

## MACAULAY—THE LAST OF THE WHIGS

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MACAULAY'S fame in historical work has cast a long shadow over his political career. The last generation of Victorians knew him only as the author of the *Essays* and the *History*, and they transferred to their children the same limited outlook. Thus the champion of the first Reform Bill, the councillor who organized much of the civil government of India, and the author of the system by which the Indian Civil Service became the pride of British imperial government has dropped from sight. Of recent years there has appeared some disposition to correct the error, and a new biography of Macaulay has appeared within the past twelve months. The time may therefore be suitable for a brief review of his part in the drama of Victorian politics.

The family of Zachary Macaulay was initiated at a very early age into the discussion of public affairs. At thirteen the son was writing to his father an intelligent commentary on the new *India Act*; at fourteen, he applauded the decision of the allies to send Bonaparte to Elba; and at twenty-one he joined the head of his house in defending the hapless Queen Caroline. At Cambridge he showed considerable promise in the Union, where, with his fellow-members, he demonstrated a remarkable capacity for turning the most innocent topic into a vigorous discussion of current affairs, to the discomfort of the authorities. Upon graduation he practised law, but not with much enthusiasm or success; and, growing restless, he began to make excursions into the field of politics. His first public speech was made before the Anti-Slavery Society in 1824, and in the following year he began his long and distinguished connection with the *Edinburgh Review*. This placed him quite definitely on the Whig side of politics, and involved him more and more deeply in the discussion of public questions.

The years immediately following were filled with political excitement such as no young man with Macaulay's interests or background could resist. The repeal of the Test Act, the rise and tragic death of Canning, and the hot argument over Catholic Emancipation caused a series of commotions that stirred

the whole kingdom. After forty years of inaction the Whig party came to life, while radicals like Burdett and Cobbett put new fire into their agitation. This swift series of crises naturally tempted Macaulay to consider a political career; and, by a strange turn of fortune, at the very moment when his resolution began to take shape, the path opened invitingly before him. Prompted by the success of his essays on Mill which had recently appeared, and by the moral reputation of the author, Lord Lansdowne offered him a seat in the House of Commons, with perfect freedom to vote as he felt inclined. The offer was a handsome gesture. Could a youth with ambition refuse?

His entry into the Commons coincided almost exactly with the opening barrage in the battle for parliamentary reform. Within a few months Parliament was dissolved, the Whigs came to power and Russell introduced the first Reform Bill. But meantime the member for Calne (such was the name of Lord Lansdowne's pocket borough) had made a very favorable impression on his colleagues. Consequently, when the Reform debate began, Macaulay was accorded the privilege of speaking for the government. The bill was introduced by Russell on March 1st, 1831, and on the following night Macaulay made the first of his Reform speeches. A full and excited House applauded him extravagantly. The Speaker paid a handsome compliment; comparisons were freely made with Canning, with Burke, with Fox; and Peel wrote to a friend, "Portions of the speech were as beautiful as anything I have ever heard or read. It reminded me of old times." At thirty-one, after a year's service, the cadet had won his spurs.

London hostesses were naturally quick to welcome a newcomer of such distinction, and within a short time Macaulay was trading quips with Lutteral and Rogers across Lady Holland's breakfast table. The house over which that good lady now presided had long been the centre of Whig society, and under her direction it lost none of its influence. There the novice found his party leaders—Grey, Russell, Palmerston and Brougham—as well as a number of literary and social luminaries whose company was scarcely less exciting. Throughout the parliamentary session his evenings and week-ends were as fully occupied with social engagements as he cared to make them; but this success made his political life precarious and expensive. Members of Parliament were not then paid; the *Edinburgh* yielded never more than two-hundred-a-year; the Commissionership in Bankruptcy, which he had held for a time, was

abolished among the other Whig reforms; and the Cambridge fellowship was soon to expire. He had a horror of debt. On one occasion he sold his university medals to meet the demands of his creditors, and it is altogether likely he would have quit public life rather than get into further difficulty. Fortunately at this time he was rewarded for his services with an appointment to the Indian Board of Control.

