

THE WHIG
INTERPRETATION
OF HISTORY

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II. THE UNDERLYING ASSUMPTION

THE primary assumption of all attempts to understand the men of the past must be the belief that we can in some degree enter into minds that are unlike our own. If this belief were unfounded it would seem that men must be for ever locked away from one another, and all generations must be regarded as a world and a law unto themselves. If we were unable to enter in any way into the mind of a present-day Roman Catholic priest, for example, and similarly into the mind of an atheistical orator in Hyde Park, it is difficult to see how we could know anything of the still stranger men of the sixteenth century, or pretend to understand the process of history-making which has moulded us into the world of to-day. In reality the historian postulates that the world is in some sense always the same world and that even the men most dissimilar are never absolutely unlike. And though a sentence from Aquinas may fall so strangely upon modern ears that it becomes plausible to dismiss

the man as a fool or a mind utterly and absolutely alien, I take it that to dismiss a man in this way is a method of blocking up the mind against him, and against something important in both human nature and its history; it is really the refusal to a historical personage of the effort of historical understanding. Precisely because of his unlikeness to ourselves Aquinas is the more enticing subject for the historical imagination; for the chief aim of the historian is the elucidation of the unlikenesses between past and present and his chief function is to act in this way as the mediator between other generations and our own. It is not for him to stress and magnify the similarities between one age and another, and he is riding after a whole flock of misapprehensions if he goes to hunt for the present in the past. Rather it is his work to destroy those very analogies which we imagined to exist. When he shows us that Magna Carta is a feudal document in a feudal setting, with implications different from those we had taken for granted, he is disillusioning us concerning something in the past which we had assumed to be too like something in the present. That whole

process of specialised research which has in so many fields revised the previously accepted whig interpretation of history, has set our bearings afresh in one period after another, by referring matters in this way to their context, and so discovering their unlikeness to the world of the present-day.

It is part and parcel of the whig interpretation of history that it studies the past with reference to the present; and though there may be a sense in which this is unobjectionable if its implications are carefully considered, and there may be a sense in which it is inescapable, it has often been an obstruction to historical understanding because it has been taken to mean the study of the past with direct and perpetual reference to the present. Through this system of immediate reference to the present-day, historical personages can easily and irresistibly be classed into the men who furthered progress and the men who tried to hinder it; so that a handy rule of thumb exists by which the historian can select and reject, and can make his points of emphasis. On this system the historian is bound to construe his function as demanding him to be vigilant for

likenesses between past and present, instead of being vigilant for unlikenesses; so that he will find it easy to say that he has seen the present in the past, he will imagine that he has discovered a 'root' or an 'anticipation' of the 20th century, when in reality he is in a world of different connotations altogether, and he has merely tumbled upon what could be shown to be a misleading analogy. Working upon the same system the whig historian can draw lines through certain events, some such line as that which leads through Martin Luther and a long succession of whigs to modern liberty; and if he is not careful he begins to forget that this line is merely a mental trick of his; he comes to imagine that it represents something like a line of causation. The total result of this method is to impose a certain form upon the whole historical story, and to produce a scheme of general history which is bound to converge beautifully upon the present – all demonstrating throughout the ages the workings of an obvious principle of progress, of which the Protestants and whigs have been the perennial allies while Catholics and tories have perpetually formed obstruction.

A caricature of this result is to be seen in a popular view that is still not quite eradicated: the view that the Middle Ages represented a period of darkness when man was kept tongue-tied by authority – a period against which the Renaissance was the reaction and the Reformation the great rebellion. It is illustrated to perfection in the argument of a man denouncing Roman Catholicism at a street corner, who said: 'When the Pope ruled England them was called the Dark Ages.'

The whig historian stands on the summit of the 20th century, and organises his scheme of history from the point of view of his own day; and he is a subtle man to overturn from his mountain-top where he can fortify himself with plausible argument. He can say that events take on their due proportions when observed through the lapse of time. He can say that events must be judged by their ultimate issues, which, since we can trace them no farther, we must at least follow down to the present. He can say that it is only in relation to the 20th century that one happening or another in the past has relevance or significance for us. He can use all the arguments

that are so handy to men when discussion is dragged into the market place and philosophy is dethroned by common sense; so that it is no simple matter to demonstrate how the whig historian, from his mountain-top, sees the course of history only inverted and aslant. The fallacy lies in the fact that if the historian working on the 16th century keeps the 20th century in his mind, he makes direct reference across all the intervening period between Luther or the Popes and the world of our own day. And this immediate juxtaposition of past and present, though it makes everything easy and makes some inferences perilously obvious, is bound to lead to an over-simplification of the relations between events and a complete misapprehension of the relations between past and present.

This attitude to history is not by any means the one which the historical specialist adopts at the precise moment when he is engaged upon his particular research; and indeed as we come closer to the past we find it impossible to follow these principles consistently even though we may have accepted them verbally. In spite of ourselves and in spite of our

theories we forget that we had set out to study the past for the sake of the present, we cannot save ourselves from tumbling headlong into it and being immersed in it for its own sake; and very soon we may be concentrated upon the most useless things in the world – Marie Antoinette's ear-rings or the adventures of the Jacobites. But the attitude is one which we tend to adopt when we are visualising the general course of history or commenting on it, and it is one into which the specialist himself often slides when he comes to the point of relating his special piece of work to the larger historical story. In other words it represents a fallacy and an unexamined habit of mind into which we fall when we treat of history on the broad scale. It is something which intervenes between the work of the historical specialist and that work, partly of organisation and partly of abridgment, which the general historian carries out; it inserts itself at the change of focus that we make when we pass from the microscopic view of a particular period to our bird's-eye view of the whole; and when it comes it brings with it that whig interpretation of history which is so different

from the story that the research student has to tell.

