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Published on *Reviews in History* (http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews)

Liberal Epic: The Victorian Practice of History from Gibbon to Churchill

Review Number:
1247
Publish date:
Thursday, 3 May, 2012
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ISBN:
9780813931456
Date of Publication:
2011
Price:
£35.50
Pages:
344pp.
Publisher:
University of Virginia Press
Place of Publication:
Charlottesville, VA
Reviewer:
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The liberal enlightenment idea of progress has promised many benefits over the past 300 years. Liberal progress, we have been told, would provide cures for diseases, remedies for ignorance, alternatives to superstition, and antidotes to poverty. Nothing however has raised higher expectations than liberalism?s claim that it could put an end to war. According to Kant, Condorcet, Godwin, and a host of others, the spread of knowledge and the accumulation of wealth would reinforce rational thinking, and promote an understanding that gain need not be achieved at the expense of someone else. With the resultant conquest of fear and hate, it seemed only reasonable to anticipate that violence would cease as the means of self-assertion, whether by groups, individuals, or organized states.(1)

Yet, as with so many of liberalism?s promises, the vision of a peaceful future has proven impossible to sustain. The French Revolution, which was supposed to put enlightenment ideals into practice, eventuated, after 1792, in a gruelling, 25-year-long transcontinental struggle that left approximately five million soldiers and civilians in their graves. Some decades later, when the world had recovered from this bloodletting, the champion of English liberalism, Richard Cobden, formulated a concrete political program in which open markets, free thought and representative government would guarantee that such a débâcle could not recur. Yet, as these institutions were gradually established, the spectre of war continued to darken the horizons.

Open trade was ringed with tariffs, free thought spawned propaganda, while the industrial techniques pioneered by peaceful commerce were turned into dynamite detonators and machines of death. Armed with these tools of industrial destruction, enlightened men began to hurl them at one another during the First World War (1914-18), which left ten million fatalities in its wake. To the American President, Woodrow Wilson, this horrid ?war to end all wars? might actually have been redeemed, had it resulted in a mutually acceptable peace settlement, based on open covenants, national self-determination and an international economy of free trade. Alas, 20 years later, almost to the date, the curtain rose on an even bloodier world-wide holocaust that generated another 60 million corpses.(2)

This proliferation of mass murder, amidst paeans to pacifism, represents one of the most striking contradictions of the modern epoch. But where there is contradiction, there is also the seed for great literature. The ways that literature has navigated the relationship between war and liberalism provides the theme for Edward Adams?s sometimes brilliant, but occasionally maddening, book. Surely, we are told by our inner enlightenment philosopher, ?war cannot be liberal, and liberalism cannot be warlike?. Yet, as Adams explains in *Liberal Epic*, the way in which the two have co-existed is much more painful, convoluted and complex. Since the days of Homer, as everyone knows, the war epic has reigned in the artistic firmament as a literary genre of enormous prestige. To compose an epic of Homeric proportions had been the goal of nearly every major poet throughout antiquity, the Middle Ages, and early modern times. And yet, at the turn of the 18th century, François Fénelon attempted to invert this classical Homeric pattern with his clever sequel, *Les Aventures de Télémaque*. Picking up the travels of Telemachus from the point when Homer left them, Fénelon revises the bard with a story of Mentor?s further instruction: conducting his own odyssey in search of his father, the young prince is taught to renounce the war epic, to become a just ruler, and to abandon violence and corruption as instruments of political policy.

In the aftermath of Fénelon, as Adams demonstrates, aspiring bards, such as Alexander Pope and Voltaire, felt obliged to remodel the classical epic. As his bloody deeds were exposed by the early rays of enlightenment, the war hero was demoted from his epi-centric place. Thus, when Pope produced his celebrated translation of the *Iliad*, he engaged in a program of linguistic sanitization that greatly diminished the ubiquitous blood and gore of the Greek original. When the historian, Edward Gibbon, aspired to write a great prose epic, he found that a comparable strategy was required. Although *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* was filled with fighting and battles, Gibbon abridged his coverage and downplayed their significance, hinging his declension narrative on the *teloi* of corruption and religion, rather than on the tides of fortune or the vicissitudes of arms.

