
Butterfield as Historian: Objectivity Over Partisanship

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Herbert Butterfield: Historian as Dissenter, by C. T. McIntire. *New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004. xxv + 499 pp. \$50.*

In his biography of Herbert Butterfield, C. T. McIntire recounts how the distinguished Cambridge historian was invited to write for William F. Buckley's *National Review* in the late 1950s. The invitation, subsequently turned down, was offered in response to Butterfield's defense of individual liberty against encroachments from the state. A friend at the British embassy dissuaded Butterfield from writing by warning him against associating with the "right-wing" magazine. At the time, there was enough reason to think that Butterfield was on the conservative side of the political spectrum, or at least on the American conservative side. Yet his political identity has been the subject of debate among historians for many decades. Even so, his political views are worth re-examining since they provide insight into his intellectual contribution to the study of history.

Butterfield was born at the start of the twentieth century and died in his seventy-ninth year. During that time, he earned the respect of fellow historians and enjoyed a kind of celebrity status among his non-academic admirers, on both sides of the Atlantic.

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Butterfield wrote twenty-two books; became Professor of Modern History at Cambridge in 1944; was appointed Master of Peterhouse, his college, in 1954; and was elected Regius Professor of History in 1963. As vice-chancellor of Cambridge from 1959 to 1961, he earned a reputation as a defender of the independence of colleges vis-à-vis the university and of universities in their relations with the state. While many of his books covered the traditional fields of political and diplomatic history, particularly during his early career, his most original intellectual contributions were in relatively new fields: history of science and historiography.

McIntire applies the “dissenter” label to Butterfield to show how his apparent departure from the dominant orthodoxies of his profession and of public opinion is a product of his Methodist non-conformity. The use of the word dissenter is helpful, but only up to a point. Was he really a dissenter at Cambridge for not abandoning his Methodist faith for the Anglicanism of his fellows? McIntire fails to examine in detail how a rebel like Butterfield could enjoy enormous popularity during his lifetime. His most famous work, a critique of *The Whig Interpretation of History* (1931), led Annabel Patterson to associate him with the Tory views of Lewis Namier and David Hume. Such misinterpretations are likely the result of a lack of familiarity with Butterfield’s written work or an inability to distinguish between various schools of political thought. In contrast, Maurice Cowling and J. C. D. Clark have rightly identified Butterfield with Asquithian Liberalism, in part because his political views were formed in a household loyal to Herbert Asquith’s floundering Liberal Party. While his writings and personal testimony reveal a mind not attracted to socialist politics—despite demonstrating a willingness to see value in some elements of Marxist historiography—the Tory alternative was no more compelling to him. “Butterfield was never a figure of the Right,” declared Cowling in *Religion and Public Doctrine in England*. Owen Chadwick echoed this view in his address delivered at a memorial service to Butterfield in 1979. Chadwick recalled that some thought he was a Tory because of his opposition to a Whig idea of progress and that “all later Cambridge conservatives sat at his feet.” “Those of us who knew him know this to be illusion.”

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So if Butterfield was not a Tory, is McIntire right to say he was a “twentieth-century New Whig” who is liberal and progressive but who does not fall within the standard categories? While not

an English conservative, Butterfield's liberalism is not entirely the modern sort either—which helps explain the confusion. *The Whig Interpretation of History* established his reputation as a critic of the Whig historians; indeed, according to McIntire, he admitted that it was written in his most anti-Whig period. The Whig tendency, as described in the preface, is to “write on the side of the Protestants and Whigs, to praise revolutions provided they have been successful, to emphasise certain principles of progress in the past and to produce a story which is the ratification if not the glorification of the present.” Here, Butterfield famously challenged Lord Acton for insisting that historians condemn historical figures for their moral failings. Whig historians like Acton want to give their profession the last word in a controversy by making moral claims that go beyond their competence, wrote Butterfield. After giving examples of how Whig historians have misinterpreted historical developments and misjudged the actions of historical figures, he suggests that such moralizing “brings the effort of understanding to a halt” because their prejudices—accompanied by “generalizations and vague philosophizing”—impede a true understanding of events.

When the book first appeared in 1931, the Anglican cleric Charles Smyth, a historian with Tory sympathies, thought it gave no comfort to the conservative cause. Instead, Smyth saw it as a call for the reform of the old Whig tradition by a new Whig, a reference to Edmund Burke's famous essay *An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs*. According to McIntire, Butterfield agreed with Smyth: “I am complaining that the Whigs are not liberal enough. . . . They don't extend to Tories in the past the same techniques of human comprehension that they are willing to extend to the Whigs of the past.” Since Butterfield had identified himself with the Whigs, it is not surprising that the Whig politicians are praised in *The Englishman and his History*, while the Whig historians are criticized for the same failings delineated in *The Whig Interpretation of History*. Publishing during World War II, Butterfield intended, in the words of Cowling, to “bring Asquithianism to the aid of the Churchill/Atlee coalition” by celebrating the “ancient” rights of Englishmen, secured—albeit through the falsification of history—by seventeenth-century Whig historians as a result of their victory over the English monarchy.

