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Review Article

The Past Masters

The Past Masters: Politics and Politicians 1906-1939. By Harold Macmillan. Harper and Row Pp. 240. $15.00.

Already the author of a political apologia in six stout volumes, Mr. Harold Macmillan has prevailed on an indulgent publisher to allow him a postscript. *The Past Masters* is a collection of biographical essays and other musings by a man who in half a century of public life has seen much and forgotten nothing.

It is doubtful whether as a literary craftsman the author could claim to be the equal of Winston Churchill or R.S. Crossman. But Mr. Macmillan has other gifts of communication. In dining clubs and drawing rooms, or in the simulated intimacy of the television studio, his talk is matchless. His medium has always been the footlights rather than the printed page. He has long held his audience spellbound by the brilliant timing, benign malice and the histrionic graces of a bygone age. His memoirs, however interesting and important, only came to life when he recounted the same story in front of the television cameras. The elaborate Edwardian manner is executed with ease when accompanied by a tremor in the voice, a shaking of silvery locks or a partrician curl of the lips. In print it is likely to seem merely contrived.

These dozen essays do not pretend to add more than an occasional footnote to his published memoirs. Their value is in recapturing the flavour of his artful conversation and in offering us a glimpse of his kaleidoscopic character, whose many facets can bewilder as well as attract.

The Macmillan memoirs were on a scale which no Prime Minister other than Churchill approached. And the title of his present book inevitably invites a comparison with Churchill's *Great Contemporaries.* Most of Churchill's nineteen "Contemporaries", including four of the five who were the subjects of the most distinguished essays on which the fame of the book rests, were born twenty or thirty years before he was. Macmillan's *Past Masters,* of whom five (Lloyd George, MacDonald, Baldwin, Neville Chamberlain and Churchill himself) are given separate chapters, stand in a roughly similar age relationship to their author.

The difference in the form and impact of the two volumes is immense. Churchill wrote his in mid-career. He wrote them for separate newspaper publication before they were assembled in a book, and he wrote them for money. Apart from the quality of the writing, this imposed a tautness, discipline and individuality upon the portraits. They formed, with a little fraying at the edges, a coherent gallery, but they were also complete in themselves. They were mostly based on a mixture of personal reminiscence and some purposeful reading, if not quite amounting to research, about the individual subjects.

Macmillan's whole approach is different. His urge has been to write a footnote to his memoirs, weaving the portraits of the major political figures and the minor ones like Simon, Halifax and Maxton into a reflective account of his own attitude to life and politics. Therefore, in a way it is a more egocentric book than Churchill's. It is also much less disciplined. It would have been preferable to see the more nebulous chapters — on Parliament, Independent Members, Women in Politics — replaced by further individual portraits.

Pride of place in Macmillan's gallery of English statesmen goes to Lloyd George and Winston Churchill, but he has great difficulty deciding which comes first. For Lord Beaverbrook, who knew both men just as intimately, there was no such problem, as he always maintained that Lloyd George was greater because, apart from his leadership in World War II, Churchill contributed little to English history, whereas Lloyd George was the architect of the Welfare State, in addition to winning World War I.

Since Lloyd George and Churchill have been the subject of so much examination, Macmillan does not add much to our knowledge of these two men. His description of Lloyd George's origins as working class seems doubtful, especially if we compare this account with that set forth in John Grigg's first volume of the life of Lloyd George. Yet it is true, as Macmillan says, that Lloyd George was an inspiring orator who could stir people's feelings and that during the early part of World War I, his speeches surpassed even those of Churchill at his best and, in later years, Nye Bevan.

If Lloyd George is the hero of these pages, there are also a few villains. Baldwin emerges as a sensitive, gifted leader who could rise to the level of great events, but surrounded himself with mediocrities. Ramsay MacDona,d though vain, was a romantic who did not lack courage. Neville Chamberlain "would have been remembered as one of the most progressive and effective social reformers of his own or almost any time" but for the fatal three years of his premiership. Mosley is rescued from the obloquy of fashionable historians as a man of great talents and great strength of character who, had he waited, might have been supreme; as in many other things, the essence of politics is "timing".

Somewhat surprisingly Macmillan has little to say about those responsible for the conduct of British foreign policy during the years with which he deals. For

example, he praises Ramsay MacDonald, but not his achievements in foreign policy; yet it was in this field that his distinction lies. Entering office in January 1924, he decided to combine the Foreign Secretaryship with the Premiership, following the example of Lord Salisbury in the last decades of the previous century. It was not an ideal combination of offices, and if either of them suffered it was the Premiership. The change from Curzon was an improvement, for although he often knew the course which ought to be pursued, he seldom pursued it. On the other hand, MacDonald had judgment, or perhaps one should say an instinct, that was often sound, and he certainly did not share his predecessor's illusion that an occasional admonition would be enough to bring about a general recovery in Europe.