There is an alternative line of assumption upon which the historian can base himself when he comes to his study of the past; and it is the one upon which he does seem more or less consciously to act and to direct his mind when he is engaged upon a piece of research. On this view he comes to his labours conscious of the fact that he is trying to understand the past for the sake of the past, and though it is true that he can never entirely abstract himself from his own age, it is none the less certain that this consciousness of his purpose is a very different one from that of the whig historian, who tells himself that he is studying the past for the sake of the present. 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 than our own. It is not reached by assuming that our own age is the absolute to which Luther and Calvin and their generation are only relative; it is only reached by fully accepting the fact that their generation was as

valid as our generation, their issues as momentous as our issues and their day as full and as vital to them as our day is to us. The twentieth century which has its own hairs to split may have little patience with Arius and Athanasius who burdened the world with a quarrel about a diphthong, but the historian has not achieved historical understanding, has not reached that kind of understanding in which the mind can find rest, until he has seen that that diphthong was bound to be the most urgent matter in the universe to those people. It is when the emphasis is laid in this way upon the historian's attempt to understand the past, that it becomes clear how much he is concerned to elucidate the unlikenesses between past and present. Instead of being moved to indignation by something in the past which at first seems alien and perhaps even wicked to our own day, instead of leaving it in the outer darkness, he makes the effort to bring this thing into the context where it is natural, and he elucidates the matter by showing its relation to other things which we do understand. Whereas the man who keeps his eye on the present tends to ask some such

question as, How did religious liberty arise? while the whig historian by a subtle organisation of his sympathies tends to read it as the question, To whom must we be grateful for our religious liberty? the historian who is engaged upon studying the 16th century at close hand is more likely to find himself asking why men in those days were so given to persecution. This is in a special sense the historian's question for it is a question about the past rather than about the present, and in answering it the historian is on his own ground and is making the kind of contribution which he is most fitted to make. It is in this sense that he is always forgiving sins by the mere fact that he is finding out why they happened. The things which are most alien to ourselves are the very object of his exposition. And until he has shown why men persecuted in the 16th century one may doubt whether he is competent to discuss the further question of how religious liberty has come down to the 20th.

But after this attempt to understand the past the historian seeks to study change taking place in the past, to work out the manner in

which transitions are made, and to examine the way in which things happen in this world. If we could put all the historians together and look at their total co-operative achievement they are studying all that process of mutation which has turned the past into our present. And from the work of any historian who has concentrated his researches upon any change or transition, there emerges a truth of history which seems to combine with a truth of philosophy. It is nothing less than the whole of the past, with its complexity of movement, its entanglement of issues, and its intricate interactions, which produced the whole of the complex present; and this, which is itself an assumption and not a conclusion of historical study, is the only safe piece of causation that a historian can put his hand upon, the only thing which he can positively assert about the relationship between past and present. When the need arises to sort and disentangle from the present one fact or feature that is required to be traced back into history, the historian is faced with more unravelling than a mind can do, and finds the network of interactions so intricate, that it is impossible to

point to any one thing in the sixteenth century as the cause of any one thing in the twentieth. It is as much as the historian can do to trace with some probability the sequence of events from one generation to another, without seeking to draw the incalculably complex diagram of causes and effects for ever interlacing down to the third and fourth generations. Any action which any man has ever taken is part of that whole set of circumstances which at a given moment conditions the whole mass of things that are to happen next. To understand that action is to recover the thousand threads that connect it with other things, to establish it in a system of relations; in other words to place it in its historical context. But it is not easy to work out its consequences, for they are merged in the results of everything else that was conspiring to produce change at that moment. We do not know where Luther would have been if his movement had not chimed with the ambitions of princes. We do not know what would have happened to the princes if Luther had not come to their aid.

The volume and complexity of historical

research are at the same time the result and the demonstration of the fact that the more we examine the way in which things happen, the more we are driven from the simple to the complex. It is only by undertaking an actual piece of research and looking at some point in history through the microscope that we can really visualise the complicated movements that lie behind any historical change. It is only by this method that we can discover the tricks that time plays with the purposes of men, as it turns those purposes to ends not realised; or learn the complex processes by which the world comes through a transition that seems a natural and easy step in progress to us when we look back upon it. It is only by this method that we can come to see the curious mediations that circumstances must provide before men can grow out of a complex or open their minds to a new thing. Perhaps the greatest of all the lessons of history is this demonstration of the complexity of human change and the unpredictable character of the ultimate consequences of any given act or decision of men; and on the face of it this is a lesson that can only be learned in detail. It

is a lesson that is bound to be lost in abridgment, and that is why abridgments of history are sometimes calculated to propagate the very reverse of the truth of history. The historian seeks to explain how the past came to be turned into the present but there is a very real sense in which the only explanation he can give is to unfold the whole story and reveal the complexity by telling it in detail. In reality the process of mutation which produced the present is as long and complicated as all the most lengthy and complicated works of historical research placed end to end, and knit together and regarded as one whole.

The fallacy of the whig historian lies in the way in which he takes his short cut through this complexity. The difficulty of the general historian is that he has to abridge and that he must do it without altering the meaning and the peculiar message of history. The danger in any survey of the past is lest we argue in a circle and impute lessons to history which history has never taught and historical research has never discovered — lessons which are really inferences from the particular organisation that we have given to our knowledge.