In Walter Scott?s novels, the hero is turned into a passive protagonist, while his *Life of Napoleon*, the one true epic that Scott actually produced, continues the sanitization of military history that Gibbon had begun. The romantic poets further destabilized the war epic, starting with Southey, whose *Joan of Arc* refigured the warrior as a female saint (not to mention, a revolutionary enemy). Two decades later, he felt obliged to compensate for these youthful indiscretions with his *Lives of Nelson* and *Wellington*, and his *Peninsular War* . Purveyed from the opposite end of the political spectrum, these were little more than reactionary tirades ? in which ?every rhetorical opportunity to diminish the French enemy and aggrandize the English is taken? (p. 119). By contrast, Byron?s *Childe Harold* was an anti-war manifesto that was scarcely redeemed by his subsequent *Don Juan*, which begins with a list of soldiers, only to settle on a conqueror of a different kind.(3) In the aftermath of Britain?s own heroic, anti-Napoleonic crusade, it was left to a liberal general, Sir William Francis Napier, to provide the multi-volume prose epic of these recent events. As a military man with ardent sympathies for radical reformers, Napier refigured the war in Spain as a campaign against native retrogression, in which the original French liberators had turned into tyrants, necessitating a second, British, invasion to institute regime change.

As Adams shows, it was during the high Victorian period that the war epic came under full frontal attack. For John Stuart Mill, the progress of society could be measured by the degree to which people were protected from violence, and the extent to which they felt free to express their individuality in peaceful ways. To Herbert Spencer the entire history of mankind could be encapsulated in a shift from primitive, static ?militant? societies, organized for competition in war, to progressive, dynamic ?industrial? societies, which

shifted competition from the battlefield to the marketplace and the higher realms of invention and thought. A comparable historicist scheme was offered by Henry Buckle, who argued that climate governed human progress during the early stages of civilization, but that advanced peoples had created their own pacific environment, in which the pace of progress was determined by mental laws of scientific discovery and innovation. Under these circumstances, Edward Creasy dared to publish his popular *Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World* (1851) only by offering a disclaimer that the battles (from Marathon to Waterloo) had been chosen because each had contributed to advancing the cause of civilization and peaceable progress.

Nevertheless, even under these circumstances, Adams shows, the war epic would not entirely go away. The Crimean War alerted Britons to the dangers of military unpreparedness, while the Indian Revolt of 1857 reminded them that their empire must ultimately be sustained by force of arms. Even Mill discovered ?just wars? of liberation in Europe and America that rendered his later writings a good deal more bellicose than the theoretical pacifism which had marked his earlier work. While Dickens wrested the novel away from the ghost of Scott, Thackeray attempted to re-inscribe the older epic forms. Carlyle, meanwhile, celebrated the return of the hero, and spent 15 years writing a 22-volume *History of Frederick the Great*. Most notably, T. B. Macaulay, arguably the most popular writer of the age, capped his essayistic celebrations of progress with a bestselling five-volume *History of England*, in which battles and wars found a significant place. This resurgence of the war epic continued to accelerate throughout the medieval revival of the 1860s, 1870s, and 1880s. Adams traces it in William Morris?s *Sigurd the Volsung* (1868) and *The House of Wolflings* (1889), even though his subsequent conversion to Marxism enabled him to dream of a future entirely free of warfare in his utopian novel *News from Nowhere* (1890). Moving on to the last years, before the end of the 19th century, the journalist Alexander Kinglake, the poet/novelist Thomas Hardy, and the historian G. M. Trevelyan each found in the ?progressive? wars of the 19th century ? Crimean, Napoleonic, and Garibaldian, respectively ? material for a new kind of war epic, in tune with the *telos* of liberalism.

Needless to say, the carnage of the First World War put an end to this fledgling genre, although Adams?s last chapter offers a telling contrast. On the one side we are given C. V. Wedgwood?s *History of the Thirty Years? War*, which reflected on the futility of state violence. On the other side, we are accosted by Winston Churchill?s early war reportage, and his post-Gallipoli biography of his ancestor, Marlborough, which revels in the blood and gore of battlefield violence in a disturbingly anachronistic Homeric way. If Churchill rose to the occasion, when the fate of freedom hung in balance, during the ultimate conflagration of 1940?5, it was his sadism, not his liberalism, that fitted him for the job. ?To be blunt, Churchill saw war coming before others and rose to its challenge, because Churchill wanted to see that challenge, welcomed the exhilarating violence of war in life and art, and clutched at such heroism and such domination as a leader and a historian? (p. 256).

