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Macaulay and Son: Architects of Imperial Britain

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With the government in the midst of yet another shake-up of the national curriculum, the teaching of history in schools has become perhaps the most contentious of proposed reforms. Like many Education Secretaries before him, Michael Gove has found his agenda, namely the creation of a national story complete with its heroes, to be at odds with the proposals of the history profession and thus become the source of an embarrassing conflict for the government. Catherine Hall's new study of the great Victorian historian and provider of a national narrative, Thomas Babington Macaulay, is therefore a timely one.

In writing a biographical history of Macaulay, Hall tasks herself with the deconstruction of his *History of England*, by looking at the centre of the Victorian narrative of England from its margins, and thus exposing how certain groups had been written out. This shift in focus away from previous studies is perhaps the next logical step in a career dedicated to unearthing the gendered, racial and imperial attitudes that underpinned English identity. She has often stated in previous works that the role of coloniser was a constituent part of that identity.

The primary target of *Macaulay and Son*, however, is a particular silence in history, that of the emotional and psychological life; aspects which so clearly shape historical actors yet are rarely accounted for in the history of great men. From the start she points to Macaulay's lack of interest in internal thought. His figures are 'bundles of characteristics', one dimensional actors; unlike himself, whose letters reveal strong passions

and fluctuating emotions. In order to make sense of this and to better understand Macaulay's politics, policies and *History*, she changed her focus to also encompass Zachary Macaulay, his father, and Tom's relationship with him and his family, particularly his mother and two favourite sisters, Hannah and Margaret. Tom incidentally is the name by which Hall and his family refer to him throughout the book, and as a result is the name with which I shall refer to him from now on.

Looking at father and son, whose visions of nation and empire were very different yet also connected, is a way for Hall to explore two key moments in the creation of imperial discourse - evangelicalism and liberal imperialism. Thus the book is not simply a biographical study; rather by exploring the lives and writings of these two men it provides a lens through which to observe ideas of nation, empire and history.

The first section of the book opens with a question which runs throughout: what makes an imperial man? It then tracks Zachary's early life from Scotland to Jamaica, where he encounters the cruelty of slavery first hand, and on to Sierra Leone, thanks to his connection within the Clapham Sect. This opportunity to make something of himself and play a leading in the colony's establishment, was not without difficulties and led to his support for an authoritarian empire against unruly black immigrants from Nova Scotia. The second chapter explores Zachary's faith and its influence upon his life to a much greater extent; his sense of duty and understanding of sin played a huge part in his relationship with imperial reform. As a result, he became a fervent supporter of abolition, to the detriment of his finances and leaving a powerful vision of a godly nation and world, organised by men like himself as a legacy to Tom.

The second section turns to Tom himself, his upbringing, his relationship with his family and its effects upon his outlook and personality, in particular the immense blow of losing his mother and two sisters and how this would affect his later public life and his writing. The fourth chapter moves on to his life as a Whig and reformer; his part in the Reform Act and his belief in an inclusive and assimilative idea of nationhood, which embraced Irish Catholics and Jews, yet also excluded women and colonial subjects from the nation in 1832.

Chapter five expands to the empire. Tom's vision would be shaped by the ideas of his father but were significantly different. His vision of empire was one which abandoned conquest and slavery and instead focused upon spreading civilisation to its subjects. Hall discusses colonial difference and its effects on Tom's philosophy. While all men belonged to one family and all British subjects must enjoy the rule of law, the methods and forms of government must be different based on the level of civilisation achieved by different subject peoples.

The final chapter looks at Tom the historian: his motivations and goals; how he saw his writing as complementing the Whig goal of governing *for* the people; his central theme of progress from barbarism to civilisation and how Englishmen shared a common liberty; finally, how his history defined the nation and its outsiders and attempted to build up walls to maintain that division.

Moving on to the first of the book's major themes, in the first section Hall sets out her position on racial attitudes in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, through the experiences of Zachary. At 16 he had taken up employment as a book-keeper in Jamaica, an under-manager on a plantation. Though shocked by the daily violence he witnessed, he felt it important to assimilate himself into white planter society, and, except for his sober manner, his habits and dispositions became like theirs. Yet he soon came to recognise his actions as grave sins, to be atoned for, thus on his return to Britain he used the one advantage he possessed, a good education, to argue for emancipation on the behalf of the enslaved.