We may believe in some doctrine of evolution or some idea of progress and we may use this in our interpretation of the history of centuries; but what our history contributes is not evolution but rather the realisation of how crooked and perverse the ways of progress are, with what wilfulness and waste it twists and turns, and takes anything but the straight track to its goal, and how often it seems to go astray, and to be deflected by any conjuncture, to return to us – if it does return – by a back-door. We may believe in some providence that guides the destiny of men and we may if we like read this into our history; but what our history brings to us is not proof of providence but rather the realisation of how mysterious are its ways, how strange its caprices – the knowledge that this providence uses any means to get to its end and works often at cross-purposes with itself and is curiously wayward. Our assumptions do not matter if we are conscious that they are assumptions, but the most fallacious thing in the world is to organise our historical knowledge upon an assumption without realising what we are doing, and then to make inferences from that

organisation and claim that these are the voice of history. It is at this point that we tend to fall into what I have nicknamed the whig fallacy.

The whig method of approach is closely connected with the question of the abridgment of history; for both the method and the kind of history that results from it would be impossible if all the facts were told in all their fullness. The theory that is behind the whig interpretation – the theory that we study the past for the sake of the present – is one that is really introduced for the purpose of facilitating the abridgment of history; and its effect is to provide us with a handy rule of thumb by which we can easily discover what was important in the past, for the simple reason that, by definition, we mean what is important ‘from our point of view.’ No one could mistake the aptness of this theory for a school of writers who might show the least inclination to undervalue one side of the historical story; and indeed there would be no point in holding it if it were not for the fact that it serves to simplify the study of history by providing an excuse for leaving things out. The theory is important because it provides us in the long

run with a path through the complexity of history; it really gives us a short cut through that maze of interactions by which the past was turned into our present; it helps us to circumvent the real problem of historical study. If we can exclude certain things on the ground that they have no direct bearing on the present, we have removed the most troublesome elements in the complexity and the crooked is made straight. There is no doubt that the application of this principle must produce in history a bias in favour of the whigs and must fall unfavourably on Catholics and tories. Whig history in other words is not a genuine abridgment, for it is really based upon what is an implicit principle of selection. The adoption of this principle and this method commits us to a certain organisation of the whole historical story. A very different case arises when the historian, examining the 16th century, sets out to discover the things which were important to that age itself or were influential at that time. And if we could imagine a general survey of the centuries which should be an abridgment of all the works of historical research, and if we

were then to compare this with a survey of the whole period which was compiled on the whig principle, that is to say, 'from the point of view of the present,' we should not only find that the complications had been greatly oversimplified in the whig version, but we should find the story recast and the most important valuations amended; in other words we should find an abridged history which tells a different story altogether. According to the consistency with which we have applied the principle of direct reference to the present, we are driven to that version of history which is called the whig interpretation.

Seeing Protestant fighting Catholic in the 16th century we remember our own feelings concerning liberty in the 20th, and we keep before our eyes the relative positions of Catholic and Protestant to-day. There is open to us a whole range of concealed inference based upon this mental juxtaposition of the 16th century with the present; and, even before we have examined the subject closely, our story will have assumed its general shape; Protestants will be seen to have been fighting for the future, while it will be obvious that the

Catholics were fighting for the past. Given this original bias we can follow a technical procedure that is bound to confirm and imprison us in it; for when we come, say, to examine Martin Luther more closely, we have a magnet that can draw out of history the very things that we go to look for, and by a hundred quotations torn from their context and robbed of their relevance to a particular historical conjuncture we can prove that there is an analogy between the ideas of Luther and the world of the present day, we can see in Luther a foreshadowing of the present. History is subtle lore and it may lock us in the longest argument in a circle that one can imagine. It matters very much how we start upon our labours — whether for example we take the Protestants of the 16th century as men who were fighting to bring about our modern world, while the Catholics were struggling to keep the mediæval, or whether we take the whole present as the child of the whole past and see rather the modern world emerging from the clash of both Catholic and Protestant. If we use the present as our perpetual touchstone, we can easily divide the men of the 16th

century into progressive and reactionary; but we are likely to beg fewer questions, and we are better able to discover the way in which the past was turned into our present, if we adopt the outlook of the 16th century upon itself, or if we view the process of events as it appears to us when we look at the movements of our own generation; and in this case we shall tend to see not so much progressive fighting reactionary but rather two parties differing on the question of what the next step in progress is to be. Instead of seeing the modern world emerge as the victory of the children of light over the children of darkness in any generation, it is at least better to see it emerge as the result of a clash of wills, a result which often neither party wanted or even dreamed of, a result which indeed in some cases both parties would equally have hated, but a result for the achievement of which the existence of both and the clash of both were necessary.