If he had wished to make this post a sinecure, he might easily have done so; but with characteristic thoroughness Macaulay plunged into the study of Indian politics and history. A further revision of the East India Company's charter was impending, and he determined to make himself thoroughly familiar with every phase of the subject. When Hyde Villiers died, Macaulay succeeded him as secretary, and was thus largely responsible both for shaping the legislation and for piloting it through the Commons. The radical nature of the changes proposed made this a difficult task, for the altered situation in the Orient compelled the government to cancel the monopoly of the China trade, and to transform the company from a commercial organization into the governing body of India. Nevertheless the young secretary performed his duties with skill and patience, earning a larger measure of his leader's confidence.

Meanwhile, of course, Calne had vanished, with all the other pocket boroughs, and its member was forced to find a new seat. That was not difficult, since the new urban constituencies vied with one another in securing distinguished representatives, and the Whigs of Leeds invited Macaulay to be one of their candidates. He accepted, but on terms which, in their severity, are reminiscent of Burke. Though an uncompromising supporter of democracy, he flatly refused to surrender his independence. Lansdowne had never interfered with his parliamentary freedom: neither should Leeds. He promised that if he should be elected, he would act faithfully in the interests of his constituents and of the country at large; but he, and not the local committee, must be the judge of those interests. As to the method of election, he was equally firm. He wrote as follows to his agents:

The practice of begging for votes is, as it seems to me, absurd, pernicious, and altogether at variance with the principles of representative government. . . . The practice of canvassing is quite reasonable under a system in which men are sent to Parliament to serve themselves. It is the height of absurdity under a system under which men are sent to Parliament to serve the public. . . . I trust that the great and intelligent body of people

who have obtained the elective franchise will see that the seats in the House of Commons ought not to be given, like rooms in the almshouse, to urgency of solicitation. . . I think it, at this conjuncture, my duty to declare that I will give *no pledges*. . . My opinion is that the electors ought first to choose cautiously; then confide liberally. . . Under the old system I have never been the flatterer of the great. Under the new system I will never be the flatterer of the people.

Leeds accepted the terms, and Macaulay's campaign was fought cleanly and vigorously. On one occasion he scolded a questioner who enquired his religious faith, refusing to allow religion to become a party issue; and he gave the electors a strenuous course of instruction in the science of politics. These methods, however novel, proved acceptable in Leeds, and Macaulay was returned by a large majority. Whether there or later in Edinburgh, he maintained the same high standard of public conduct, so that years afterward he could write, "I have been four times returned to Parliament by cities of more than one hundred and forty thousand inhabitants; and all those four elections together have not cost me five hundred pounds."

Within Parliament he acted with equal disinterestedness. When the Anti-Slavery measure was introduced in 1833, he was forced to choose between his party affiliations and the wishes of his father. The bill provided a twelve-year period of apprenticeship, which seemed to the abolitionists a method of prolonging the very condition that the measure was intended to correct. With admirable courage, Macaulay placed his resignation in the hands of the party Whip and attacked the government. His example strengthened the opposition, with the fortunate result that the measure was revised and he was enabled to remain a Whig in good standing.

It was largely to meet such uncertainty as this that Macaulay went to India. The new *India Act* provided for a civilian member of the Supreme Council who was not a company official and, with his record on the Board of Control and in Parliament, it was not surprising that he was offered the appointment. While it meant temporary exile from England, there was much to tempt him. It was a post of honour and distinction, with a salary of £10,000 a year (half of which might be saved); and it was therefore a dignified manner of securing his future independence. Three years in Parliament had given rise to wholesome political ambitions. They had also demonstrated the precarious nature of political life. Macaulay could never be

comfortable while his conscience was fettered by any considerations whatever. He therefore accepted the post.