The most interesting chapters in the book, "An Honorable Ambition" and "The Wing Tradition", illuminate the character of Mr. Macmillan. "An Honorable Ambition" begins with Macmillan's grandfather, Daniel Macmillan, and there is a photograph of the ruins of the croft in Arran in which he was born. But there is no account of how, in a very brief time, the Macmillans made enough money to move south, and to be accepted by the English aristocracy to such an extent that Lady Arthur Russell became his godmother, and he himself married the daughter of the ninth Duke of Devonshire. The transition into the aristocracy was not only rapid, but also so complete that it is clear that Macmillan retained no family memory of, or connection with, Scottish life. However, he clearly likes the romantic element in the cottage-to-country mansion saga.

Although Macmillan is not by origin a descendant of any of the great Whig families, he finds the history and habits of these noblemen and noblewomen very fascinating. The most absorbing section of the book describes their homes and their attitudes, and Macmillan stresses a continuous tradition embedded in certain families which contributed so much to English public life, from the end of the 17th century until World War I. He particularly relishes their combination of "advanced ideas" with an element of aloofness and almost disdain, especially for Tories who come from minor families and whose history has a tinge of vulgarity.

Macmillan has inherited this Whig contempt for the Conservatives for whose party he reserves the most incisive thrusts. (The Conservative Party is a collection of bad losers who are "apt to seek scapegoats for defeat either in the Leader or the party organization."). Macmillan's contempt for the Conservatives has been like that of Lord Lansdowne of whom he recounts that, having held the highest offices in successive Conservative administrations, he preferred to be drenched in the rain rather than commit the indignity of seeking refuge in the Conservative Carlton Club. And Macmillan remembers his father-in-law calling out on the grouse moor: "Those damned grouse; they won't fly straight — like a lot of Tories."

Indeed, Macmillan does not pretend to be other than an unrepentant, unreconstructed Whig. he tells the Conservatives that "a successful party of the Right must continue to recruit its strength from the Center, and even from the Left Center. Once it begins to shrink into itself like a snail it will be doomed." He is not afraid to think about a National Government. To him it seems more important that men and women of goodwill, "including politicians and even leaders of parties", should devote themselves to the constructive work of fighting inflation rather than continue to indulge in "contests of negative recrimination and abuse."

His message — hinted at rather than stated openly, but certainly discernible between the lines — is that Britain's problems can no longer be solved within the conventional party framework, that the conventional framework is unlikely to yield to something more satisfactory of its own accord, that the English are lost without strong leadership, but that strong leadership may no longer be possible in the political system the English know. The theme that echoes through the book is that of decline: of decline in British power and of decline in the character, courage and individuality of the political nation.

Again and again he implies that the conditions which made it possible for the great leaders of the past to survive and flourish no longer exist, or, at any rate, that they no longer exist on the old scale. Even more insistently, he implies that the party orthodoxies of today are, if anything, more constricting for those trapped within them — and, therefore, more harmful to the country — than were the orthodoxies against which he fought as a young man in the 1920s and 1930s.

Despite the lack of explicit answers to these problems, the book does provoke some thought on the subject. It is clear that continuity was once a pronounced feature of English political life, of its leadership, its attitudes and its institutions. Yet more or less since the end of the Macmillan era, since the early 1960s, many aspects of political life have profoundly altered. The Conservative Party has changed to leaders educated at grammar schools, people without a shred of Whiggery or even the kinds of Tory connections and views for which the Whigs expressed such contempt. The Conservative rank and file in Parliament consists of small-scale business, the professions and advertising agencies. On its side, the Labour Party has a few representatives of the Whig-Liberal tradition (in ideas, not in descent), and the rest of the rank and file consists of trade unionists, lawyers, teachers and sociologists.

In practice it is difficult to produce governing groups with set convictions, with vigour and independence, accustomed to the exercise of a firm but not arrogant authority, if there ceases to be a reservoir of people whose background and training prepares them for the task of leadership. The conduct of politicians is bound to be different if they are trying simultaneously to earn a living in politics, to establish themselves and to absorb the conventions of democratic government. R.H.S. Crossman used to complain that if, in his speeches, he

drew even the most obvious parallels with previous episodes in British political life, the passage would evoke no response, because only a handful of MPs knew what he was saying. Yet Macmillan is full of opposite references, because this history is all part of the family background into which he married. For this reason his favourite relaxation was the Trollope political novels, which gave a fictional account of the same families and situations.

