

The Life and Thought of Herbert Butterfield

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The former Master of Peterhouse, Herbert Butterfield, has become something of a cottage industry over the past ten years or so, with a number of monographs resurrecting a career that had previously fallen into neglect. Indeed, the writer of this book, Michael Bentley, has himself contributed to the rehabilitation of Butterfield academically – his Wiles lectures, published as *Modernizing England's Past*, centred around the contrasting approaches to history taken by Butterfield and his *bête noire*, Lewis Namier.⁽¹⁾ Now he returns to the fray with the first biography of Butterfield to have been written. Although two substantial works devoted to Butterfield have appeared in recent years – Keith Sewell's *Herbert Butterfield and the Interpretation of History* and C. T. McIntire's *Herbert Butterfield, Historian as Dissenter* – both of these works concentrated solely upon his writings as opposed to the man himself.⁽²⁾ As E. H. Carr might say, surely this is an attempt to study the part without reference to the whole. This book then, attempts to do both – 'this biography is intended as an analysis of the thought as well as the man'. It is an official biography written in close co-operation with Butterfield's wife and sons, and thus Bentley has had access to much previously unseen material.

As Bentley points out in his introduction, one of the main reasons that Butterfield has not fared too well over the years is that unlike, say, Namier or Elton, he 'never built himself around a "school" of pupils who could together help raise the fallen flag' (p. 2). In his biography of G. M. Trevelyan, David Cannadine referred to Butterfield as a 'giggling, chain-smoking iconoclast, who seemed to be permanently about thirty-five years old', and a figure who 'never really matured into a seriously productive scholar or a major historian'.⁽³⁾ For Noel Annan, Butterfield was 'a Methodist with a twinkling eye, a fascinator whose chief pastime was academic intrigue'.⁽⁴⁾ Much like his contemporary Hugh Trevor-Roper (also the subject of a recent biography), he ultimately did not write the 'big book' that his talents suggested him to be capable of. As J. P.

Kenyon put it, Butterfield was ‘a man with a reputation rather like an inverted cone, his wide-ranging prestige balanced on a tiny platform of achievement’.(5) Yet Bentley argues that to say Butterfield never wrote anything is ridiculous: ‘historians who do not write anything do not bequeath bibliographies of published material running to some 180 items...’ (p. 2).

Born in 1900, Butterfield went up to Cambridge in 1919. After a false start, he eventually came under the tutelage of Harold Temperley, about whom Bentley is scathing. Far from Butterfield owing everything to the teaching of Temperley, Bentley argues that this legend ignores ‘two elemental observations: that Butterfield was very clever indeed and that Temperley was not ... Temperley’s teaching hardly deserves the name’ (pp. 41–2). Nevertheless, Butterfield achieved a vaunted double first, and won the Le Bas prize, the winner of which saw their essay published by the Cambridge University Press. The work, *The Historical Novel*, has not aged well. At the time however, its merits were enough to convince the Master of Peterhouse to elect Butterfield to a History Fellowship alongside Temperley and Paul Vellacott. In 1944 he was elected to the chair of Modern History, and from 1955–1968 he was master of Peterhouse, as well as holding the vice-chancellorship of the university between 1959 and 1961. He was knighted in 1968. His inveterate smoking and unhealthy lifestyle saw the last 20 years of his life plagued by health problems. Upon his death doctors found that he possessed only one functioning kidney; the other having been shrivelled since birth. In 1967 he was hospitalised with pneumonia, and suffered a mild stroke in 1971. A further stroke in 1976 made him virtually housebound, and he died on 20 July 20 1979.

Butterfield’s oeuvre covered many fields, including 18th-century political history, historiography and the history of science. His most widely known work is still *The Whig Interpretation of History*. 1931 saw the publication of the book Butterfield is most associated with. Less a book than a lengthy essay, *The Whig Interpretation of History* is a curious affair. As Carr put it, ‘it was a remarkable book in many ways – not least because, though it denounced the Whig Interpretation over some 130 pages, it did not ... name a single Whig except Fox, who was no historian, or a single historian except Acton, who was no Whig’.(6) It is unclear what motivated Butterfield to write the piece. Clearly one of the targets was Acton; to him Bentley feels we must add R. H. Tawney and Harold Temperley. Butterfield had read Tawney’s *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, and thought it ‘a silly book on the grounds of historical logic rather than faulty research’ (p. 100). It took a ‘series of complex transitions and turned them into a simple “cause” and high-road towards future capitalism’ (p. 100). With regards to Temperley, much ‘of the *Whig Interpretation* can be read as a mild joke against the man across the landing, and it would have been entirely characteristic of Butterfield to have enjoyed the mischief of making it’ (p. 100).

