

WHIG HISTORY AT EIGHTY

Wilfred M. McClay describes the enduring relevance of
Herbert Butterfield and his most famous book.

It is odd that in the many recent discussions about what it might mean to pursue a more self-consciously “Christian” approach to scholarship, debates that were given fresh urgency over a decade ago by George Marsden’s book *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship*, the name of Herbert Butterfield (1900–1979) almost never seems to surface. One might have assumed that this famous Cambridge don, a man of vibrant faith with a career-long interest in the intersection of faith and knowledge, and the author of *Christianity and History* (1950), one of the handful of essential works on that subject, would play an important role in the discussion. If nothing else, one might have thought his personal example would be more highly valued than it has been. Few academic historians in the Anglophone world have more successfully combined a high level of visible and relatively orthodox Christian commitment with a record of high scholarly achievement and status. It seems a pity that he should be so thoroughly forgotten, a victim, perhaps, of

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history's growing tendency to be a discipline with a short and trendy memory.

More's the pity, too, when one takes into account the impressive and inspiring trajectory of Butterfield's life, the details of which have been set forth in a valuable and meticulous biography by C. T. McIntire (*Herbert Butterfield: Historian as Dissenter*, 2004). Far from being to the high-table born, the young Butterfield was a working-class rube from the provincial West Yorkshire village of Oxenhope, a town created and sustained by the textile mills nearby. Like so many of the mill workers and their families, his parents were devout Methodists, as he would be all his life, a sturdy background that helps account for his strong commitment to hard work and personal piety—and, as would emerge, much else about him as well. His father, whom Butterfield always counted the most influential person in his life, had been forced to leave school at the age of ten to take a job as a wool sorter, eventually working his way up to a clerical position. The young Butterfield was an extremely diligent student, and managed to win a scholarship to Peterhouse at Cambridge. But when he arrived there in the fall of 1919, it was as a near-complete misfit: a socially awkward, teetotaling, working-class Methodist with an unmistakable Yorkshire accent and a rather scanty background in history, taking up residence in a palace of high-Anglican refinement and public-school snobbery.

An unpromising beginning indeed; and yet Butterfield's superior qualities of mind and character quickly came to the fore, and would prevail in the end. After some initial misgivings, his teachers soon came to appreciate his boundless energy and enormous potential, and he advanced rapidly, quickly acquiring honors and other forms of recognition, followed after graduation by research fellowships and finally a faculty appointment. In the fullness of time this erstwhile rube would flower into one of the leading figures of British academic life in the early and middle parts of the twentieth century. He served on the Cambridge faculty until 1968, having been Master of Peterhouse, Vice-Chancellor of the University (1959–1961), and Regius Professor of Modern History (1963–1968), the last being the same position held by his distinguished predecessors Lord Acton, George Trevelyan, and J. B. Bury. Perhaps most importantly of all, he churned out a remarkable series of influential books treating subjects as widely dispersed as the history of science, the historical novel, British political history, European diplomacy, international politics, the theory and practice of historical writing—and the intersection of Christianity and history. And he rose in the academic world spectacularly

without ever budging an inch from the Methodism in which he was raised, continuing to attend worship services faithfully and even delivering ecclesiastical lectures and the occasional lay sermon to student and church groups on the side of his professional duties. It was a life of exemplary integrity.

Of all Butterfield's many works, the most famous and enduringly influential is arguably his 1931 critique entitled *The Whig Interpretation of History*, a crisp, essay-like book that became, and has remained, one of the truly indispensable works in the field of Anglo-American historiography. In it Butterfield defined "Whig" history as an approach to the past that makes its meaning and its lessons subservient to the demands of the present and to the present's reigning idea of what constitutes "progress." Whig history was history written by and for the winners in historical conflict and change, and as such, it always upheld the present's sense of itself as an unmistakable and inevitable advance on all that preceded it. Such historical writing was likely to be simplistic and one-sided, reducible to white hats and black hats, and thereby offending Butterfield's sense of historical complexity and his insistence on broad sympathies. The term "Whig history" expressed the tendency of so many historians, in his words, "to write on the side of Protestants and Whigs, to praise revolutions provided they have been successful, to emphasize certain principles of progress in the past and to produce a story which is the ratification if not the glorification of the present." Such history sought to make the crooked straight and the rough places plain, and paved over the lost causes, failed arguments, noble sacrifices, unopened doors, untried passages, ambiguous outcomes, and inconclusive experiments that are the soul and substance of life as lived and remembered.