If he was to build his political future on India, he was determined to serve the country well; his record is one of conscientious and enlightened administration. As President of the Council of Public Instruction, he reorganized the whole educational system. For some time previous to his arrival, the authorities had been divided on an important point of policy. One faction proposed that all the institutions of higher learning should be used to spread European culture, while the opposition insisted that Oriental studies should receive the same emphasis they had in the past. The two parties were about equal, and progress was impossible while the dispute continued; so Macaulay was forced to take sides, and he threw his influence on the side of the reformers. Evidently he did so for several reasons. Like most of his countrymen, he unfortunately did not appreciate the Oriental point of view; he asserted that European science was so far in advance of the Asiatic that it would be folly to perpetuate the inferiority; and in a letter to his father he wrote, "No Hindoo, who has received an English education, ever remains sincerely attached to his religion. . . . It is my firm belief that, if our plans of education are followed up, there will not be a single idolator among the respectable classes in Bengal thirty years hence." The wisdom of attempting to superimpose English culture on the Oriental may now be questioned, but Macaulay's methods of putting the reforms into effect are entirely commendable. Not satisfied with having fixed the general policy of the department, he gave patient attention to all sorts of minor details. He received reports from inspectors, drew up book lists for libraries, investigated the competence of teachers and harmonized the relations between the officials and school boards. In the field of law he made an equally important contribution. At his own request he became chairman of a commission appointed to compile a code of criminal law, his object being to adapt the law of England to Oriental conditions. His report furnished a clear, concise statement of the spirit of English criminal law and, while it was not immediately adopted, it eventually became the basis of the Indian code.

As an administrator, therefore, Macaulay was eminently successful. He is an unusual example of a literary man with rare executive capacity, willing to leave the study for public office. He served England as an interpreter of her culture, her

political institutions and her law: he served India as a singularly honest and energetic councillor.

After four years in Calcutta he resigned, returning to England in 1838. His future independence was now secure, for, in addition to his savings, an uncle had unexpectedly left him a legacy of £10,000. Further essays in the *Edinburgh* had increased his popularity; his administrative record was much in his favour; and the Whigs, now led by Lord Melbourne, were still in office and desperately in need of such support as Macaulay could give. One might have expected him to plunge again into public life without hesitation. But by this time his enthusiasm for politics had diminished considerably. His sister, Margaret, had died in 1834, and the tragedy had left a lasting scar. To be far removed from England had only deepened his grief, and it had driven him to seek comfort in his books. "That I have not utterly sunk under the blow," he wrote, "I owe chiefly to literature. What a blessing it is to love books as I love them. . . I have gone back to Greek literature with a passion quite astonishing to myself." He continued to follow the political news of England as well as one might, removed by a three-months-voyage from the actual scene; but from this time on his passion for literature, always strong, became dominant, and the projected *History* took first place in his mind. Nor, on his return to London, was the posture of affairs altogether attractive. True the Whigs were in office, but the Melbourne Cabinet, having outlived its usefulness, depended upon the support of a divided and dispirited party. While he was unpardonably blind to the faults of his friends and quite conscious of their distress, Macaulay refused to act precipitately. Though a staunch Whig, he was still determined to preserve his independence; and, while he continued to support his party, it was at his own terms. The ministry, of course, was willing enough to meet his demands. He was elected for Edinburgh and, for a time, served in the cabinet as Paymaster. But these duties were somewhat exacting, he was forced to neglect his *History* (though at this time he wrote two of his most brilliant essays—*Clive* and *Warren Hastings*) and it was with a feeling of relief that he followed his party into opposition in 1841.

From this time on, Macaulay acted principally in the rôle of "elder statesman". Though he was younger in years than many of his leaders, his temperament and his reputation both placed him somewhat above the party disputes and even when,

in 1846, he accepted a portfolio under Lord John Russell, he was allowed to choose the office that would least interfere with his literary labours. His electors in Edinburgh were treated with a high hand that eventually lost him the seat, and he complained that it was no longer easy to meet the public either in social or in political intercourse. And yet, while his enthusiasm for public life was rapidly vanishing, his influence in the Commons had considerably increased. The members listened attentively, whether he spoke from the Speaker's right or left, and often enough followed him into the lobby. From the opposition benches he practically dictated the *Copyright Act* of 1843; he forced Peel to recall a Governor-General of India, Lord Ellenborough; and on one memorable occasion he persuaded the House, contrary to custom, to reject a bill which had reached its third reading. "Before Mr. Macaulay had spoken," wrote an eye-witness of the latter incident, "you might safely have bet fifty-to-one that Lord Hotham would have carried his bill. After that speech, the bill was not thrown out, but pitched out."