Adams?s book is filled with shrewd and sharp observations like the one just quoted, but in the end it does not entirely live up to its promise. In part, it suffers from poor organization ? a 57-page prologue/introduction, which does not so much introduce, as prefigure, the argument of the chapters, and individual chapters that are constantly signalling ahead, looking backward, and turning in on themselves. In a 280-page book (plus 13 pages of notes) Adams is trying to cover so much ground that he is constantly jumping from one argument to another (usually based on contrasts between two or more literary/historical works). This leaves little space for the kind of exegesis and meta-commentary on specific poems or prose epics at which he clearly excels, and that his argument requires.

Adams has clearly made the right decision to define the modern epic extremely capaciously, so as to include not only poetry but also prose histories and novels, (although he hints that the novels would require a separate treatment). But to treat books like J. M. Keynes' *Economic Consequences of the Peac*e, or William Morris?s *News from Nowhere* as in any sense epic, is to stretch the genre beyond all meaning. Here again, this extravagance is a product of Adams?s restless intelligence and great erudition. There appears to be little that he has not thought about, and even less that he has not read. His chapter sub-titles indicate the range of figures on whom he is writing: François Fénelon, Alexander Pope, Edward Gibbon, Walter Scott, Robert Southey, William F. Napier, W. M. Thackeray, T. B. Macaulay, Thomas Carlyle, J. S. Mill, Edward Creasy, T. H. Buckle, William Morris, Alexander Kinglake, Thomas Hardy, G. M. Trevelyan, Leo Tolstoy, J. M.

Keynes, Winston Churchill and C. V. Wedgwood. Yet in addition to this epic cast of characters, Adams gives almost equally starring roles to many of the most important intellectuals of the modern age. According to my running count, John Milton, Hugo Grotius, Samuel Pufendorf, John Locke, Bishop Bossuet, John Dryden, Voltaire, Giambatisto Vico, David Hume, Adam Smith, Edmund Burke, J. J. Rousseau, Immanuel Kant, William Blake, Leigh Hunt, S. T. Coleridge, William Godwin, Percy Shelley, Charles Dickens, Henry Hallam, Alfred Tennyson, John Ruskin, W. E. H. Lecky, George Eliot, Herbert Spencer, Lord Acton, Henry Adams, Francis Parkman, H. G. Wells, Mikhail Bakhtin, Fernand Braudel, Isaiah Berlin, Hugh Trevor-Roper, John Keegan, S. L. A. Marshall, Elaine Scarry, and Martha Nussbaum all make more than walk-on appearances in Adams?s pages. This is not mere name dropping, since Adams has interesting and original things to say about many of these figures, but their appearance on so crowded a stage creates frequent confusion, dialogue that is rushed, and lines that are cut off almost before they have begun.

When we do step back to distinguish Adams?s forest from his trees, we must question his concluding paragraph, which contends that ?epic survived or persisted or flourished in the modern liberal world and in spite of liberalism?s profound ethical and intellectual objections, because liberalism still needed and still needs its horrific or sublime, offensive or beautiful drama of domination? (p. 290). On the contrary, what Adams shows (at least to this reader) is that liberals have slowly but steadily striven to put ever increasing distance between themselves and the Homeric war epic?s blood and gore. If this process has taken an unconscionably lengthy period of time, it is because of 1) the lingering literary prestige of the classical epic, 2) the repeated appearance of post-liberal critics who have been motivated by disillusionment with its betrayed ideals and 3) the ever renewed supply of sanguinary politicians eager to stoke up war fever, such as Churchill, or the (thankfully unnamed) architects of the 2004 Iraq War, who have clearly served as the muses for Adams?s book. Indeed, to understand why anyone genuinely committed to liberalism can no longer find in the war epic ?the one literary genre supremely dedicated to convincingly representing agency??, we need do no more than to turn to Churchill?s insight that ?war, which used to be cruel and magnificent, has now become cruel and squalid: It is all the fault of democracy and science. Instead of a small number of well trained professionals championing their country?s cause with ancient weapons and beautiful intricacy of archaic maneuver ... we now have entire populations, including even women and children, pitted against one another in brutish mutual extermination, and only a set of blear-eyed clerks left to add up the butcher?s bill?.(4)