The whig historian has the easier path before him and his is the quicker way to heavy and masterly historical judgments; for he is in possession of a principle of exclusion which enables him to leave out the most troublesome

element in the complexity. By seizing upon those personages and parties in the past whose ideas seem the more analogous to our own, and by setting all these out in contrast with the rest of the stuff of history, he has his organisation and abridgment of history ready-made and has a clean path through the complexity. This organisation of his history will answer all questions more clearly than historical research is ever able to do. It will enable him, even before he has studied anything very deeply, to arrive at what seem to be self-evident judgments concerning historical issues. It will enable him to decide irrevocably and in advance, before historical research has said anything and in the face of anything it might say, that Fox, whatever his sins, was fighting to save liberty from Pitt, while Pitt, whatever his virtues, cannot be regarded as fighting to save liberty from Fox. But it is the thesis of this essay that when we organise our general history by reference to the present we are producing what is really a gigantic optical illusion; and that a great number of the matters in which history is often made to speak with most certain voice, are not inferences

made from the past but are inferences made from a particular series of abstractions from the past – abstractions which by the very principle of their origin beg the very questions that the historian is pretending to answer. It is the thesis of this essay that the Protestant and whig interpretation of history is the result of something much more subtle than actual Protestant or party bias; the significant case arises when the very men who opposed votes for women until the vote could be withheld no longer, are unable to see in the opponents of the Great Reform Bill anything but the corrupt defenders of profitable abuses; and it is this kind of limitation to the effort of historical understanding which requires to be explained. The whig interpretation of history is not merely the property of whigs and it is much more subtle than mental bias; it lies in a trick of organisation, an unexamined habit of mind that any historian may fall into. It might be called the historian's 'pathetic fallacy.' It is the result of the practice of abstracting things from their historical context and judging them apart from their context – estimating them and organising the historical

story by a system of direct reference to the present.

It may be argued that this whig principle which is under discussion is seldom applied by any historian with prolonged consistency; and one might go further and say that it could not conceivably be applied with perfect completeness. Its logical conclusion, if it had any, would be the study of the present without reference to the past; a consummation which is indeed approached, if we can judge by some of the best specimens of the fallacy – the case of some popular views in regard to the Dark Ages, for example. This whig principle accounts for many of the common misconceptions concerning the past, but its application is by no means restricted to the region of popular error; witness the fact that it can be put forward as a definite theory by historians. It represents a kind of error into which it is very difficult for us not to fall; but, more than this, it is the very sum and definition of all errors of historical inference. The study of the past with one eye, so to speak, upon the present is the source of all sins and sophistries in history, starting with the simplest of them,

the anachronism. It is the fallacy into which we slip when we are giving the judgments that seem the most assuredly self-evident. And it is the essence of what we mean by the word 'unhistorical.' It describes the attitude by which the men of the Renaissance seem to have approached the Middle Ages. It describes the attitude of the 18th century to many a period of the past. It accounts for a good deal of the plausibility of that special form of the whig interpretation which expounded the history of England in the light of the theory of primitive Germanic freedom. It explains a hundred whig and Protestant versions of history that have been revised by the work of specialists. And though it might be said that in any event all errors are corrected by more detailed study, it must be remembered that the thesis itself is one that has the effect of stopping enquiry; as against the view that we study the past for the sake of the past, it is itself an argument for the limitation of our aims and our researches; it is the theory that history is very useful provided we take it in moderation; and it can be turned into an apology for anything that does not tally with

historical research. A more intensive study can only be pursued, as has been seen, in proportion as we abandon this thesis. And even so, even in the last resort, though a further enquiry has corrected so many of the more glaring errors that result from this fallacy, there is a sense in which, if we hold to the whig thesis, historical research can never catch up, for it can never break into the circle in which we are arguing. The specialist himself is cheated and he cries out to us to no purpose, if we re-cast his work from what we call the point of view of the present – still selecting what conforms to our principle, still patching the new research into the old story.

III. THE HISTORICAL PROCESS

THE whig method of approach is bound to lead to an over-dramatisation of the historical story; it tends to make the historian misconceive both parties to any struggle that takes place in any given generation. The party that is more analogous to the present is taken to be more similar, more modern than close examination would justify, for the simple reason that the historian is concentrating upon likenesses and is abstracting them from their context and is making them his points of emphasis. The result is that to many of us the sixteenth century Protestants or the whigs of 1800 seem much more modern than they really were, and even when we have corrected this impression by closer study we find it difficult to keep in mind the differences between their world and ours. At worst some people seem willing to believe that Luther was a modern Protestant fighting for a broader and more liberal theology against the religious fanaticism of Rome; although heaven itself

might bear witness that it was anything but the religious fanaticism of the Renaissance popes that drove Luther to exasperation. Matters are not very much improved when we come to the historian who qualifies all this by some such phrase as that 'Luther however was of an essentially mediæval cast of mind'; for this parenthetical homage to research is precisely the vice and the delusion of the whig historian, and this kind of afterthought only serves to show that he has not been placing things in their true context, but has been speaking of a modernised Luther in his narration of the story. But if one party is misconceived through this method of historical approach, it would seem that the opposing party is even more gravely maltreated. It is taken to have contributed nothing to the making of the present-day, and rather to have formed an obstruction; it cannot by the process of direct reference be shown to have stood as a root or a foreshadowing of the present; at worst it is converted into a kind of dummy that acts as a better foil to the grand whig virtues; and so it is often denied that very effort of historical understanding which would have

helped to correct the original fallacy. In all this we tend to undo by our process of abstraction and our method of organisation all the work which historical research is achieving in detail; and we are overlooking the first condition of historical enquiry, which is to recognise how much other ages differed from our own.

