

Review Article: Preaching History*

Historians have not always been kind to Sir Herbert Butterfield. Some have been downright unpleasant. In a famous put-down, E. H. Carr's influential *What is history?* (1961) declared that Butterfield's first and still best-known book *The Whig interpretation of history* (1931) had not included 'a single Whig except Fox, who was no historian, or a single historian save [Lord] Acton, who was no Whig'.¹ Elsewhere, J. P. Kenyon, in a particularly dyspeptic mood, summarised Butterfield's 'output of published work' as 'modest and rather random', adding that 'he was a man with a reputation rather like an inverted cone, his wide-ranging prestige balanced on a tiny platform of achievement'.² It is true that Butterfield's *oeuvre*, although not 'modest' in quantity, did not quite match in quality the standing he achieved in the historical profession nor the academic appointments with which he was showered (professor of modern history, regius professor and vice-chancellor at Cambridge, and master of Peterhouse). Yet his life and work has attracted, and still attracts, substantial scholarly attention. One explanation – manifested in the book under review – would stress his role in developing several important fields of historical study: historiography, the history of science, and the history of international relations. Another, more cynical, interpretation might focus on the existence of a large personal archive in which scholars may forage (although some sections of these papers, at Cambridge University Library, remain closed), and from which they can quote amusing and malicious remarks, and revealing gossip about Butterfield's contemporaries, much in the same way that the opening of Hugh Trevor-Roper's archive has prompted a renewed interest in, and renewed appreciation of, his work.

Michael Bentley's long-awaited biography takes the high road. Butterfield is interesting because of his contribution to the discipline of history and because of his influence as a public intellectual in post-war Britain. The thrust of the book is to enable the reader to understand, and to understand the importance of, Butterfield's contribution to the development of the writing of history in a period that Bentley himself has characterised elsewhere as the era of 'modernism'.³ At the same time Bentley does make excellent use of the personal archive. He has been accorded by the family privileged access to all nooks and crannies of the Butterfield papers, including those hitherto kept from public view, and to another, unspecified,

* THE LIFE AND THOUGHT OF HERBERT BUTTERFIELD: HISTORY, SCIENCE AND GOD. By Michael Bentley. Pp xv, 381. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2011. £50.

¹ E. H. Carr, *What is history?* (Harmondsworth, 1961), p. 35.

² J. P. Kenyon, *The history men: the historical profession in England since the renaissance* (London, 1983), pp 261–2.

³ Michael Bentley, *Modernizing England's past: English historiography in the age of modernism 1870–1970* (Cambridge, 2005), based on his 2003 Wiles Lectures, then entitled 'English historiography in the age of Butterfield and Namier'.

‘private collection’ which provides him with his greatest biographical scoop, the identification of Butterfield’s extra-marital lover, Joy Marc. The discussion of their affair does not merely satisfy a desire for prurience, or give scope to the exercise of a sardonic wit which is happily in evidence throughout the book (Butterfield was ‘surprised by Joy’ (p. 78), etc.), it enables Bentley to discard unwarranted speculation about his subject’s sexuality, and also raises important questions about Butterfield’s psychology. Bentley does not spare any painful detail of the anxieties, doubts, weaknesses of personality, and contradictions that lay behind the public persona of the committed Christian historian.

An ‘intellectual biography’ presents its author with particular challenges. Even if the public and private life of the subject contains sufficient material of intrinsic interest to hold the attention, there will inevitably be a temptation to concentrate on the development of ideas to the exclusion of character and circumstances. Bentley’s principal interest is with Butterfield the intellectual, but he is too far imbued with the traditional virtues of the professional historian to fall into the trap of playing down the biographical context and discussing Butterfield’s published writings in isolation. Although Butterfield did not cut much of a dash in either his public or private life, in order to understand his history books it is still essential to understand the mind that produced them, and to understand the mind one must trace the influences of family, career and personal relationships; above all, the development of Butterfield’s Christian faith and his ethical world-view during one of the most tumultuous and catastrophic periods of modern history. This requires a book that is both a study of the man and his writings. It is not an easy trick to pull off, and there are inevitably occasions when the reader will wish for more about the man and less about the ideas, and vice versa. Bentley has compromised between a narrative and thematic treatment. The first section of his book traces Butterfield’s life from birth to the end of the Second World War, a period in which his main influence was within the academy, as a ‘private intellectual’. Contrastingly, the third and final section explores his years as a ‘public intellectual’, when he did indeed make his most significant mark on his times. In between is sandwiched a section whose three chapters – ‘Science’, ‘God’ and ‘History’ – echo the subtitle of the book and provide its analytical heart. Generally, it must be said, this structure works, mainly because the central, thematic chapters remain anchored in a biographical narrative.