One wonders whether this tradition gave a quality to government which made it easier to obtain consent. Even if this is so, the Whig families cannot be recreated; but the task of giving government decisions the kind of authority that allows the system to work effectively remains. It requires a trust among the electorate that those in power are not primarily self-seeking, and a corresponding belief by those in power that the public good is not to be exploited for their own benefit. Whether in England or America, failure here leads ultimately to disasters like Watergate and to the collapse of political authority.

Perhaps the problem in England is not as recent as *The Past Masters* would suggest. Macmillan quotes Gladstone's comment that his 1868 cabinet (with seven Whig peers out of 15 members) was "the best instrument to carry on public affairs with which he had ever been connected." But then the level, even by Gladstonian standards, begins to decline. The interwar record, despite Macmillan's charity towards the persons about whom he writes in his book, shows a serious slippage. This book does not try to offer any answers, and Mr. Macmillan says that he has none. But perhaps now the neglected achievements of the self-made Daniel Macmillan are more relevant than the hereditary prowess and accustomed authority of the Whig grandees.

Reading the flow of reminiscence enlivened by many bursts of sardonic humor, one finds it difficult to believe that exactly twenty years have elapsed since Macmillan became Prime Minister in the wake of the Suez affair. In retrospect the year 1957 is beginning to acquire something of the same importance as the year 1485. Traditional English histories tell us that the Middle Ages ended and Modern Times began, at least in England, on Bosworth Field. Similarly, it seems that British imperialism came to an end with the liquidation in 1957 of the Anglo-French operation against Egypt. In the same year the first black African colony (and, incidentally, the last major Asian colony) became independent. The first Russian space satellite was launched. The treaty creating the European Economic Community was signed. These events combined to force a recognition on the British people that it was no longer possible for them to have an independent foreign policy. At the same time a material and psychological transition was occurring at home, in which the year 1957 marks a watershed at least as conveniently as did the year 1485. Social changes arising from mass technology — the car, television, washing machines — and the cultural changes arising from the increasing prosperity and self-confidence of the working class, reflected in kitchen-sink drama and realistic novels of in-

dustrial life, were neatly encapsulated in a seminal book published in 1957, Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy.*

In the same year Macmillan became Prime Minister. At first there is a strange irony about the conjunction of events. Macmillan had the reputation of being old-fashioned; he was a few years older than his predecessor, which is unusual for Prime Ministers of the same party; he had completed his education before World War I. Words like "Edwardian", "foppish", and "languid" were applied to him. He was temperamentally an esthete and a philosopher and by marriage a member of the inner aristocracy. In his autobiography he describes himself as a "gown man" whom circumstances turned into a "sword man". But both these roles could be regarded as obsolete in 1957. Many people portrayed him as a kind of King Canute. In a sense they were right, but not in the sense they imagined. For Canute was a shrewd man who never imagined that he could turn back the waves. He only went through the performance at the water's edge to show his courtiers that they were fools. The same description could be applied to the conduct of Macmillan as Prime Minister.

That he was to be a progressive rather than a reactionary Prime Minister only gradually became apparent. It was the right wing of the Conservative Party that brought him to power rather than the left, which would have preferred R.A. Butler. And the right wing preferred him to Butler because he was thought to have been more forceful and determined in support of Sir Anthony Eden's policy against Egypt. Such reasoning was oversimplified because it was based on stereotyped images. Those who saw Macmillan as an old-fashioned reactionary must have forgotten his record in the 1930s, when he was the only disciple of Keynes in the Conservative Party, as well as his remarkable performance at the Ministry of Housing from 1951. They soon became disappointed with him as Prime Minister. Lord Salisbury resigned from his government within a few weeks because he released Archbishop Makarios from detention in the Seychelles. And Mr. Thorneycroft and his colleagues at the Treasury (including Mr. Enoch Powell, that stern and unbending Tory) resigned less than a year later because they wanted a more deflationary budget than Macmillan would allow.

The two crucial events which transformed his image were the application to join the European Common Market and the "Wind of Change" speech in South Africa. Macmillan's autobiography does not give us ahint how his mind moved toward those two great watersheds, even if we try to read between the lines. It is not easy to do so in any of his writings, including *The Past Masters,* because he has always been adept at concealing his mental processes. In retrospect, however, it is clear that several crucial events must have shaped his decision: the collapse of the Suez policy, England's recurrent economic crises, his tour of the Commonwealth at the beginning of 1958, the realization that not even the good will of President Eisenhower could restore the Anglo-American "special relationship" which had emerged from World War II.