Still, it may seem surprising that Butterfield took such a firm stand against these Whiggish tendencies, which seemed to him not only gross oversimplifications but betrayals of the rightful task of the historian. One might have thought that his Christian commitments would lead him in the opposite direction, toward a way of writing and thinking about the past that insisted on finding clear moral meaning rather than ambiguity or randomness, and that passionately sought signs of the larger providential telos implicit in the direction of worldly events. He might have disagreed with the particular calculus that individual Whig scholars applied to the interpretation of modern history, or disagreed with their conclusions, without rejecting the enterprise altogether.

But reject it he did. Not that Butterfield disbelieved in Providence. But he insisted that the historian had no special access to providential designs and should refrain from making such arguments, choosing for himself a more modest role, answerable to a different and more limited set of canons, technical or even “scientific” in character, with a deliberate agnosticism about their larger meaning. No mere mortal historian had a right, or had sufficient knowledge, to be making the kind of final moral judgments about the ultimate meaning of historical actions and actors. In this respect, Butterfield found particular fault in the writings of Lord Acton, a historian whom he otherwise greatly admired, but against whom much of the argumentative force of *Whig Interpretation* was directed. That Acton was himself a notable member of that shrinking band of believing Christian historians, and a Catholic to boot, and that Butterfield himself was a Whig by default, only adds further ironies to the mix.

The tendencies Butterfield resisted were illustrated in Acton’s 1895 inaugural address on assuming the Regius chair. In that address, Acton issued a rebuke to one of the chief characteristics of historicism: its insistence on confining the historian’s moral judgment to the specific historical contexts in which the actions under review took place. Acton embraced historicism as a method but drew a line against its tendency toward relativism. Instead, he offered a ringing defense of the historian as moral arbiter, urging his audience “never to debase the moral currency or lower the standard of rectitude, but try others by the final maxim that governs your own lives, and to suffer no man and no cause to escape the undying penalty which history has the power to inflict on wrong.”

In other words, as we might say today, the historian should not hesitate to impose his values on the past. And Acton was in no doubt about the general direction of history’s movement: “I hope . . . this will aid you to see that the action of Christ who is risen on mankind whom he redeemed fails not, but increases; that the wisdom of divine rule appears not in the perfection but in the improvement of the world; and that achieved liberty is the one ethical result that rests on the converging and combined conditions of advancing civilization. Then you will understand what a famous philosopher said, that History is the true demonstration of Religion.”

In making such broad and expansive claims, which clearly were meant to underwrite the liberalism of his own day, Acton was hardly representative of the historians of his time, most of whom were clearly moving in the opposite direction. In that sense, Butterfield

chose an easy target. But Butterfield’s complaint against Acton seemed clearly to come from a deeper source than mere professional concerns. Although it might not be apparent to his readers, his was a religiously grounded dissent. He sought a historiography that would, like the Yorkshire Methodism in which he had been raised, take losers just as seriously as winners and, instead of tracing a line of obvious truths culminating in the triumphant conventional wisdom of the present, would seek deliberately to distance itself from Acton’s smug view that “history is the arbiter of controversy, the monarch of all she surveys.” Instead, Butterfield argued, history is better understood as “the very servant of the servants of God, the drudge of all the drudges.” It was the discipline of the historian to reject firmly the self-satisfied idea that the way things have turned out is, in some sense, the way they ought to have turned out. Instead, one should be willing to entertain the opposite possibility and seek to study the past without insisting on its reference to the present and without playing the arbiter, the “avenging judge” who is engaged in dispensing “verdicts.”

Such verdicts were not only morally presumptuous but epistemologically suspect, given the complex way in which historical change actually occurs. “If we see in each generation the conflict of the future against the past, the fight of what might be called progressive versus reactionary,” Butterfield wrote, we end up with our gaze “fixed upon certain people who appear as the special agencies of that progress.” But this is not how historical change actually works, he argued. Even the “ways of progress” are “crooked and perverse,” reflecting the pervasiveness of original sin in human existence and the fatal limitations of every historical actor or movement. However, he continues,

if we see in each generation a clash of wills out of which there emerges something that probably no man ever willed, our minds become concentrated upon the process that produced such an unpredictable issue, and we are more open for an intensive study of the motions and interactions that underlie historical change. . . . The process of the historical transition will then be recognized to be unlike what the whig historian seems to assume—much less like the procedure of a logical argument. . . . It is a process which moves by mediations and those mediations may be provided by anything in the world—by men’s sins or misapprehensions or by what we can only call fortunate conjunctures. Very strange bridges

are used to make the passage from one state of things to another; we may lose sight of them in our surveys of general history, but their discovery is the glory of historical research. History is not the study of origins; rather it is the analysis of all the mediations by which the past was turned into our present.