Butterfield the man emerges from the book by no means as a plaster saint, and Bentley emphasises that his portrait has taken away ‘innocence’ and revealed ‘complexity’ (p. 370). Occasionally astringency does give way to a degree of indulgence. Bentley’s scrupulosity is severely tested in discussing Butterfield’s attitude to Nazi Germany. The notion that Butterfield was a Nazi sympathiser is dismissed, and evidence of mild anti-Semitism treated as normative for someone of Butterfield’s background, which it probably was. The burden of accusation against Butterfield rests on his table talk and correspondence during the period 1933–44, which provide examples of initial naïve optimism about the Third Reich, followed by a settled emphasis on pragmatism rather than idealism in British relations with Germany (including the desire for a negotiated peace in 1940), and after the war an unrestrained enthusiasm for the rapid reintegration of Germany into the mainstream of European political and intellectual life. Some of Butterfield’s comments reveal no more than a desire to tease liberal friends and colleagues, and the same silly-clever tactlessness can presumably explain his

visits to German universities as late as 1938. Certainly it makes sense to argue that the Christian Butterfield was more fearful of atheist Bolshevism than of Nazism, and that the realist Butterfield was anxious for British policy to remain pragmatic. But as Bentley notes, a Cambridge don in the 1930s, even before he visited Nazi Germany himself, must have been aware of the true nature of the regime, from newspaper coverage, and from the influx into the university of Jewish academic refugees. Moral issues could not, or should not, have been easily sidestepped. The tenderness with which Butterfield's conscience is treated in this respect contrasts with Bentley's categorical statements that Dublin friends and acquaintances of Butterfield were openly sympathetic to the Third Reich. This is symptomatic of a tendency, inevitable in a biographer, to give full consideration to the complexities of his subject's life while dealing more briskly with other individuals who flit across his field of vision. Much enjoyment is taken, and much undoubtedly is to be had, in the accounts of Butterfield's interactions with Desmond Williams, Robin Dudley Edwards, and other U.C.D. luminaries, but they figure in the text as a kind of comic relief.

The Irish example also highlights another issue specific to this particular biography: how the author should deal with academic politics and academic gossip, something fascinating to specialists but likely to leave the outsider cold or confused. Williams's correspondence with Butterfield (a part of the archive that has not been closed to historians) is a goldmine of quotable passages. Yet to spend too much time on the small change of high-table conversation obviously risks cheapening what is intended as a very serious enterprise. Bentley's puckish sense of humour cannot resist every temptation. There are amusing anecdotes, tart character sketches, and sideswipes at Butterfield's contemporaries. However, the present reviewer was left wondering how interesting (or indeed intelligible) these passages would be to a reader not 'in the know'. It would probably have been preferable for Bentley to have given us either less of this material, or more in the way of explanatory detail. A particular problem relates to those younger historians whom Butterfield took up, and who for the most part disappointed him. Given that his judgement in matters of academic patronage was criticised by contemporaries, we need to know the full story; not just the difficulties his protégés encountered, but why Butterfield chose to patronise them in the first place. It is hard to see what Butterfield ever saw in Williams, who wrote very little 'real' history and whose rare efforts in this direction Butterfield privately criticised.⁴ Another sad figure, Brian Wormald, is discussed extensively, with the 'Wormald problem' (p. 277) explained in a subtle piece of psychological analysis, containing a dutiful reference to the debilitating effect of prolonged exposure to Butterfield's overpowering intellect. But it would help to have a critical assessment of Wormald's actual achievement. Bentley takes this for granted while other more hostile observers were sceptical. For Trevor-Roper (writing, it has to be admitted, at a time of deep alienation from Butterfield's disciples at Peterhouse), Butterfield's devotion to Wormald seemed absurd; he quoted with approval a *bon mot* of Noel Annan that Wormald's *Clarendon* was only 'half a book, written backwards'.⁵

⁴ Butterfield to Williams, 12 Apr., 16 May 1955 (Cambridge University Library, Butterfield papers, BUTT 531/W/245–6).

⁵ Trevor-Roper to J. H. Plumb, 20 Oct. 1989 (Cambridge University Library, Plumb papers, by kind permission of Mr W. A. Noblett).

Finally there is the elephantine problem of Namier, whose 'scientific' approach to history was the antithesis of Butterfield's own. Namier did not share Butterfield's religious faith, and his materialistic-cum-Freudian analysis of human motivation was anathema to Butterfield. Furthermore, the moralistic, and viscerally anti-German, tone of Namier's analyses of pre-war diplomacy grated with Butterfield's approach to the history of international relations and his attempts to arrive at an objective understanding of the events of Munich and their aftermath. At the same time Butterfield did not publicly attack Namier's efforts in contemporary history, preferring to encourage others, including Williams, to take up the cudgels.⁶ But he was the first historian to challenge the great Sir Lewis on his own ground, the political history of late eighteenth-century England, even if these attacks were carefully, not to say cunningly contrived, and for the most part targeted the Namierites rather than their master. Though coming off worst in the short term, Butterfield lived to see his criticism of the Namier method embraced by a younger generation. Bentley does his best to be even-handed in his account of these conflicts, but again does not really say enough to make them fully intelligible to the general reader, or even the specialist reader not already familiar with the ground.