As in previous works, Hall states that, 'it was only through the construction of others that the Englishman could know what Englishness was' (p. xxiii). Yet unlike previous work, such as *Civilising Subjects* where she states 'what is absolutely the same versus what is absolutely other, will not do' (1), this stress on racial othering is not dwelt upon, being neither qualified nor tempered in this way. Othering is a concept not without its critics (2), and a discussion of the similarity or even ambiguities of racial difference within the Macaulays' imperial experiences would have been a welcome addition.

This aside, her summary of racial theories in the period is excellent and nuanced. Hall suggests that race has always been entwined with numerous other conceptions of difference and understandings of humanity. She draws out the multiplicity of conceptions of racial difference during the long 18th century, but rightly focuses upon the singular and stadial view of civilisation as formulated during the Scottish Enlightenment. She goes on, however, to contend that though there remained the vision of a singular human nature and the optimistic belief that with the removal of environmental or cultural factors, progress would be possible for all, this formulation created an impassable barrier for subject races. Thus, drawing on the work of Stuart Hall and others she affirms that race has two registers, the cultural and the biological, and that cultural differences such as religion, history or social norms can be just as 'essentialising' as skin colour.

Whilst this is a very important insight for our understanding of racism historically, it is problematic when applied to British India, at least prior to 1857. Undoubtedly, cultural racism can be just as vicious and exclusionary as biological racism, but with the small and essential difference being that Tom, and all other contemporary liberal writers on India, thoroughly believed in the civilising mission, not as mere window dressing for imperialism, but as a way to reformulate its institutions to bring about change in the colonial subject. This oversight clouds many of the book's later conclusions about the imperial projects of the Macaulays. Both men were certainly racist, and Tom's candid letters prove him to be much more so than his father, yet they both firmly believed they were working towards the material betterment of colonial subjects. Both were also convinced by the universal nature of man, viewing difference as mutable and temporary; a belief which coloured both their policies and writings, even if results were markedly different, which Hall does not fully allow for.

In discussing race in the work of Zachary Macaulay and other Clapham Sect abolitionists she brings out clearly the dual nature of their intervention, as both emancipatory and restrictive. By approaching abolition as a task for the civilised white man to perform in order to save the barbarous black, they came to support racial hierarchies. Zachary's own experience in Sierra Leone proved, they were much more comfortable with the idea of a pleading African, as in the famous image asking 'am I not a man and a brother?', than the clamorous settlers, with their dissenting beliefs and claims to equality, who peopled the new colony. The result of this was his own assertion of despotic authority against the 'Jacobinical' colonists, a difficult position for a man such as himself. This was a turn of events which he preferred to forget in later years, preferring instead to concentrate on abolition, which held out the hope of ending the source of such problematic differences.

Tom's reaction to his troubling encounters with other races was similar to his father's. Each chose to forget or ignore such issues, preferring more congenial tasks to tackling the disturbing experiences which might undermine his idealised vision of progress. If Partha Chatterjee's theory of colonial difference is right, then perhaps one way it operated on idealistic men like the Macaulays was to encourage obfuscation or neglect, rather than active reassessment of the prospects of ending difference or a repositioning of the goal posts.⁽³⁾

From his upbringing Tom had lived with ideas about empire and its gradations of racial difference. As a young man he developed his own approach, marked by his father's beliefs but shaped by his commitment to liberal imperial reform and its goal of progress. His was a secular vision of improvement, whereas his father's was deeply Christian. Before he arrived in India, Tom had been 'profoundly influenced' by Mill's *History*, which taught there was nothing to learn from Indian culture, and once ensconced in the European enclave in Calcutta he found the country foreign, chaotic, decayed, hot, superstitious, degraded, wretched and peopled by 'blacks'. He came naturally to view India as backwards due to his own understanding of British history. Comparisons between the Scottish Highlands or Ireland, prior to English intervention and 'improvement' taught him to judge India accordingly.

