

Essays in English History

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This collection of essays are presented chronologically in the thematic sense. Thus apart from the two introductory essays, the first essay properly is on Cromwell, and the last, somewhat peculiarly on Manchester. In many ways the introductory essays are almost the most interesting as he does to some extent reveal his own professional philosophy on the writing of history. History for Taylor is close to fiction in the sense that it needs a plot and should be a good yarn. He points out that in most European languages the words for history and story (the latter also in the sense of anecdote and yarn) are the same. Its closeness to fiction brings with it the temptation to embellish. How much are you allowed to embellish? There are two extremes, one in which you do not state anything except what there is historical documentation for, the other in which you allow yourself to include everything that does not contradict facts, even if there is no support for it. The first kind of history becomes very dry and in effect one may even ask whether it is history at all, the other kind could be very entertaining, and usually occurs in fictional form. According to Collingwood, history is about the reconstruction of the past using all the available evidence. It is about creative interpolation staying within the facts, which may change as more is being unearthed. History, like science is a developing process, and Taylor touches upon it, asking plaintively whether not the historian approach is so much more different from the scientist, who also, supposedly, starts to ask questions of the data.

Taylor is by upbringing and unchecked habit a leftist, and has but scorn for the conservatives, although this has not prevented him from establishing ties of friendship across the political divide. Is there in addition to Whig history a Tory history he asks. What makes the Tory a deplorable politician, should make him an excellent historian, because after all the virtues they profess, such as a love of the past and caution in interpretation, should serve them well. He does, however, profess a certain disappointment when he has occasion to sample some.

Taylor is a historian of diplomacy and war, and individuals play an important part in his presentations. His essay on the diplomatic game in the Upper Nile at the end of the 19th century is very boring, maybe because, as he explains, it was, unlike the other essays, mainly intended for a professional audience. Taylor is foremost an expert of English 19th century history. The Corn Law, the Reform Bill and Home Rule are three fundamental issues during the time, the significance of which may not be clear to the uninitiated, and one would like at some time to have a clear explanation, putting together some missing pieces. He is in particular fascinated by the leading politicians, Palmerstone foremost among them, then Lord Salisbury gets good marks. Lord Russell is a middling personality, as are Gladstone and in particular Disraeli, who usually dominated in popular accounts. (Those were the only ones I heard of as a child.). He writes engagingly on Lloyd George, one of the first PM's who came from the lower ranks. Churchill is a favorite, in spite of his conservatism and attachment to empire and colonies. After all Churchill stood up to Hitler,

and it is unclear whether any other man would have done it and made the public rally. Thus, in spite of everything, Taylor holds him as the foremost Prime Minister England ever had. A most conventional judgment, especially coming from a man like Taylor who took pride in going against the established grain. His study of Neville Chamberline is very interesting and quite sympathetic. The problem with Chamberline was not that he was an appeaser, he acted rationally and morally after all, if from a limited perspective. The problem with Chamberline was basically bad luck. It haunted him to his death. Shortly after resigning the office of prime minister he was struck with cancer and died. True to his style, he seeks out obscure and forgotten public figures, such as John Bright and his inspired but yet ineffective opposition to the Crimean War, the object of which was to stem the ambitions of the Russians, who were generally thought of as barbarians. Or Keir Hardie, the labor candidate who was the definitive outsider in parliament, and died too early to make a mark. It seems that many of the great politicians did not get into their strides until quite late in life, definitely not before their sixties. As to the constitutional monarchy Taylor is at best bemused. He admits that the recent Georges have served their functions well, but of course that the functions are outmoded.

Taylor is to be sampled and appreciated for his wit and opinion. Lord Salisbury, as mentioned, is a favorite, although a Tory. Taylor goes on to say that 'The Tory party has been called the stupid party (and not unfairly, to be stupid and to be sensible are not far apart. The Progressive party, Radical and Socialist, is clever, but silly)' And continues to find it strange indeed, that its most successful leader that stupid party had had since the Reform Bill, was an intellectual, supremely clever. He goes on to say that most prime ministers would not be interesting unless they had been prime ministers. In other words, the office conferred greatness on them, not the other way around. He speaks well of Salisbury literary merits, as he does of Palmerstone, and shows admiration for the steadfastness with which he held to his principles, even if those were misguided, such as his fear of democracy.

Taylor is critical of imperialism, claiming that it is not even financially justifiable. There is exploitation, but no further compensation on the national level, colonies only benefitting a thin sliver of the population who may get a comfortable living out of it. In fact he points out that the capitalists are not the worst culprits in the engagement, but the high-minded and inspired, such as missionaries. In the 18th century the merchants of the East India Company left the Indians and their culture alone, only in the following century did the English take on themselves the White Man's burden, being well-meaning busy-bodies, but inevitably racists, discovering their own superiority in the process.