The *Whig Interpretation* did not refer to Whig politicians, but to the 19th-century interpretation of history as one long triumphant march of progress.(7) In English history this took the form of drawing a straight line from the Protestant triumph in the Reformation through the Glorious Revolution of 1688 to the present day. Furthermore, in constructing this interpretation historians usually committed anachronisms by seeing the past entirely in terms of the present. As J. H. Hexter once put it, ‘[w]e are unhappy when we watch Bishop Stubbs adding Victorian liberalism to the cargo that the Anglo-Saxons brought with them to England from their North German forests’.(8) Butterfield warned that real ‘historical understanding is not achieved by the subordination of the past to the present, but rather by our making the past our present and attempting to see life with the eyes of another century rather than our own’.(9) The same might be said of *The Whig Interpretation*; given the developments in historiography and historical theory, it is tempting to view it now as a somewhat primitive piece. One ‘has to see his act of criticism in the light of its own day, responding to a climate of historiographical opinion that no longer exists’ (p. 104).

Any account of the *Whig Interpretation* must invariably mention a book that has come to be seen as its sequel – *The Englishman and his History*. The origins of this book were hardly disinterested academic ones – during the academic session of 1943–4 an unfreezing of positions presented an opportunity for Butterfield to occupy the Chair of Modern History and become Professor Butterfield. But Butterfield’s most recently published book had been a short effort on Napoleon published three years earlier. He needed a new publication, and quickly. Recycling some of the material from his notorious trip to Bonn (see below), the result was ‘an unsatisfactory and rushed volume’ called *The Englishman and his History*, a book that gave

rise to what became known as the 'Herbert Butterfield problem'. Having dished the Whig interpretation less than 15 years earlier, Butterfield now seemed to have performed a *volte-face*. Whig history was now 'part of the landscape of English life ... part of the inescapable inheritance of the Englishman'.⁽¹⁰⁾ Scholars have gone to lengths to reconcile the contents of the two books, most notably Keith Sewell.⁽¹¹⁾ As Bentley puts it though, ultimately it was 'a botched book' (p. 168). It achieved what it needed to however, in that it secured him the post vacated by Temperley's death at the outbreak of the war.

Butterfield's other major works concerned the 18th century, which was the subject of two of his most substantial works. His first, *The Peace Tactics of Napoleon*, was published in 1929, at the end of a fairly turbulent period for Butterfield. Diplomatic history was traditionally a fairly dry subject, often consisting of what one clerk said to another. Butterfield wanted his history to be evocative, the story of how people wrestled with moral dilemmas in order to reach and carry their decisions. He made a convincing effort at this in *Peace Tactics*, but the book is not without its flaws. It weighs in at 400 pages, however, Butterfield claimed that this constituted less than half of his original manuscript. Lord Acton exhorted historians to study problems, not periods; but Butterfield seemed to have done the reverse, and the book lacked a problematic. Nonetheless, it has its moments, 'not least because it may be the best written of all Butterfield's books, with its sense of pointedness, artistry and without the staleness of some of his later style when he wrote too much' (p. 60).

Butterfield's second lengthy monograph came out in his hugely productive post-war period. *George III, Lord North and the People* was a strange book with a complicated genesis. It partly had its roots in the biography of Charles Fox which Butterfield ultimately never wrote (more on this shortly), but also sprang from a maelstrom of other topics which were in Butterfield's mind at the time; Lord Acton, the defeat of Germany and the beginning of the Cold War, and also Butterfield's *bête noire* Lewis Namier. To 'say something important about English politics in the reign of George III had become an urgent objective in his mind ever since the brilliant early volumes of Lewis Namier had changed the historical landscape' (p. 245). In a 400-page work based on archival research – 'a thought worth stressing when enemies always complained that Butterfield never visited archives' – Butterfield argued for the eyebrow-raising proposition that 1780 constituted the closest England ever came to a French-style revolution (p. 248). The book took a battering from the reviewers, with the *Times Literary Supplement* and Richard Pares in the *English Historical Review* exposing some of the empirical and logical problems with Butterfield's contention. As Bentley puts it with a neat turn of phrase, 'He [Butterfield] had over-egged the pudding. Perhaps it was not much of a pudding in the first place' (p. 250).