When it came to Tom's most famous act in India, his *Minute on Education*, Hall's analysis is insightful, providing a valuable demonstration of Chatterjee's colonial difference in action. The aim of an English education was to construct a class of Indian collaborators to act as a link and interpreters between the rulers and ruled. The English language would bring with it knowledge and progress, but the use of English was

also a way of maintaining their separation both culturally and in terms of power relations; establishing a permanent dominance of one culture over the other. Mimic men could never be Englishmen, otherness would never be overcome and Tom's 'brown Englishmen' a dream deferred. An additional aspect of the *Minute* that Hall's biographic approach brings out is his tendency to dissipate strong emotions through writing; the *Minute* was written only a month after his sister Margaret's death, the harsh language used throughout can thus be viewed as a vehicle for venting some of his anger at her loss.

Tom's more liberal credentials were on display elsewhere in his dealings with Indian administration, in particular the law, which drew upon his understanding of English history and the centrality of the rule of law. Hall tells us that to his mind, the Great Reform Act had limited the power of the aristocracy in England and Tom saw his task of instituting equal laws for all races in India through codification as a way to end the power of a 'small white aristocracy' over millions. A measure he was proud of, even if this meant turning a blind eye to actual equality in exchange for establishing legal equality. Imperial entanglements were not, despite what Tom might have wished to be isolated and his experiences were to shape his understanding of home and its history. By the 1830s Tom and James Mill had repaired any rift between them over democracy in England and were correspondents over Indian affairs. In a letter home to Mill he even went so far as to say his Indian endeavours had led him to desire codification of the law in England.

On his return to England Tom took up writing his *History*, which was for him the most important task he had yet undertaken. Despite his claims to write a completely objective history, Hall reminds us of how deeply subjective all history writing is, and Macaulay's is no different. His *History* was one which stressed national uniqueness as a challenge to revolutionary French universalism. Unlike Herder, who thought poetry and language were at the heart of nationhood, he stressed constitutional history, progress and the search for liberty as the essentials of the English story. This emphasis not only privileged certain narratives but also actors, marking out the boundaries of the national community; this of course meant creating exclusions as well as inclusions. On his return from India, Tom told a friend he had abandoned Locke long ago, though he remained a staunch Whig. He was certainly no friend to democracy, believing it would result in anarchy or the emergence of a military state to quell that anarchy, both of which would not provide liberty. Working men were also not educated enough to vote even if they could be trusted not to plunder the aristocracy. Instead, like their imperial counterparts, they were to be subjects not citizens, granted suitable liberties by their betters but not active in politics. The security of the nation depended on the full inclusion of men from the middle classes, men like himself, into political citizenship, but also on bringing the respectable working classes into the national family. This was the story which his *History* presented, one where the great men of the past fought to establish the liberty of England for her grateful people. And they were men of course, women being excluded from this tale; always attached to men or acting for them and were thus sidelined in his history. Here is perhaps the most important point for contemporary legislators and potential creators of 'national' history; all history writing, no matter what its intentions, will privilege certain groups and narratives over others and contribute to a sense of exclusion for the multitudes who do not fit this image.

In turning to the extension of England's story outside her borders, he looked first to the home nations. His history of Scotland focussed upon its successful assimilation with England and the benefits of prosperity and civilisation that this had bestowed; a narrative which reflected his personal story. Ireland's story was more problematic. Ireland might be Britain's sister kingdom, but all progress according to Tom in that country was down to Englishmen. The Irish, like the Indians, were stuck in barbarism and their best hope of achieving civilisation was through complete assimilation with England. Until that time a strong 'father' was needed.

When discussing the empire Tom completely overlooked North America and the Caribbean, instead focussing on Ireland's place as a colony. He therefore ignored the sphere of his father's life work except in passing to celebrate abolition, preferring not to dwell on the horrors of what came before it. Hall suggests that this was perhaps because of his distaste for his upbringing, but was also another example of his characteristic turn away from the troubling aspects of imperial greatness. India, unlike the other colonies, was important to Tom's story of England and her rise to greatness. Yet even here it was the scene for the Englishman's triumph and the focus was much more on India's effect on England than the reverse. It is, however, the common thread of progress, residing in both Macaulay's deeds and writings, which places

them as the architects of liberal imperialism.