One of Butterfield's favorite examples of oversimplified history was the tendency to either glorify or vilify the man Martin Luther, rather than examine the unintended consequences by which Luther's actions contributed to the emergence of the secular state of modern times, a transformation that had been actively sought by very few actors but one that would be affected by the confluence of countless streams, large and small, of historical change. A similar example would be the emergence of religious liberty in America, a product less of the actions of Roger Williams or William Penn than of particular circumstances that made religious freedom a necessary and fruitful practice before it became an enshrined principle.

So if history is not a game of picking winners and losers, heroes and villains, what is the point of it? Butterfield envisioned a broadly civilizing and humanizing function for the study of the past. He wanted it to promote the intellectual and moral ability to "enter into minds that are unlike our own," to make sympathetic contact with the full range of human experience and cognition, to "see all lives as part of the one web of life," and to take "men and their quarrels into a world where everything is understood and all sins are forgiven." The historian should, in short, aspire to a God's-eye view, one in which a deliberate attempt is made to set aside the dominant moral claims and sympathies of one's own era—not out of a misplaced relativism but out of a carefully thought-out set of judgments about the limits of what historians can accomplish, and the peculiar set of virtues to which they should aspire.

Such a view was, in some ways, a precursor to the great flowering of social history and history "from the bottom up" that has transformed American historical writing over the past four decades. But it also clearly reflects the influence of Butterfield's active faith, with its insistence on respecting equally the historical experience of all persons, not merely the prominent ones who are granted fortunate outcomes. All were equally creations of God; all fell equally within His providential reach; all had an intrinsic importance and value; all would be judged by God alone. We should not presume that the events and

outcomes that we currently find to be of note are, in fact, the ones that are noteworthy sub specie aeternitatis. Nor should we "cheer for" any side, very much including our own. To cultivate such nonteleological inclusiveness of vision amounts to a kind of grand spiritual discipline, more like a self-emptying, or *kenosis*, than an anxious and sterile liberal nonjudgmentalism. To achieve it, even in only small and intermittent measure, is to achieve a kind of godliness, an *imitatio Christi*. But at the same time it is also to grasp the biblical proclamation that God's ways are not our ways, that we can never rely too much on our own understanding.

It is not surprising, then, that Butterfield would openly disdain the idea that historians had it in their power to acquaint themselves with the operations of Providence. That was stepping over a terrible line, from being god-ly to being god-like. Such was precisely the error committed by the Whig historians, who were too confident that they knew where "History" was "going," that they knew what constituted "Progress," and that their judgments about questions of importance and nonimportance corresponded with those of the Deity. Butterfield thought it a massive arrogation for the historian to imagine that he had even the remotest capacity for such judgments. That was simply beyond his ken, or that of any mere mortal.

Paradoxically, then, it was not out of programmatic skepticism, but precisely out of robust religious belief, including his eschatological confidence in God's unknowable providence, that Butterfield was able so easily to insist that the historian has to forswear any attempt to make final moral claims about the deeds and the consequences of human history. Comprehensive providential understanding, like vengeance, should be yielded up unto to the Lord, and for exactly the same reasons. The best that the mortal historian can hope for, or aspire to, is an impartial record of what happened, with all its complexities and ambivalences. History is no oracle.

Instead, Butterfield thought, history should be regarded with suspicion, an ambitious upstart all too willing to serve unsavory worldly alliances. As he said on his penultimate page: "History is all things to all men. She is at the service of good causes and bad. In other words, she is a harlot and a hireling, and for this reason she best serves those who suspect her most." Hence her judgments are never to be trusted as final or ultimate. "In other words," he said in his deceptively simple concluding words, "the truth of history is no simple matter . . . and the understanding of the past is not so easy as it is sometimes made to appear." The idea of progress, particularly as the

Whig historians employed it, was perhaps the most dangerous simplifier of all, elevating some men into prophets while damning others to oblivion.

There is much that is attractive about the generosity and epistemological modesty of Butterfield's position. It corresponds very well with the official ethos of the historical profession as it exists today (the profession's actual practice frequently being another matter, but that is a subject for another occasion). It is an indispensable book for all earnest students of history, good for their mental and moral hygiene, productive of the kind of healthy self-examination that every decently educated person should be equipped to engage in.