Of the events which had influenced Macmillan's policy as Prime Minister most deeply, the most important was that which brought him to power: the failure of the expedition against the Suez Canal. It is also the most tantalizing episode in his memoirs, about which he adds nothing to what was already known. (Nor does he touch upon the subject in *The Past Masters.)* In his memoirs he comes near to adding less than nothing by ignoring the more-or-less authoritative accounts that were published, including Anthony Nutting's *No End of a Lesson.* Nutting recorded, among other revelations, a conversation he had at the time with Macmillan which implied that Macmillan was aware of collusion between the Englis, French and Israeli governments, though unlike Mr. Nutting he condoned it. In his memoirs Mr. Macmillan makes only one reference to Nutting, which is to mention that he was one of the two junior ministers who resigned. For the rest, he accepts a personal and heavy share of responsibility, but only for such errors as the miscalculation of American reactions to the Anglo-French action. Until today his silence on the main point is as impenetrable as that of Anthony Eden.

Indeed, it seems as if he never regarded the matter as very interesting. And the reason is not difficult to explain. Like his hero Winston Churchill, Macmillan sees politics in personal and dramatic terms. It is the interplay of personalities that stirs him, especially, of course, when one of the leading personalities is himself. In the dispute with Egypt in 1956, the leading figure was not Macmillan, but Eden. The affair is therefore less interesting to him than his later confrontations with de Gaulle, Khruschev, Makarios, or even Harold Wilson.

Mr. Macmillan follows Lenin (who borrowed the words from Gogol) in believing that the crucial question in politics is "who whom?" By an exercise of anticipation which the Greeks called "tragic irony", it is possible to foresee how this highly personalized view led to Macmillan's downfall in 1963. His writings reveal vividly the strain in his character which has been both the strength and the weakness of his dealings with other men. Loyalty and trustworthiness were the qualities he has always respected. Thus in his autobiography loyality was what Selwyn Lloyd had and Peter Thorneycroft lacked. Trustworthiness was the virtue which endeared Eisenhower to Macmillan and perfidy was the defect he despised in Makarios. Macmillan's way with those who do not meet the test is to mention them with disdain in passing and then consign them to oblivion. Disloyalty and untrustworthiness may, of course, sometimes be a byproduct of high-minded devotion to principle. But Macmillan has a particular scorn for the high-minded. His strong dislike of John Foster Dulles ("whose vanity more than equalled his talents") was due to the moralistic priggishness with which the Secretary of State approached political problems.

All are judged by a code fixed permanently in Macmillan's mind by an Edwardian education and the experiences of Eton, Balliol and the Guards. It was

the code of a bright and honourable schoolboy. In his memoirs Macmillan's mind frequently reverts to his schooldays. Presenting a Budget was "rather like a school speech day — a bit of a bore, but something which had to be endured," because "the parents and the old boys like it." This is a classic example of Macmillan's technique of teasing self-mockery: the schoolboy dreaming of brilliant success has become the brilliant success dreaming of his schooldays. It was the same when it came to choosing a new Prime Minister. Each minister was summoned by Lord Salisbury to be asked one by one: "Well, which is it, Rab or Harold?" Almost every one of them began by saying: "This is like coming to the Headmaster's study." Thus was the captain of the school chosen.

Naturally, there is an element of make-believe in Macmillan's self-portrait. But it is a sincere kind of make-believe because it is natural to him — as natural as that of the boy in *Peter Pan* who thought that "to die will be an awfully big adventure." Life was full of big adventures for Macmillan. The biggest of all was his transition from a "gown man" to a "sword man", which took place in 1914 and affected his whole life. In his memoirs he writes:

> I have ever been conscious of this duality. On the whole, it has been of some advantage to me. I could escape from the worst moments of military dangers or political anxiety into the comforting world of books. I have equally been able to acquire a certain calm, not internally, for I have suffered from agonies of nervous apprehension, but at any rate externally — what was afterwards called "unflappability."

In this respect he compares himself with Disraeli and Churchill, though "on a much lower scale". But he perhaps had a greater capacity than either of his two heroes for self-criticism and for concealing his self-doubts behind a facade of studied indifference.

Hostile critics, of whom there are many, have assumed that Macmillan's attitudes are part of an ironic pose, but it would be wiser to consider them as an intrinsic expression of his character. There is always a great deal of irony in his writings. He teases political opponents and anyone in whom he detects falseness and deception. He especially teases himself, lamenting, for example, his own tastes for the grouse moor and the golf course.