Family analogies were common in Tom's *History*, and these are considered in the final and perhaps most important aspect of Hall's analysis. Tom's education was very exacting and Zachary was a hands on and at times domineering father. There was strong emphasis put naturally on religion but also on duty. Tom reacted badly to this, though his education did not suffer; his intellectual abilities came to build his fragile self confidence, where arrogance formed his defence. More than anything else it was his relationship with the women in his family that shaped his character and career. The trauma of losing his mother, and then the marriage and subsequent separation from his two favourite sisters were to mark him deeply and left scars that never fully healed. Such things were banished to the private world, for his *History* would focus upon the public and national history, where women would play a background role.

The sense of unstinting love received from Hannah and Margaret was what allowed Tom to maintain his independence from party and electorate pressures and to act as his conscience and education guided him. Both sisters for their part idolised Tom, and were extremely happy during their time living together in London. Though deeply attached, they remained hopeful of a marriage and were aware of the heartache the resulting separation would be for all. With Margaret's inevitable marriage he was indeed angry and devastated, though he tried unsuccessfully to contain these emotions.

On his appointment to India, he all but forced an unhappy Hannah to accompany him, unable to contemplate facing life and duty alone. This was itself a fateful decision, for in Calcutta Hannah would meet and fall in love with Charles Trevelyan, a man Tom did not disapprove of, though he felt Charles had lacked for society in India. He was once again deeply wounded, and the event was shortly followed by the death of Margaret, the final blow which Tom was never to recover from. His response was to bury himself in books. This tragedy was to express itself in Tom's writing, which he used as a barrier to further pain by closing himself off from an emotional life. In writing the *History* he could create a safer world, though one shaped by his experiences of government and empire.

This section on Tom's relationship with the key women in his family is the most successful. Tom's emotional life and character are brought to life in riveting detail. His sense of loss, of inadequacy and selfishness are laid bare and the reader is left feeling at once pity for and frustration with him. The sections which suggest at an almost incestuous love between the sisters and their brother are a little disturbing. The language of their letters is indeed emotionally charged and comparable to letters between lovers, but one wonders if the florid and confessional language of private letters between all very close friends and relations of this period do not share this characteristic.

Overall, Hall's project is an insightful and illuminating one. In focussing upon the private and emotional life of the Macaulays she brings forth an aspect in the lives of historical actors so often neglected. She also successfully establishes the relationship between this hidden aspect and the actions and beliefs of her primary character, Tom. The project, however, does feel muddled at times and the structure, at once joint biography and historical analysis, might prove too unwieldy for subsequent historians to undertake. There are moments when one is left desiring greater exploration of the points where the lives of the Macaulays touch on current historiographical concerns, whilst those unfamiliar with the subjects will not find an easy chronology to follow. Another small complaint might be that Hall does not provide enough direct quotations from Tom's large body of writing.

That said, the book's real achievement is in revealing the background and substance of Macaulay's historical scope, his assumptions and his exclusions; constraints which sadly still persist today in writing outside of academia. Political debate on foreign policy, informed or otherwise, still rests on assumptions of Western superiority, while consumers of popular history, in print and on television, remain captivated by the retelling of the national story, with the familiar focus on its 'great men'.⁽⁴⁾ The history of other nations, women, minorities, and social groups other than the political elite remains disturbingly marginalised. This is the real danger in allowing the government to prescribe a singular national narrative to be taught to the nation's young minds.

Notes

1. Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination, 1830-1867* (Cambridge, 2002), p. 16.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. For a critique of what he calls 'historians' folk wisdom' with regard to identity see Peter Mandler, 'What is "National Identity"? Definitions and applications in modern British historiography', *Modern Intellectual History*, 3, 2 (2006).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton, NJ, 1993).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Maya Jasanoff, 'Macaulay and Son: Architects of Imperial Britain' by Catherine Hall - review?, *Guardian*, 21 December 2012, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2012/dec/21/macaulay-and-son-catherine-h...> [2] [accessed 19 March 2013].[Back to \(4\)](#)

[Listen to Professor Catherine Hall's Creighton Lecture on 'Macaulay and Son: an imperial story'](#). [3]

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<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2012/dec/21/macaulay-and-son-catherine-hall-review> [4]

historyextra.com

<http://www.historyextra.com/book-review/macaulay-and-son-architects-imperial-britain> [5]

History Today

<http://www.historytoday.com/blog/2013/01/macaulay-and-son-architects-imperial-britain> [6]

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[7] http://www.history.org.uk/resources/general_resource_6156_73.html

[8] <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v34/n22/bernard-porter/manly-voices>