Yet today, eighty years after its publication, we face new difficulties for which Butterfield's book gives us little help. True, it addresses itself to a problem against which historians always need to be on guard. We always need a corrective to excessive present-mindedness and chronological pride, the narcissistic belief that we are the ones toward whom all of human history has been laboring. But Butterfield did not live long enough to see the full flowering of post-modernism in the academy and to see the elevation of the word *metanarrative* to iconic status as an all-purpose disparagement. Had he done so, given his attentiveness to the particularity of changing contexts, he would be the first to recognize that the intellectual world has changed dramatically since 1931, and that his own ideas might take on a different flavor in our different age, and themselves stand in need of a fresh reading, in light of a counter-corrective.

Such a counter-corrective may actually be more fully in the spirit of Butterfield than might seem the case at first glance. At the time *Whig Interpretation* appeared, his Cambridge colleague Charles Smyth, who was an Anglican clergyman and a Tory, shrewdly observed to Butterfield that his book offered no consolation for those who would have preferred a Tory interpretation of history. The clear implication was that Butterfield's critique of Whiggery took place entirely inside the Whig tradition and was an attempt to reform and enlarge and perfect it rather than overturn it. Indeed, according to C. T. McIntire's account, Smyth went on to suggest that a proper title for the book should have been *An Appeal from the Old Whigs to the New*, an allusion to Edmund Burke's famous essay, *An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs*, but reversing the order of old and new. Burke had been writing against the New Whigs of his day, such as Charles James Fox, whom he associated with the radical French

revolutionaries, and in favor of Old Whig reformers with a more patient and gradualist sensibility.

Butterfield readily agreed with Smyth. He acknowledged that he was writing in and for a New Whig tradition in historiography, seeking to extend the sympathies of the Whig tradition beyond their original base so that the tradition would include within its ambit even Tories and other outcasts. Such a view was nothing if not universalistic in its scope and ambition—a universalism that was ultimately grounded not in the unreliable swamplands of post-modern skepticism but the sturdy and confidently inclusive Methodism Butterfield learned in Oxenhope.

With his foundation firmly planted in a vigorously evangelical understanding of the Christian message, Butterfield took it for granted that man does not live by critical distance alone. One is inclined to suspect that he would conclude that we now need to rescue the idea of progress itself from dissolution, from a too easy and too pervasive slackness of mind and despondency of heart, for which programmatic skepticism has become the lazy and impotent official philosophy.

But that was not the task of his own time, which entailed tamping down the idea of progress rather than reviving it. Like his American contemporary Reinhold Niebuhr, whose forceful study *Moral Man and Immoral Society* was published the following year, and whom he resembled in some ways, Butterfield in his day enjoyed the luxury of counterpunching against an overweening but fully empowered and entrenched progressive tradition. His work did not need to consider seriously the possibility that, with the growing enfeeblement of such an ordering tradition, including the loss of the very Christian faith that underwrote his programmatic modesty, Western history might have no good way left to organize itself and that programmatic modesty would shrivel into a kind of inconsolable self-loathing and lingering postcolonial guilt.

Taken to its fullest, nonetheless, Butterfield's New Whig approach cuts away at the branch on which it stands, casting doubt on one of the chief culture-forming distinctives of Judeo-Christianity: its understanding of divine history and human history as intersecting stories and not merely parallel or disparate ones. The Judaism and Christianity of the Bible are faiths whose God takes a very strong and active interest in the doings of nations and the outcomes of historical events and occasionally intervenes in them, sometimes quite dramatically. True, this Deity also delights in reversals and overturnings, in ways that often entirely subvert the world's paradigms. He makes the last first, and the first last. His ways are not ours.

But He does not always or invariably do these things. Sometimes He does the opposite. Hence, although Christians can have no expectation that there will be a sure correspondence between worldly success and metaphysical “success,” neither can they expect that the two will invariably be at odds. Faced with such a quirky, unpredictable, uncategorizable Providence, it seems that Butterfield did something rather similar to what the analytic philosophers of his day—with whom he had almost nothing else in common—were doing: asserting that, because nothing can be said with clarity and precision about God’s activity in history, nothing should be said at all.