If Protestants and Catholics of the 16th century could return to look at the 20th century, they would equally deplore this strange mad modern world, and much as they fought one another there is little doubt that they would be united in opposition to us; and Luther would confess that he had been wrong and wicked if it was by his doing that this liberty, this anarchy had been let loose, while his enemies would be quick to say that this decline of religion was bound to be the result of a schism such as his. The issue between Protestants and Catholics in the 16th century was an issue of their world and not of our world, and we are being definitely unhistorical, we are forgetting that Protestantism and Catholicism have both had a long history since 1517, if we argue from a rash analogy that the one was fighting for something like

our modern world while the other was trying to prevent its coming. Our most secular historians, and the ones who are most grateful for that 'process of secularisation,' that 'break-up of mediævalism,' of which so much has been traced to the Reformation, are inclined to write sometimes as though Protestantism in itself was somehow constituted to assist that process. It is easy to forget how much Luther was in rebellion against the secularisation of Church and society, how much the Reformation shares the psychology of religious revivals, and to what an extent Luther's rebellion against the Papacy helped to provoke that very fanaticism of the Counter-reformation against which we love to see the Protestant virtues shine. And it is not easy to keep in mind how much the Protestantism that we think of to-day and the Catholicism of these later times have themselves been affected in turn, though in different ways, by the secularisation that has taken place in society and by the dissolution of mediæval ideals.

The truth is much more faithfully summarised if we forgo all analogies with the present, and, braving the indignation of the whig

historian together with all the sophistries that he is master of, count Protestants and Catholics of the 16th century as distant and strange people – as they really were – whose quarrels are as unrelated to ourselves as the factions of Blues and Greens in ancient Constantinople. In other words, it is better to assume unlikeness at first and let any likenesses that subsequently appear take their proper proportions in their proper context; just as in understanding an American it is wrong to assume first that he is like an Englishman and then quarrel with him for his unlikenesses, but much better to start with him as a foreigner and so see his very similarities with ourselves in a different light. Taking this view we shall see in the 16th century the clash of two forms of religion which in those days could not know how to be anything but intolerant; and from this clash we shall see emerging by more complicated paths than we should assume, indeed by paths almost too intricate to trace, some of our religious liberty, perhaps some of our religious indifference, and that whole tendency which the historian likes to call the process of secularisation. We shall see

Protestant and Catholic of the 16th century more like one another and more unlike ourselves than we have often cared to imagine – each claiming that his was the one true religion upon which both church and society should exclusively be established. We shall see that it was in fact precisely because they were so similar, in the exclusiveness of their claims, that they presented the world with one of the most fertile problems it has ever had to face. They presented the world with the fact which, though all men sought to close their eyes to it, ultimately proved inescapable – the co-existence of two forms of religion in one society; and they presented the world with the problem of how to make life possible and bearable in the face of such an unprecedented anomaly. Neither Protestant nor Catholic but precisely the fact that there were the two parties is the starting-point of the developments which took place.

It is here that we reach the second fault in the whig method of approach; for by its overdramatisation of the story it tends to divert our attention from what is the real historical process. The whig historian too easily refers

changes and achievements to this party or that personage, reading the issue as a purpose that has been attained, when very often it is a purpose that has been marred. He gives an over-simplification of the historical process. The whig historian is fond of showing how much Calvinism has contributed to the development of modern liberty. It is easy to forget that in Geneva and in New England, where Calvinism founded its New Jerusalem, and so to speak had the field to itself, and was in a position to have its own way with men, the result was by no means entirely corroborative of all that is assumed in the whig thesis. Whether our subject is Calvinism or anything else, it is often easy to state practically the converse of what the whig historian too readily believes; and instead of being grateful to Calvinism for our liberty we are just as reasonable if we transfer our gratitude to those conjunctures and accompanying circumstances which in certain countries turned even Calvinism, perhaps in spite of itself, into the ally of liberty. By all means let us be grateful for the Puritans of 17th century England, but let us be grateful that they were for so long in a

minority and against the government; for this was the very condition of their utility.

There is a common error into which the whig historian is bound to fall as a result of his misconceptions concerning the historical process. He is apt to imagine the British constitution as coming down to us by virtue of the work of long generations of whigs and in spite of the obstructions of a long line of tyrants and tories. In reality it is the result of the continual interplay and perpetual collision of the two. It is the very embodiment of all the balances and compromises and adjustments that were necessitated by this interplay. The whig historian is apt to imagine the British constitution as coming down to us safely at last, in spite of so many vicissitudes; when in reality it is the result of those very vicissitudes of which he seems to complain. If there had never been a danger to our constitution there never would have been a constitution to be in danger. In the most concrete sense of the words our constitution is not merely the work of men and parties; it is the product of history. Now there is a sense in which the whig historian

sometimes seems to believe that there is an unfolding logic in history, a logic which is on the side of the whigs and which makes them appear as co-operators with progress itself; but there is a concrete sense in which it might be said that he does not believe there is an historical process at all. He does not see whig and tory combining in virtue of their very antagonism to produce those interactions which turn one age into another. He does not see that time is so to speak having a hand in the game, and the historical process itself is working upon the pattern which events are taking. He does not see the solidity with which history is actually embodied in the British constitution and similarly in the modern world. He points out all the things which would never have happened if Luther had not raised the standard of the Reformation; and he does not realise the fundamental fallacy that is involved when this is inverted and all these things are counted as the work and achievement of Luther himself. In reality they are the result of interaction; they are precipitated by complex history.