Regarding Butterfield the historian, Bentley makes a strong case for his importance as a pioneer: in making fashionable an interest in the study of historiography, in establishing the history of science as a significant sub-discipline in its own right, and in encouraging the development of a more systematic approach to the history of international relations. He is also able to explain the apparent contradictions between books; between *The Whig interpretation of history*, and *The Englishman and his history* (1944), for example, which would seem to permit both 'revisionist' and 'post-revisionist' historians in Ireland to appeal to Butterfield as an authority.⁷ Curiously, however, while reiterating the view that Butterfield was a man of brilliant intelligence (disdaining some lesser minds), Bentley is critical, sometimes sharply critical, of many of Butterfield's individual books. This says much for his honesty but must leave questions in the reader's mind about how good an historian Butterfield was. The issue is raised most clearly by Butterfield's rare foray into the kind of forensic analysis practised by his arch-enemy, Namier. *George III, Lord North and the people*,⁸ was generally accounted a failure when it was published, and Bentley's valiant assertions of its importance do not make the case. At any rate, Butterfield was sufficiently deterred by its reception not to attempt to write his heralded life of Charles James Fox, despite sitting on the Fox papers for many years.

One thing Butterfield did not do, unlike Namier, was to create a 'squadron' of followers. In the long run, his rebuttal of 'Namierism' may well have had a lasting effect in inspiring subsequent generations to reverse Namier's influence and to put the conscious mind back into history (Namier's work having supposedly taken it out). Indeed some may speculate that in this respect

⁶ T. Desmond Williams, 'Negotiations leading to the Anglo-Polish agreement of 31 March 1939' in *I.H.S.*, x, no. 37 (Mar. 1956), pp 59–93, x, no. 38 (Sept. 1956), pp 156–92.

⁷ Brendan Bradshaw, 'Nationalism and historical scholarship in modern Ireland' in *ibid.*, xxxvi, no. 104 (Nov. 1989), pp 335–6, 346.

⁸ *Herbert Butterfield, George III, Lord North and the people, 1779–1780* (London, 1949).

Butterfield stands as godfather to the Cambridge historians of political thought, one of the most important of whom, J. G. A. Pocock, was his research pupil. Bentley does not overplay the Namier controversy, however, which seems on balance to be right. Although Butterfield's polemical articles, and his *George III and the historians*,⁹ may have marked the beginning of a public reaction against Namier in the late 1950s, this process was at least assisted by broader shifts in historical fashion happening at the same time.

Throughout the book, Butterfield's religion serves as a *leitmotiv*. The open profession of faith in an increasingly secular age did not endear him to irreligious academic contemporaries, who found it hard to take this kind of thing seriously any more (something that might account for the attractions for Butterfield of 1950s Dublin). It also sat uneasily with a penchant for malicious academic gossip, and a vindictive pursuit of personal feuds. Combining snobbish disdain for the Yorkshire Methodist with an aesthetic distaste for ostentatious moralising, Richard Cobb called Butterfield a 'tin-tabernacle Pecksniff'.¹⁰ Had Cobb been able to read this book, and in particular its account of Butterfield's extra-marital fling, his belief in Butterfield the hypocrite would certainly have been reinforced. Bolstered by the evidence of Butterfield's private reflections, Bentley treats the matter very differently. His account of Butterfield's spiritual journey, away from the certainties of a Methodist upbringing, and towards a less doctrinally specific framework of belief, focused on residual commitment to the essentials of a redemptive Christianity, shows a remarkable subtlety and sureness of touch. Religious belief is placed at the core of Butterfield's approach to the writing of history. For example, his early interest in the history of science is seen as an expression of Christian faith; the decline in that interest in his later years a response to the increasing alienation of contemporary science from religion. But the interplay of Christianity and history is not always so straightforward, and Bentley is careful to stress other elements in Butterfield's complex psychology, the 'powerful, cynical, hard [sic] mind' (p. 368) that pushed him towards a degree of 'realism' in politics and international relations, that others could not stomach. To assess Butterfield's work without reference to his religious belief clearly will not do, but neither should we treat it as conditioned only by that belief.

This is the strongest feature of the book, and alone would qualify it as the best and most useful biography of Butterfield that we have. It is probably also the best biography of Butterfield we are likely to have, since it is hard to imagine anyone undertaking the task again. Despite the occasional special pleading to which all biographers are liable, and the sometimes uneasy blending of big ideas with the minutiae of academic life, Bentley presents a comprehensive and perceptive account of the man and his legacy. Impressively researched, written with precision and brio, and showing a generally clear-headed sympathy with its subject, the book is a striking achievement.

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⁹ *Idem, George III and the historians* (London, 1957).

¹⁰ Cobb to Hugh Trevor-Roper, 18 Apr. 1972 (Christ Church, Oxford, Dacre papers; by kind permission of Professor Blair Worden). See also *My dear Hugh, letters from Richard Cobb to Hugh Trevor-Roper and others*, ed. Tim Heald (London, 2011), p. 131.