Macaulay's conduct must frequently have tried the patience of his party leaders, for he consistently resisted discipline. He was the most distinguished historian of his generation, whose knowledge of the period of Whig supremacy was especially profound; so it was not easy to dispute his interpretation of the Glorious Revolution. He believed that the *Act of Settlement* had established the supremacy of Parliament over the King, and that the Whigs of his time were simply completing the process by establishing the supremacy of the people over their Parliament. To this end he was prepared to support almost any measure of reform. When Melbourne encountered obstructionist tactics among the Tory peers, Macaulay readily contrived a plan for an elective House of Lords, which must have shocked Lord Lansdowne almost as it would have shocked the Duke of Wellington. Needless to say, the proposal was politely ignored. But as a rule it was not easy to ignore Macaulay. When he entered the Cabinet in 1839, he demanded the right to support the *Ballot Bill*, although most of the ministers had consistently opposed the measure, and took occasion to criticise the principle of ministerial responsibility. In a brilliant speech, drawing instance after instance from the record of the 18th century, he condemned the practice as inadvisable and unnecessary. Party ties, it appears, irked him as much as popular ones; and the freedom which he demanded

from his electors he asked also from his leaders. He believed in control without domination, and his vision of Parliament was that of a popularly elected assembly of distinguished men, who might be trusted by their constituents and leaders alike to act disinterestedly on all public questions.

While these opinions may have made Macaulay a difficult colleague, at least they made him a splendid match for the spoilsmen. Early in his career, when first asked to recommend a candidate for preferment, he had announced his opposition to the pernicious system then in force, and had refused to participate in it. And as the years wore on, he saw more and more of its abuses. History revealed many of the evils, India showed him more and, when at last he reached the pinnacle of his influence, he dealt the whole practice a staggering blow. The *India Bill* of 1833 had taken the first step in a scheme for competitive examinations, but the officials of the East India Company had successfully shelved a measure so little to their taste. Twenty years later, Sir Charles Wood made similar provision in his new *India Bill* and, with Macaulay's help, put the plan into operation. There was, of course, bitter opposition from the group whose interests were threatened, and the redoubtable Lord Ellenborough led the attack; but the measure was forced through the House, and Macaulay was entrusted with the task of drafting the complete details. Almost his final public act, therefore, was to establish the Indian Civil Service, and to destroy the spoils system in a country that had long suffered from the rapacity of minor officials. At the time there was some attempt to introduce a similar reform in England, but Macaulay rightly judged that the time was not ripe at home, and was satisfied to have provided a model which would serve almost all the civilized world.

In the election of 1852, Edinburgh made amends for its rejection of Macaulay five years before, returning him without either a campaign or a promise. Within a few days, however, he was stricken with a heart attack and, though he held the seat for several years, he was never very active. After resigning, he accepted a peerage, but his career in the House of Lords was brief and undistinguished. His public service spanned, therefore, the period of adjustment which followed the first Reform Bill, and in the transition from oligarchy to popular government Macaulay played an active and distinguished part. Though, perhaps, a somewhat partisan and superficial student of political history, he was a not unworthy interpreter of Burke and Fox;



indeed, unfriendly critics might even accuse him of having borrowed from them too freely. In some instances—in his support of the Ballot, Factory and Education Acts—he may have interpreted the Whig doctrines rather broadly; but to him the legacy of the 18th century Whig was a code of action rather than a fixed or exact policy. To act with sympathy and tolerance according to the dictates of his conscience, to study patiently all public issues before adopting a definite opinion, and, above all, to remain absolutely free of all compromising entanglements—these he believed to be the fundamental duties of a popular representative. As we look back on the experience of democracy since his death, who does not wish that his example had made a deeper impression on our political life?