The consequences of his fundamental

misconception are never more apparent than in the whig historian's quest for origins; for we are subject to great confusion if we turn this quest into a search for analogies, or if we attempt to go too directly to look for the present in the past. The very form of our question is at fault if we ask, To whom do we owe our religious liberty? We may ask how this liberty arose, but even then it takes all history to give us the answer. We are in error if we imagine that we have found the origin of this liberty when we have merely discovered the first man who talked about it. We are wrong if we study the question in that over-simplified realm which we call 'the history of ideas,' or if we personify ideas in themselves and regard them as self-standing agencies in history. We are the victims of our own phraseology if we think that we mean very much when we say that religious liberty 'can be traced back to' some person or other. And if we assert that 'but for Luther' this liberty would never have come down to us as it did come, meaning to suggest that it has come down to us as the glory and the achievement of Luther, we are using a trick in text-book

terminology which has become the whig historian's sleight-of-hand. It may be true to assert that there are many things in history and in the present day which would never have happened in the way they have happened if Martin Luther had not defied a Pope; there are equally many things which would not have taken place as they have done if Columbus had not discovered America; but it is as fallacious to ascribe paternity to Luther in the one case as it is to make Columbus responsible for modern America; we can only say that both men added a conditioning circumstance to a whole network of other conditioning circumstances more than four centuries ago. In reality we can no more work out what religious liberty owes to Luther than we can calculate what proportion of the price of a man's suit in 1930 ought to be divided between the inventor of the spinning-jenny, the inventor of the steam-engine, and the firm which actually wove the cloth. It is meaningless to trace liberty along a line which goes back to Luther merely because Luther at one time and in a world of different connotations put forward some principles of freedom, from which

as a matter of fact he shrank when he saw some of the consequences that we see in them. It is not by a line but by a labyrinthine piece of network that one would have to make the diagram of the course by which religious liberty has come down to us, for this liberty comes by devious tracks and is born of strange conjunctures, it represents purposes marred perhaps more than purposes achieved, and it owes more than we can tell to many agencies that had little to do with either religion or liberty. We cannot tell to whom we must be grateful for this religious liberty and there is no logic in being grateful to anybody or anything except to the whole past which produced the whole present; unless indeed we choose to be grateful to that providence which turned so many conjunctures to our ultimate profit.

If we see in each generation the conflict of the future against the past, the fight of what might be called progressive versus reactionary, we shall find ourselves organising the historical story upon what is really an unfolding principle of progress, and our eyes will be fixed upon certain people who appear as the

special agencies of that progress. We shall be tempted to ask the fatal question, To whom do we owe our religious liberty? But if we see in each generation a clash of wills out of which there emerges something that probably no man ever willed, our minds become concentrated upon the process that produced such an unpredictable issue, and we are more open for an intensive study of the motions and interactions that underlie historical change. In these circumstances the question will be stated in its proper form: How did religious liberty arise? The process of the historical transition will then be recognised to be unlike what the whig historian seems to assume – much less like the procedure of a logical argument and perhaps much more like the method by which a man can be imagined to work his way out of a ‘complex.’ It is a process which moves by mediations and those mediations may be provided by anything in the world – by men’s sins or misapprehensions or by what we can only call fortunate conjunctures. Very strange bridges are used to make the passage from one state of things to another; we may lose sight of them in our surveys of general history,

but their discovery is the glory of historical research. History is not the study of origins; rather it is the analysis of all the mediations by which the past was turned into our present.

Luther, precisely because he so completely assumed that the lay prince would be a godly prince, precisely because he so completely shared the assumptions of mediæval society, attributed to rulers some of the powers of Old Testament monarchs, and impressed upon them the duty of reforming the church. He was so sure that the ruler should be the servant of religion that he forgot the necessity of those safeguardings upon which the Papacy insisted in its dealings with temporal powers, and by calling rulers to his help at that particular moment he did something that helped kings and princes to become lords of everything and even masters of the church. If the Middle Ages had an inhibition against the control of spiritual matters by secular princes, Luther himself, at bottom, shared that inhibition to the utmost. Yet unawares and without liberating his own mind he helped — how much or how little would be too intricate for the historian to trace — to short-circuit the

mediæval argument and dissolve the complex that his generation laboured under. Yet perhaps he did not do even so much as this; perhaps at any other period his course of action would have had no such result; for kings in other ages had stepped in to reform the church without gaining dominion over it. Perhaps there was some still deeper movement in the time which was turning everything to the advantage of the lay prince and the secular state, taking this and anything else as a bridge to its own end. All the same it is by intricate mediations such as this that the religious society of the Middle Ages came ultimately to transform itself into the secular society of modern times; and it is important to realise that such a transition as this process of secularisation is one that could only come by mediation, by the subtle removal of what were complexes and inhibitions. It implied in men's minds deep changes that could not have been reached by logical argument, and it implied in the world a whole series of movements that could not have been made by a mighty volition. It implied new ideas that could only come through the quiet dissolving

of prejudices, through the influence of new conditions that give rise to new prepossessions, through sundry pieces of forgetfulness in the handing of a tradition from one generation to another, and through many a process of elision by which men can slide into new points of view without knowing it. It implied the overthrow of Martin Luther's idea of the religious society, the destruction of the Calvinist's New Jerusalem, and the dissolution of the Mediæval and Papal ideal; it represented the history-making that was going on over men's heads, at cross-purposes with all of them. It is well that our minds should be focused upon that historical process which so cheats men of their purposes – that providence which deflects their labours to such unpredictable results. But the whig historian, driven to his last ditch, will still ascribe everything to Martin Luther. It is part of his verbal technique to make it still an added virtue in Luther that he worked for purposes greater than those of which he was conscious; as though the same were not true of the enemies of Luther, and equally true for that matter in the case of every one of us. The whig

historian is interested in discovering agency in history, even where in this way he must avow it only implicit. . It is characteristic of his method that he should be interested in the agency rather than in the process. And this is how he achieves his simplification.