The Whig historians—Sir Edward Coke being the worst—interpreted common law precedents as widespread practices rather

than the isolated incidents that they actually were. Furthermore, the Magna Carta, largely forgotten up to this point, was characterized as a guarantor of the rights of Englishmen in general when, in fact, it really affected only certain members of the nobility, a very small slice of the population. Yet their poor historical method produced praiseworthy results: (1) fostered a love of precedent; (2) cultivated a love of tradition; (3) developed a desire for gradual change; and (4) strengthened an attachment to ancient liberties. Butterfield questions whether, in contrast to the Whig principle of political moderation that developed after the defeat of the Stuart monarchy in England, the rapid democratization of Italy and Germany during the nineteenth century was imposed without first cultivating the kind of liberal spirit that could survive the domestic upheavals that would lead to the political extremism of the 1920s and 1930s.

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He ridiculed European liberals who thought that the world could be "rapidly cured by political action" and that "human cupidity may be removed by ingenious arrangements of institutions." By forsaking Christianity, and abandoning their traditions, sentiments, and prejudices, continental liberals were really exorcising their guardian angels, "and the transition to the pagan state came with remarkable punctuality." In periods of desperation, the "rights of man" become the "duties of man" once all checks on political extremism are abandoned. Under such conditions, human beings are treated as unreal, "mere bodies to ride over on the way to Utopia." When asked to define his politics, Butterfield said his "Whiggism" can be contrasted with continental and American liberalism in that it is not utopian. "My politics," he said, "would operate by assuming that there is a great deal of egotism and cupidity in human beings, especially in those who say they haven't got any cupidity."

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By identifying himself as a Whig, Butterfield distanced himself from all the going political categories. McIntire sees his chosen party identity conforming nicely with his "quietist" practice of political nonparticipation. To favor "a political cause or a party programme" implied that one side was morally superior to the other. It was the sin of self-righteousness that tempted political leaders to abuse their power and Whig historians to misuse history. For Butterfield, the pursuit of a higher standard of objectivity necessarily precluded partisan politics. This approach to historical interpreta-

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tion required "imaginative sympathy" for individuals and movements one might not like. The Whig political tradition became the English self-understanding, but the evidence could just as easily have supported the king's historians. Thus Butterfield brings to his history of English liberty a non-ideological interpretation by concluding that both Whig and Tory now claim the fruits of the same tradition. "Liberty comes to the world from English traditions," wrote Butterfield, "not from French theories."

Many critics saw *The Englishman and his History* as a reversal of Butterfield's critique of the Whig historiographical method since it appeared to have favorable political results. In *Nobody's Perfect*, Patterson wrongly claimed that Butterfield had "diametrically reversed and did penance for his former position." Joseph Hamburger, in *Macaulay and the Whig Tradition*, suggests that, by acknowledging the political usefulness of the Whig interpretation, Butterfield "qualified his 1931 condemnation of it." George Watson, writing in *Encounter* (1986), interpreted incorrectly a poorly worded sentence to mean a retraction of his 1931 insistence on moral objectivity: "In that generous retraction he regretted a 'misguided austerity of youth' that had possessed him a dozen years earlier. . . ." E. H. Carr gave Butterfield an opportunity to correct the misinterpretation. In a 1961 review of *What is History?*, Butterfield responded to Carr's mistaken notion that the Second World War caused him to become a Whig sympathizer when, in fact, chapter one of *The Englishman and his History* on the Whig political tradition was delivered as a lecture in 1938. He admits to having added "some trip-wires for the careless reader—including . . . a menace to those who thought that the criticism of the Whig historians involved an attack on the Whig political tradition."

The Whig historians can claim to have contributed to historical understanding, but they did not apply their insights to their rivals, thus producing a lopsided view of historical events. Inaccurate history that produces good political results is still false history unworthy of a professional historian. Whether or not Butterfield employed the same method in each case—either by interpreting the past in light of present realities, or interpreting past events on their own terms—is open to debate; his identification with political Whiggery is not. Indeed, Keith Sewell has provided ample evidence to refute the claim that Butterfield was attacking Macaulay when he refuted Whig historiography. In *Herbert Butterfield and the*

Interpretation of History, he finds that “the historiographical principles and methods advocated in 1931 were fully in accord with the ‘Trimmer’ and ‘Whig’ political principles praised in 1944.”

He was not a Tory defender of erastianism. He was a defender of religious and political liberty. He was an individualist and nominalist who went so far as to portray the state as consisting of nothing more than individual persons. While he favored expanding the history curriculum at Cambridge beyond the traditional boundaries, he resisted the kind of multiculturalism that was becoming popular in the 1960s and 1970s. Indeed, he was so unprogressive that he opposed Peterhouse going coed and rejected the demands of the student protestors of the late 1960s. Yet his “conservative” tendencies must be balanced with his discomfort over Cold War anti-communist rhetoric. His famous disagreement with Reinhold Niebuhr over the dangers of Soviet communism illustrated his reluctance to adopt conventional ideological positions that would, in his view, impede understanding. To Niebuhr’s dismay, Butterfield attributed Soviet violence to the act of revolution itself and not to ideological motives per se. He foresaw the emergence of peaceful coexistence via the civilizing effects of time and reason. To blur the political categories even more, he advocated unilateral nuclear disarmament. His reluctance to take sides in an ideological fight only made his critique of Whig historiography that much more damning. Patterson felt the sting of Butterfield’s critique because she represents the liberal utopianism he opposed.

McIntire’s study would have been better had the author provided a stronger historical context, but this deficiency should not obscure the fact that this is an impressive work of scholarly research and textual analysis. *Herbert Butterfield* is not a typical biography; rather, it is an analysis and explication of the subject’s intellectual achievement. As such, it may be less useful for those who are already familiar with Butterfield’s written work but who lack the immediate historical context in which the work was produced. But for readers who want a substantial introduction to the man and his work, this is the best study currently available.