Butterfield's relationship with Namier became more complicated after *George III*. He admired the man, but hated his minions – 'the squadrons' as he referred to Namier's followers.⁽¹²⁾ Having failed to make much of a dent in the Namier interpretation of history, he instead wrote crushing reviews of the works of the Namierites, in particular John Brooke. The infamous 1953 *TLS* article which accused Namier of 'taking the mind out of history' was initially attributed to Butterfield, although it later turned out to have been written by A. J. P. Taylor.⁽¹³⁾ During 1954–5 Butterfield 'would obsess about the Namierites and the damage he saw in their hacking into his favourite century as though it were a plank of wood' (p. 306). A 1957 article in *Encounter* by Butterfield – 'George III and the Namier School' – was the prelude for another book-length bite at the Namier cherry, *George III and the Historians*, published later that year. It was a rushed work, and contained at least one error of fact that Butterfield had to publicly apologise for. Yet no 'proliferation of surface errors could be adduced to conceal the stark fact that Butterfield was right about the deficiencies of Namierism' (p. 255). After Butterfield's death, Elton remarked that 'though he [Butterfield] cannot be said to have triumphed in that battle [with Namier], he emerged from it with honour and the satisfaction of having been able to crack the crystalline self-regard of the opposing party in several places'.⁽¹⁴⁾

As mentioned above, the post-war period was a productive period for Butterfield. 1948's *The Origins of Modern Science* has largely been neglected by historians, yet the work is worthy of note not least for the fact that to an extent it foreshadows the work of Thomas Kuhn on the history and philosophy of science – a point which Bentley neglects. Kuhn remarked in *The Copernican Revolution* that 'only Herbert Butterfield ... has had particular influence on the structure of this book'.⁽¹⁵⁾ Butterfield argued that the history of science had

been subject to a Whig interpretation; whenever scientists talked about the history of science, 'they saw the past as a platform for the present and painted the history of their subject as a series of breakthroughs as though the remorseless logic of their subject matter determined the direction of its history' (p. 187). But the history of science was not one triumphant march towards greater knowledge of nature, a fact both Butterfield and Kuhn recognised. Moreover, Kuhn's idea of paradigms was in part inspired by Butterfield's argument that the main conceptual revolutions in science were 'brought about, not by new observations or additional evidence in the first instance, but by transpositions that were taking place inside the minds of scientists themselves ... [by their] putting on a different kind of thinking cap'.⁽¹⁶⁾

At the same time Butterfield was writing on science, he was addressing the subject of religion. Bentley argues that the Second World War is key to understanding Butterfield's life – 'without it, we might be discussing a very different trajectory in his mature life' (p. 173). The idea of providence had played a role in Butterfield's pre-war writings, but comes to forefront of his writings afterwards.⁽¹⁷⁾ Butterfield's idea of providence did not simply function as a kind of comfort blanket, but rather, posited the idea that history (as a discipline) ultimately had a moral base. A series of lectures given at the behest of the religious faculty at Cambridge was published in 1949 as *Christianity and History*, a book which went on to sell 30,000 copies in four years. Like most of Butterfield's work, it is brilliant in places while holding many contradictions. The famous words of the last lecture – 'Hold to Christ, and for the rest be totally uncommitted' – come at the end of a book 'that has very little to say about Him or indeed the New Testament as a whole' (p. 222).

After 1950 Butterfield increasingly turned to the study of historiography. Two articles – one on the origins of the Seven Years War and one on Lord Acton and the Massacre of Bartholomew – acted as a prelude to his 1954 Wiles lectures, published in 1955 as *Man on his Past*. In some sense the choice of topic was a surprise; many had expected something on Fox; or perhaps the Whig interpretation of history. But other historiographical issues were moving to the centre of Butterfield's thought. Prior to the war he had worried that the 'Geneva generation' had 'tried to turn modern history into a teleology with anarchic wars at one end and the League of Nations at the other' (p. 295). After the war the emphasis reversed: the need was felt 'to show the bestiality of the Germans and their special form of evil that had precipitated the destruction of Western Europe' (p. 295). Furthermore, in 1950 he supervised John Pocock's thesis on the idea of Anglo-Saxon democracy in English historiography that was eventually published in 1957 as the seminal *The English Constitution and Feudal Law*.