Does this mean that the modern liberal world no longer offers any literary genres ?supremely dedicated to convincingly representing agency?? Of course, it does not. However, to find an epic genre that is dedicated to representing agency in organically liberal terms, we need to look beyond the confines of Adams?s book. For the authentic liberal epic is the epic of peaceful conquest, of entrepreneurial capitalism, of modernization and technological development, indeed (as Churchill might have it) of scientific discovery and the search for truth. Like the classical war epic, this epic of the marketplace ? in goods, in projects, in knowledge and ideas ? has its own distinctive forms of tragedy and inner contradiction. Yet, to tell the story of this wholeheartedly modern epic requires an itinerary rather different from the one that Adams has traced. To be sure, in his capaciousness, he does momentarily glance in this alternate direction, in the context of his discussion of Buckle (chapter four), who replaces the epic of war heroes with an epic of heroes of intellect and production, ?scientists, inventors, economists, scientific historians and the like? (p. 185).

Buckle?s epic of liberal entrepreneurship/improvement (in which he assigns himself an implicit part) does indeed represent a full-blown ?liberal? alternative to the war epic, possessing its own counter-logic of struggle and triumph, hubris and nemesis. It is an epic tradition whose grounding ur-text is not Homer, but the Faust legend, haltingly formulated by Marlowe, classicized by Shelley?s *Prometheus Unbound*, and magnificently elaborated in the second part of Goethe?s *Faust*.(5) Being, at heart, a modern epic, it rises through the 19th century from a work like Samuel Smiles?s *Lives of the Engineers* to the American stories of Andrew Carnegie, Thomas Edison, and John D. Rockefeller, whose heroic feats (and failures) have never properly yet been told. Taking a mythological turn in the operas of Wagner, it is ushered into the 20th century by the Fabian critiques (and dramas) of Shaw. Since then, it has headed in many directions, my own favorite being Robert Rhodes?s magnificent trilogy on modern physicists and the birth of the atomic age: *The Making of the Atomic Bomb*

, *Dark Sun: The Making of the Hydrogen Bomb*, and *Twilight of the Bombs*.(6) Must we conclude then that the modern epic of scientific (or capitalist) development necessarily terminates (like the war epic) in Churchill?s ?cruel and squalid exercise? in ?brutish mutual extermination?? Does it have sufficient stores of energy and optimism to accelerate mankind forward to frontiers yet unknown? Adams?s framework provides no basis for answering this question, but it would be churlish to end on a critical note. His rich brew of poetry, prose and historical argumentation gives us much food for thought, and inspires us to rewrite the recipe book with a different set of ingredients.

Notes

1. Immanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays* (Indianapolis, IN, [1795], 1983), pp. 107?43; *Condorcet, Selected Writings*, ed. Keith Baker (Indianapolis, IN, [1793], 1976), pp. 209?82; William Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (London, [1798], 1976), pp. 506?23.Back to (1)
2. Charles J. Esdaile, *Napoleon?s Wars: An International History, 1803-1815* (New York, NY 2007), pp. 6?14, 561; David Gates, *The Napoleonic Wars, 1803?1815* (London, 1997), 272; Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War*, (New York, NY, 1999), p. 295; Gerhard Weinberg, *A World at Arms* (Cambridge, 1999), p. 894.Back to (2)
3. Lord Byron, *Don Juan*, ed. T. G. Steffan, E. Steffan, and W.W. Pratt (Harmondsworth, 1973), pp. 46?7.Back to (3)
4. Winston Churchill, *My Early Life, A Roving Commission*, (New York, NY 1930), p. 65.Back to (4)
5. Christopher Marlowe, *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*, (Northbrook, IL, 1950); Johan Wolfgang Goethe, *Faust*, (New York, NY, 1976), pp. 118?308.Back to (5)
6. Robert Rhodes, *The Making of the Atomic Bomb*, (New York, NY, 1986); *Dark Sun: The Making of the Hydrogen Bomb* (New York, NY, 1996); *Twilight of the Bombs*, (New York, NY, 2011).Back to (6)

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