In fairness, it should be pointed out that Butterfield was well aware that for Christians there is some kind of necessary intersection of divine and human history, and he even laid that proposition out twenty years later in *Christianity and History*. Yet it also has to be said that *Christianity and History* did little to move beyond generality and thereby show its readers how the Christian scholar might understand and explain specific aspects of that intersection. Instead, the most powerful statements in the book tended to reinforce the ironclad separation of the two realms, rather than encourage their mingling, and to make the Christian view of history something highly individual, even subjective, in character. Approvingly citing Ranke’s statement that “every generation is equidistant from eternity,” Butterfield expanded on the point:

So the purpose of life is not in the far future, nor, as we so often imagine, around the next corner, but the whole of it is here and now, as fully as ever it will be on this planet. It is always a “Now” that is in direct relation to eternity—not a far future; always immediate experience of life that matters in the last resort—not historical constructions based on abridged textbooks or imagined visions of some posterity that is going to be the heir of all the ages. . . . If there is a meaning in history, therefore, it lies not in the systems and organizations that are built over long periods, but in something more essentially human, something in each personality considered for mundane purposes as an end in himself.

Even more powerful, but also perhaps more unsettling, are his concluding words:

I have nothing to say at the finish except that if one wants a permanent rock in life and goes deep enough for it, it is difficult for historical events to shake it. There are times when we can never meet

the future with sufficient elasticity of mind, especially if we are locked in the contemporary systems of thought. We can do worse than remember a principle which both gives us a firm Rock and leaves us the maximum elasticity for our minds: the principle: Hold to Christ, and for the rest be totally uncommitted.

In other words, in place of Progress with a capital *P*, one should embrace the Rock with a capital *R*—Christ alone, and alone with Christ. Which is perhaps another way of saying that ultimate truth is, finally, outside the reach of historical inquiry.

As I have already intimated, there is a great deal to be said for this formulation as an expression of both the Christian faith and the historian’s vocation. And in today’s environment, many mainstream academics with religious commitments, perhaps even most of them, find that a choice to prescind from premise-mixing inquiries still makes a great deal of professional and personal sense.

But such a stance also has its limitations. It seems to dispense altogether with the incarnational dimension that distinguishes the Christian faith from all others. Presuming to know precisely how God’s will has been active in human history surely does entail a sin of pride; but that is not the only sin of pride to which human flesh is liable. Is it not also, and not less, a sin of pride to believe that one can or should aspire to be completely detached from all reckoning of good and evil, heroism and villainy, love and hate, and the whole range of human passions and attachments, in our consideration of the human past? Is not Butterfield’s beau ideal as presumptuous as Acton’s? Indeed, could one not argue that it is *more* presumptuous to strive to assume a God’s-eye view of events—to aspire to have the mind of God rather than merely discern God’s intentions? Might that not entail our making a claim to be able to transcend the human, creaturely status for which we were made?

Nor does such detachment give us any help in the larger task with which we seem now to be faced: a civilization that seems in imminent danger of losing its story and that needs the fresh nourishment of foundational self-confidence far more than it needs yet another dose of critical distance. Correctives are necessary but they also are always secondary and derivative; they cannot endure for long without the presence of the thing they are correcting. Butterfield’s insistence that we learn to study the past for the past’s sake remains a commendable and

profoundly humane one. I intend to continue assigning the book to my students whenever possible. But I will do so recognizing that it is incomplete and unsustainable on its own, precisely because it asks us to suspend our need for larger sustaining meanings in history, a need that can be held at bay only for so long.

When Butterfield went beyond merely problematizing the relation between progress and history and seemed to rule the question of their connection permanently out of bounds, a knowledge too noumenal for phenomenal beings, he went too far. Such a move risks robbing history of a usefulness for life that is part—if only part—of its reason for being. We need

history not merely to refine our critical apparatus but also to orient us and uphold us in our finitude and particularity. For we are creatures and not gods, for whom seeing through a glass darkly is one of life's unavoidable hazards.

Still, Butterfield's *Whig Interpretation* remains essential reading, particularly if we are to recover what progress meant before it became Progress—that is, before it became a false religion with a secular and immanent eschatology. We still need his help in undertaking that task of recovery. But in using him, we also need to read his words with an understanding of the things that they presumed but did not openly state. Because they can no longer be presumed today. ■

GOVETT'S LEAP

Looking across to Bridal Veil Falls,
 You feel your weight's
 Free will against the fence
 Urging you outward into that immense
 Absence of panorama which appalls
 The same mind it exhilarates.

Impossible to calculate the stretch
 From here to there—
 That far sunwall of cliff—
 And wonder how long you would wonder if
 That empty impulse undertook to fetch
 You forth into the mindless air.

And a butterfly floats past you to commit
 Precisely this.
 You very nearly gasp
 And fling your hand out in a desperate grasp,
 For one distracted second sure that it
 Will plummet into that abyss.

—*Stephen Edgar*