When the large map of the centuries is being traced out and the mind sweeps over broad ranges of abridged history, the whig fallacies become our particular snare, for they might have been invented to facilitate generalisation. The complexity of interactions can be telescoped till a movement comes to appear as a simple progression. It is all the more easy to impute historical change to some palpable and direct agency. What we call 'causes' are made to operate with astonishing immediacy. So it is when we are forming our general surveys, when we are placing the Reformation in the whole scheme of history, that we project our wider whig interpretations and draw our diagram in the strongest lines. In regard to the Reformation it might be said that the whig fallacies of secular historians have had a greater effect over a wider field than any theological bias that can be imputed

to Protestant writers. And the tendency is to magnify the Reformation even when it is not entirely complimentary to the Protestants to do so. It is easy to be dramatic and see Luther as something like a rebel against mediævalism. It is pleasant to make him responsible for religious toleration and freedom of thought. It is tempting to bring his whole movement into relief by showing how it promoted the rise of the secular state, or to say with one of our writers that without Martin Luther there would have been no Louis XIV. It may even be plausible to claim that Protestantism contributed to the rise of the capitalist; that in its ethics were evolved the more than seven deadly virtues which have helped to provide the conditions for an industrial civilisation; and then to bring this to a climax in the statement: 'Capitalism is the social counterpart of Calvinist Theology.' So we complete the circle and see Protestantism behind modern society, and we further another optical illusion – that history is divided by great watersheds of which the Reformation is one. Sometimes it would seem that we regard Protestantism as a Thing, a fixed and definite

object that came into existence in 1517; and we seize upon it as a source, a cause, an origin, even of movements that were taking place concurrently; and we do this with an air of finality, as though Protestantism itself had no antecedents, as though it were a fallacy to go behind the great watershed, as though indeed it would blunt the edge of our story to admit the workings of a process instead of assuming the interposition of some direct agency. It is all an example of the fact that for the compilation of trenchant history there is nothing like being content with half the truth. We gain emphasis and at the same time we magnify the whig interpretation of history by stopping the enquiry into the historical process at the precise point where our own discoveries have made it interesting. In this way we are able to take the whig short cut to absolute judgments that seem astonishingly self-evident.

It seems possible to say that if we are seeking to discover how the mediæval world was changed into the world that we know, we must go behind Protestantism and the Reformation to a deeper tide in the affairs of men,

to a movement which we may indeed discern but can scarcely dogmatise about, and to a prevailing current, which, though we must never discover it too soon, is perhaps the last thing we can learn in our research upon the historical process. It does seem for example that before the Reformation some wind in the world had clearly set itself to play on the side of kings, and in many a country a hundred weather-vanes, on steeple and on mansion, on college and on court, had turned before the current to show that the day of monarchy had come. And indeed some little detail in popular psychology would seem to have shown the way of the wind as clearly as some of the larger developments in the constitutional machinery of a state. Further it is possible to say that when there is such a tide in the affairs of men, it may use any channel to take it to its goal – it may give any other movement a turn in its own direction. For some reason Renaissance and Reformation and rising Capitalism were made to work to the glory of kings. And even if in their origin these movements had been rather of a contrary tenor – even though a religious awakening might not in itself seem likely to

increase the power of secular monarchs over the church – still the deeper drift might carry with it the surface currents, and sweep them in to swell the prevailing tide. Perhaps – to take one example – it was because the princes were already growing both in power and in self-assertion that the Reformation was drawn into an alliance with them, which had so great influence on Protestants as well as Kings.

The large process which turned the mediæval world into the modern world, the process which transformed the religious society into the secular state of modern times, was wider and deeper and stronger than the Reformation itself. The Reformation may have been something more than merely a symptom or a result of such a process, and we should be assuming too much if we said that it was only an incident in the transition. But the historian would be very dogmatic who insisted on regarding it as a cause. Protestantism was the subject of rapid historical change from the very moment of its birth. It was quickly transformed into something which its original leaders would scarcely have recognised. And though it might be true to say that later

Protestants were only working out the implications of the original movement, the fact remains that they worked them out in a certain direction; they found implications that Luther did not intend and would not have liked; and it was precisely in this turn that Protestantism acquired the associations that have become so familiar, the ones which are roughly denoted by the words, Individualism, Capitalism, and the Secular State. Precisely where the whig historian ascribes influence, the Reformation itself most obviously came under the influence of the tendencies of the times. If the movement had political, economic, or sociological consequences, this was because it had itself become entangled in forces that seemed almost inescapable, and if it gave them leverage this was because it had itself become subject to their workings. It is not sufficient to imply that Protestantism was in any way responsible for the capitalist; it is not sufficient to see that the religious and economic realms were reacting on one another; we must be prepared to watch the truth of history water down into a banality, and allow that to some degree

Protestants and capitalists were being carried in the same direction by the same tide. If Roman Catholicism proved less amenable, this was not simply because it was an older and more hardened system, but because the remarkably assimilative mediæval Catholic church had become the remarkably unassimilative modern Roman Catholic one, as though the Lutheran movement had turned it in upon itself, and had set it in opposition to innovation, even to the deeper tendencies of the age. Further it is possible to say, or at least we must leave room for saying – we must not by our mere organisation of the historical story close the door against it – that the Reformation in its original character as a reassertion of religious authority and a regeneration of the religious society was in some sense an actual protest against that comprehensive movement which was changing the face of the world; but that being the subject of rapid historical change from the very start it came itself under the influence of that movement, and was turned into the ally of some of the very tendencies which it had been born to resist.