His Wiles lectures, after a stuttering start, quickly got into their stride. In the *Whig Interpretation* Butterfield had noted with satisfaction that historians had little reflected on the nature of their subject, and in *Man on his Past* he reassured readers that his enquiry was not about theory. Yet 'every word of his text implied theory – about the nature of historical knowledge, the place of accumulation in sustaining it, about appropriate methodologies, about the history of historiography as its own form of explanation' (pp. 303–4). Of course Butterfield would not be the first practising historian to struggle with the world of conceptualising historical practise. One of his most perceptive statements on historiography came in response to some of the jabs aimed at him by E. H. Carr in *What is History?* A 'person who enters the field of Lutheran studies inherits a long tradition of scholarship which ... does not merely reflect the view of 1961. It holds some sort of deposit from the views of 1561, 1661, 1761 and 1861'.⁽¹⁸⁾ If historians 'pay attention to the perspectives of untold previous generations, they cannot be accused of creating a past that simply reflects their own present' (p. 313). In 1965 Butterfield delivered the Gifford lectures at Glasgow University on *The Origins of History*. The lectures themselves were a disappointment – audience turnout was small and Butterfield himself was underprepared. He prevented their publication in his lifetime; in 1981 they were posthumously edited and published by Butterfield's friend Adam Watson.

In retrospect, Butterfield, much like Lord Acton, is perhaps best known for the book he didn't write – a biography of Charles James Fox. After Butterfield had name-checked Fox in *The Whig Interpretation*, G. M. Trevelyan 'decided to make Butterfield put his money where his mouth had been' (p. 105). The then-Regius professor sent Butterfield the Fox papers which had been in his care suggesting that Butterfield might like to write a biography of him – not the sort of invitation one declined. Butterfield, though, was never one for archival work at the best of times. The 'book on Fox, a call to celebrity, had come to feel like an incubus that

he would not dislodge from his shoulders for 20 years' (p. 118). He worked at it on and off; the 'box with his [Fox's] name on it continued to fill with tiny docketts ... Each year brought new resolutions to move Fox forward and each saw the project languish when so many other tasks seemed to claim priority' (p. 243). Many reasons have been put forward as to why he did not finish the Fox biography. Denis Brogan, who thought Butterfield somewhat of a prig, remarked that 'so upright a man could not being himself to grapple with rakes and rascals'.⁽¹⁹⁾ Then again, this did not prevent him writing on Napoleon. Ultimately the only man who can answer this question is the subject of this book; and for the foreseeable future he will remain silent.

A word or two must also be said about Butterfield's alleged pro-Nazism. Undoubtedly his decision to lecture in Bonn in 1938 – 'by which time all 'decent' people are supposed to have understood all too well the real character of Hitler's government' – was a misjudgement (p. 118). Bentley goes to great lengths to exonerate Butterfield from the charge of being a fellow-traveller – more than is necessary I suspect. Undoubtedly Butterfield said some stupid things about the political situation in the 1930s and made some misjudgements – but he was hardly alone in this, and, if one wants an example of a card-carrying Nazi sympathiser, one need look no further than Arthur Bryant. As Bentley has written in an earlier piece, Butterfield loved to affect humour, 'and his academic colleagues, like their students in the lecture hall, wrote down his jokes and jibes as formal pronouncements for reproduction'.⁽²⁰⁾ Therefore, 'many of the more rebarbative and unethical statements attributed to Butterfield have their origins in a knockabout conversation on a railway platform, or at a party, or on high table at Peterhouse ...'.⁽²¹⁾

Readers of this biography who have had to assimilate all of the theoretical verbiage that postmodernism has forced upon historical theory might perhaps see Butterfield's contribution to historical theory and method as fairly tame stuff. However, as Butterfield himself might say, these things have to be looked at in context. Butterfield was part of the bridge between the golden age of historiography of the late 19th and early 20th century, and the era of postmodernism which decried the historian's ability to say much about anything. As Bentley wrote in his earlier book *Modernizing England's Past*, many history tutors who teach their students all about postmodernist historiography tend to struggle when asked to define its modernist pre-cursor. In *Modernizing England's Past* Bentley wrote about English historiography largely in terms of two of its titans – Butterfield and Namier – and this biography continues the project of expositing modernist historiography.

For those interested in the private lives of dons, Bentley's biography contains revelations of a previously unknown affair, with Joy Marc between 1935 and 1939. It is right that knowledge of this relationship should be included in a biography, but aside from telling us the fact that *Peace Tactics of Napoleon* was completed seven years before it was published, it does not really tell us anything new about Butterfield the historian. Furthermore, Bentley's somewhat prudish stand on the Butterfield/Marc letters – 'I have suppressed any sexually explicit material in this account, both on the grounds of taste and in consideration of the feelings of Joy Marc's family' – makes one ask: why include the affair in the first place if the account is ultimately going to be a censored one? Perhaps one is being too hard on Bentley here; given that this is to all intents and purposes an official biography, one suspects he is trying to straddle two horses at the same time when he writes about this relationship.