However, when he has poked fun at himself as an out-of-date country gentleman, he has not just been acting a part. He has recognized that there has been no other part for a man of his generation, background, and upbringing who has been intellectually aware, to a far greater extent than most others of his kind, that a new world is in the making. Besides, it is a new world with which he has been in sympathy. But it has been a logical and practical impossibility for him to become a part of it. In none of the crucial struggles of the era could a man like Macmillan change sides. A man born under Queen Victoria could not be on the side of rebellious youth. A white aristocrat could not be on the side of black nationalists. An Etonian could not be on the side of the comprehensives

and secondary moderns. He might realize that the other side would win; he might partly want it to win; but to join the other side would be contrary to his nature, and besides, it would be disloyal. All that a perceptive and intelligent man could do is to ease the transition, like Canning calling the New World into being to redress the balance of the Old.

During his years in office, Macmillan was a kind of midwife of political revolution. Like another intellectual midwife, Socrates, he used the thrust of irony to force people to face the implications of new ideas. Most of his followers had little idea what he was doing or where he was leading them. When he made Lord Home Foreign Secretary, for example, his right wing welcomed the appointment of a fourteenth Earl because it annoyed the Socialists; they failed to see that what Macmillan was doing was helping to make his application to join the Common Market more acceptable by placing a former Commonwealth Secretary in the Foreign Office. Yet he never deliberately disguised his motives. He just left them transparent, knowing that most of his party would look straight through them and see nothing but their own preconceptions. He exploited the simplicity of the Conservative mind as Disraeli had done a century before. To do so gave him great amusement, for, as Robert Blake said of Disraeli in an admirable study of his life, he was "never a grave politician".

Mr. Blake also said of Disraeli that he would probably never have been deceived by the Profumo scandal because, unlike Macmillan, Disraeli led an active life in high society even while he was Prime Minister. One passage in Macmillan's memoirs shows us the circumstances which allowed it to happen. Macmillan contrasts his life at No. 10 Downing Street, with life at No. 11 when he was Chancellor:

> Now I found myself alone, solitary (for very few people ask to see a Prime Minister, except those he does not much want to see), only leaving my house to go to the House of Commons (since the house itself was my office); seldom if ever going to a club; and working in one way or another for very long hours.

That is a self-portrait of a reserved and introspective man that could never have been written by Disraeli or Churchill, though it might have been by Baldwin. It helps to explain why he sometimes welcomed an indiscreet chat with an old crony like Randolph Churchill, who let him down in 1958 by reporting in detail in the *Evening Standard* remarks which he had made over a drink about the Far Eastern crisis. This was a minor betrayal compared to that of Profumo five years later, But what they had in common was macmillan's refusal to believe that a gentleman could be such a cad.

He cannot therefore, be acquitted of being out of touch in some ways with the new era which he was helping to bring about, and with which, at any rate in its more exciting aspects, he was fundamentally in agreement. That he was out of touch with it socially he admits and this was inevitable. During his years in office, he made little attempt to keep up with his tastes in literature and the arts

which might have helped him to be more aware of the ptifalls ahead of him. As a scholar and a publisher, his memoirs are naturally studded with literary allusions, but there is hardly one of them that could not have been embedded in his mind before he left university. Scott, Dickens, Conan Doyle, and, of course, Trollope, represent his taste among novelists; Thucydides, Gibbon and Voltaire among political historians; and his few other cultural allusions are mostly ironic, like the assumption that a man's moral standards must be above reproach because he sang in the Bach Choir. The Bible naturally has been the touchstone of his upbringing, yet he has a habit of misquoting it or misunderstanding its lessons. What could be the source of his belief that "it is somewhere stated in Scripture that it is our duty to forgive our friends"? And how did he come to suppose that the application of the Judgment of Solomon to the Cyprus problem would point to the solution of partition?

Mr. Macmillan's writings, including *The Past Masters*, will, of course, provide raw material of vital importance for future historians. But they will have to be carefully scrutinized in conjunction with other sources. Where it will be of incomparable value will be in assessing the fascinating character of the protagonist himself. Although more prolix than Churchill or Eden, let alone Atlee, Macmillan is both entertaining and more sensitive than any of them. His wit and irony are all his own. His comment on Khrushchev's press conference after the U-2 incident — "*Qualis artifex* if he would only perish!" — could have come from no other source. But however much he may pretend to have been the amateur captain of a country-house cricket team, he is equally revealing of the steely professionalism behind the facade. In what is perhaps the single most important sentence in *The Past Masters*, he writes that "a careful reading of histories and memoirs makes me feel that the power of a Prime Minister has steadily grown." It will be interesting to see whether reading his writings will make historians feel the same. In any event, they will have to do it; and fortunately they will find much to reward them.