The watershed is broken down if we place

the Reformation in its historical context and if we adopt the point of view which regards Protestantism itself as the product of history. But here greater dangers lurk and we are bordering on heresy more blasphemous than that of the whigs, for we may fall into the opposite fallacy and say that the Reformation did nothing at all. If there is a deeper tide that rolls below the very growth of Protestantism nothing could be more shallow than the history which is mere philosophising upon such a movement, or even the history which discovers it too soon. And nothing could be more hasty than to regard it as a self-standing, self-determined agency behind history, working to its purpose irrespective of the actual drama of events. It might be used to show that the Reformation made no difference in the world, that Martin Luther did not matter, and that the course of the ages is unaffected by anything that may happen; but even if this were true the historian would not be competent to say so, and in any case such a doctrine would be the very negation of history. It would be the doctrine that the whole realm of historical events is of no

significance whatever. It would be the converse of the whig over-dramatisation. The deep movement that is in question does not explain everything, or anything at all. It does not exist apart from historical events and cannot be disentangled from them. Perhaps there is nothing the historian can do about it, except to know that it is there. One fallacy is to be avoided, and once again it is the converse of that of the whigs. If the Reformation is not merely a 'cause,' at the same time we cannot say that it is merely a 'result.' It is like the mind of a human being: though we find the historical antecedents of everything in it, still, in our capacity as historians at least, we cannot deny that something different is produced. In this sense we may say that history is the study not of origins but of mediations, but it is the study of effective mediations genuinely leading from something old to something which the historian must regard as new. It is essentially the study of transition, and to the historian the only absolute is change.

There were many reasons why the Reformation should have provided a countless number of interesting forms of this kind of mediation.

Merely by creating an upheaval in the 16th century it threw a great many questions into the melting-pot. By the very intensity of the warfare and controversy it caused it must have hastened the decision of many conflicts of forces and ideas. By the novel situations it created and the unsettlement it produced, it must have given special opening for many new combinations of ideas. And the mere fact that there were such overturns in society, necessitating so much reorganisation, must have prevented in many countries the solid resistance of stable and established institutions to whatever tendencies existed in the times. For all these reasons and for many others the Reformation is the most interesting example one could find for the study of the mediations by which one age is turned into another – for the examination of an historical transition. We can see why the Reformation may have been something more than a passenger, and may have been an ally, giving actual leverage to forces that we may regard as existing already. And the result will be different from whig history because there will be less of that subtle implication that the changes of the 16th

century can be accounted for by reference to the nature or essence of Protestantism. There will be more room left for such comments on this whole period of transition, as that the Reformation, by the mere fact that it produced upheaval, was bound to make transformations more rapid in every sphere of life. And if it is said that on this argument the Reformation still does nothing more than leave the field open for the play of those forces which were already at work, and so serves merely as a hindrance of hindrances – if we must go further and admit that we are not in a position to deny the genius and personal achievement of a man like Martin Luther – here we may agree with the whig historian, we may even say that the Reformation in a certain sense brings something new into history; but even here there is a subtle difference. We could not imagine Luther as having produced something out of nothing; it lies in the very terms of our study of history that we should discover the historical antecedents of everything that Luther said or did; he would still be himself an example of historical mediation, performing what is really a work of transition,

carrying what was old into something which we could agree to be genuinely new. And it might be suggested that if history is approached in this way – not as a question of origins but as a question of transitions, not as the subject of ‘causes’ but as the subject of ‘mediations’ – historical interpretation would become less whig and change would seem less cataclysmic. History would lose some of the paradoxes, such as those which are at least implied in the statement : ‘Capitalism is the social counterpart of Calvinist Theology’; and the world of the historian would become much more like the world as it appears in life. In reality this method of approach would tend to lead us to the view that the Reformation was essentially a religious movement, as it must have appeared to its original leaders. We should discover that if so much of the modern world has been placed on the shoulders of Luther, this has been due at least in part to the historian’s optical illusion, to certain features in the technique of history-writing, and to the exploitation of that dubious phraseology which has become the historian’s stock-in-trade. We should end by being at least

more prepared to recognise that in history as in life Luther must stand or fall on his genius and his genuineness as a religious leader. And if the Reformation had economic or political consequences we should be more ready to see that this was because it became entangled in tendencies which were already in existence, and which indeed it does not seem to have altered or deflected so greatly as is sometimes assumed.

Finally in criticism of the whig historian who studies the past with too direct reference to the present day, it may be said that his method of procedure actually defeats his original confessed purpose which was to use the past for the elucidation of the present. If we look for things in the course of history only because we have found them already in the world of to-day, if we seize upon those things in the 16th century which are most analogous to what we know in the 20th, the upshot of all our history is only to send us back finally to the place where we began, and to ratify whatever conceptions we originally had in regard to our own times. It makes all the difference in the world whether we already assume the present

at the beginning of our study of history and keep it as a basis of reference, or whether we wait and suspend our judgment until we discover it at the end. The controversialists of the 17th century who made a too direct reference of Magna Carta to their own day, were not using the past in such a way as to give them better insight into their own generation, but were arguing in a circle, and, perhaps happily for them, were making their history confirm some of their misconceptions concerning their own present. If we turn our present into an absolute to which all other generations are merely relative, we are in any case losing the truer vision of ourselves which history is able to give; we fail to realise those things in which we too are merely relative, and we lose a chance of discovering where, in the stream of the centuries, we ourselves, and our ideas and prejudices, stand. In other words we fail to see how we ourselves are, in our turn, not quite autonomous or unconditioned, but a part of the great historical process; not pioneers merely, but also passengers in the movement of things.