This might also account for the odd fact that is glossed over here and there; for instance, Bentley neglects to mention that in his pursuit of the Namierites Butterfield reviewed one of John Brooke's books for four separate publications – a clear breach of academic etiquette.⁽²²⁾ The book also suffers from the lack of a few concluding remarks at the end. Perhaps Bentley felt that after nearly 400 pages such a tail-end was unnecessary. But I for one would have liked to have seen something along the lines of an earlier comparison he made between Butterfield's commitment to 'narrative exposition with emplotment' and similarities to Butterfield in the styles of modern historians like Simon Schama or Niall Ferguson. Also, those who enjoyed the flair and pace of Bentley's writing in *Modernizing England's Past* may be slightly disappointed here; *The Life and Thought of Herbert Butterfield* is a much more subdued affair – perhaps befitting the book's status as an 'official biography'. However, this is not to say the book isn't extremely readable – quite the opposite in fact. Together with Adam Sisman's biography of Trevor-Roper, *Herbert Butterfield* may be seen

as another important brick in the prosopographical record of the great English historians of the mid 20th century – even if this is not an endeavour that Butterfield himself would have approved of. With regards to a verdict on Butterfield the historian, one inclines towards the same view that one felt after reading the aforementioned biography of Trevor-Roper – while Bentley is right to point out that Butterfield’s output was not as insignificant as some critics have stated, one gets the feeling that a man of his talents ought to have left a greater written legacy.

Notes

1. Michael Bentley, *Modernising England’s Past* (Cambridge, 2006).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Keith Sewell, *Herbert Butterfield and the Interpretation of History* (Basingstoke, 2005); C. T. McIntire, *Herbert Butterfield, Historian as Dissenter* (New Haven, CT, 2004).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. David Cannadine, *G. M. Trevelyan*, (London, 1992), p. 128.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Noel Annan, *Our Age* (London, 1990), p. 270.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. J. P. Kenyon, *The History Men* (2nd ed., London, 1993), p 276.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. E. H. Carr, *What is History* (London, 1961), p. 41. Bentley remarks that this is a ‘celebrated, but weary jibe’ (p. 100). Perhaps it needs to be replaced with Geoffrey Elton’s remark that the ‘range of examples [used in *Whig*] is surprisingly narrow ... one gets very tired of Martin Luther popping up on page after page’. Elton, ‘Herbert Butterfield and the study of history’, *The Historical Journal*, 27 (1984), 734.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Thus, the arch-Tory Bishop Stubbs is seen as one of the great Whig historians on this interpretation. [Back to \(7\)](#)
8. J. H. Hexter, ‘The historian and his day’, *Political Science Quarterly*, 69 (1954), 220.[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (London, 1931), p. 16.[Back to \(9\)](#)
10. Herbert Butterfield, *The Englishman and his History* (Cambridge, 1944), p 2.[Back to \(10\)](#)
11. See Keith Sewell, ‘The Herbert Butterfield Problem and its Resolution’, *Journal for the History of Ideas*, 64 (2003), 599–618.[Back to \(11\)](#)
12. According to J. H. Plumb, Namier ‘hated Butterfield, [with] a hatred that deepened year after year and became a kind of obsessional rage. He spoke of him with sneering bitterness, arranged for his books to be savaged by anonymous reviewers and wrecked his reputation whenever opportunity offered’. Quoted in McIntire, *Herbert Butterfield, Historian as Dissenter*, pp. 277–8.[Back to \(12\)](#)
13. The quote ran, ‘Darwin was accused of taking mind out of the universe; and Sir Lewis has been the Darwin of political history – in more senses than one’, *TLS*, 28 August 1953.[Back to \(13\)](#)
14. Elton, ‘Herbert Butterfield and the study of history’, 729.[Back to \(14\)](#)
15. Thomas Kuhn, *The Copernican Revolution* (Chicago, IL, 1957), p. 283.[Back to \(15\)](#)
16. Herbert Butterfield, *The Origins of Modern Science 1300–1800* (London, 1948), p. 1.[Back to \(16\)](#)
17. See also Sewell, pp. 94–111.[Back to \(17\)](#)
18. Butterfield, ‘Review of “*What is History*”’, *Cambridge Review*, 1961, 172.[Back to \(18\)](#)
19. Elton, ‘Herbert Butterfield and the study of history’, p. 739.[Back to \(19\)](#)
20. Michael Bentley, ‘Herbert Butterfield and the ethics of historiography’, *History and Theory*, 44 (2005), 57.[Back to \(20\)](#)
21. *Ibid.*[Back to \(21\)](#)
22. See Kenyon, p. 277.[Back to \(22\)](#)

Other reviews:

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<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/jul/15/life-herbert-butterfield-michael-bentley-review> [2]

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