Taylor is fascinated by journalism and by implication newspapers. In fact if anything he comes across as a journalist of history. Thus he is fascinated by men such as Northcliffe who made papers pay. Taylor sees him as the one, by his innovations, such as the short quickfire paragraph (according to Taylor the greatest advance in communication, since the abandonment of Latin for English), and thereby making English Newspapers the best in the world, and never losing sight of the basic insight that freedom must be paid for like everything else, and that a newspaper has a right to exist only if it can meet its bill. A sentiment maybe a bit strange for a leftist, but Taylor was never the ordinary leftist.

As to the Anglo-Russian entente, which came to an end by the Bolshevik revolution,

and which is forgotten nowadays by both parties, did after all do quite a lot of good in his opinion written on its fiftieth anniversary in 1957. The Buffer states in Asia, such as Afghanistan and Tibet are safe from the Russians and the British empire. Most remarkable of all, he claims, is that Persia still defies Imperialist encroachment from every quarter with supreme self-confidence. This can be discussed, in fact as far as Persia, this may be somewhat more true now fifty odd years later, than at the time of writing.

Reviewing Harold Nicolson's account of George V, gives him an opportunity of reflect on the institution of monarchy. He congratulates the author on including enough original material to satisfy the historian without tiring the general reader. He concludes that with George V, constitutional monarchy became a whole-time occupation. His predecessor - Edward VII, was too engaged in his garish activities, to spare much time for politics. With George V, the Crown became the symbol it had always intended to be, and he showed how this symbol could be beautifully personified by a very ordinary man with very ordinary tastes. This is indeed, I would say, the point of modern monarchy, extolling the virtues of a non-entity. Such could be, as Taylor points out, conscientiousness and decency. Admittedly not always exhibited by modern monarchs. The duties of a constitutional king are to advise, to encourage and to warn. So when he received his first Labour ministers he told them that 'The immediate future of my people is in your hands gentlemen. They depend on your prudence and sagacity'. Excellent words to be addressed to a Conservative administration, Taylor remarks, as prudence and sagacity are the best that can be expected from it. While with a government of the left you are looking out for initiative, energy and creative daring. There is something to be said for conservatism, Taylor points out, at the same time coquettishly confessing that he can never recollect what, but after all the defects of gradual reform are greater than commonly supposed, he claims, and sees that gradual reform is what constitutional monarchy inevitably promotes. George VI was a telling successor. He had been trained to respect the throne, and not to occupy it, and no man can change his character in mid-life Taylor reminds us. He brought his high-principles too far during the war, his ostentatious display of personal sacrifice during the Blitz, they were in fact pointless, and the public may have appreciated more a king like Edward VII, who at least could have fun. Taylor can never forgive him the reluctance with which he appointed Churchill as Prime minister.

Of academics turning into politicians he has well-founded scorn, They tend to combine high principles and impracticality in about equal measure. As to the Irish question, which would plague British politics for generations, he remarks that most reasonable men take leave of their senses as soon as they touch it. As noted Taylor had a penchant for journalism, which maybe a reason for his sympathy for Lloyd George, who, according to the author valued its world more than the political, and agreed with the editors of the Times that they were more important than prime ministers. Why did Lloyd George at the helm of liberalism have such success? By all accounts it ought to have been dead by the beginning of the 20th century. Taylor's explanation is that the English economy boomed again just before the Third World War. And Lloyd George was fond of businessmen too, and brought many into his cabinet. In fact, as Taylor points out, not with expected acidity, that he was the only politician since Walpole, leaving office financially much better off than he was before. As his most important legacy, Taylor holds, was that he provided the link between

the Liberals and Labour on the trade union side, making them not only an accepted but an essential part of the social order. He did get things done, as the saying goes, or maybe not after all, Taylor muses, but at least he tried to get them done, which is more than can be said for anyone else in office. The basic purpose of the essay is to try and explain why Lloyd George fell from the status of the most admired figure in British politics to the most hated and distrusted. Taylor's take is that he was basically devious. He was a leader of a predominantly Right-wing coalition, yet his instincts were exclusively on the left. He had to be devious, he had to browbeat people to get things done his way. Sooner or later he was bound to be found out. Then of course he tolerated no rival, confident as he was of his own powers, thus he had in the end no colleagues, only subordinates, men, who, in the words of Taylor, had pinned their fate to his and had no resources with which to oppose him. Then of course he sold honors indiscriminately, not for the benefit of his political party, as he had essentially dispensed with one, but for himself. With the emergence of Labour, saving the two-party nature of British politics, Lloyd George became superfluous. He had risen during a time of national crisis, when that had passed, his allure faded. Lenin admired Lloyd George, according to Taylor, and even dedicated a book to him. Not surprisingly he points out, Lenin too jettisoned party doctrines and party comrades as well.

Of Churchill he is critical, as already noted, but when all is said and done, to extol his greatness as the prime minister who more than any other British prime ministers came to represent the national will during a time of supreme crisis. Taylor reminds us that it is easy to be critical in retrospect, it is quite something else to make decisions in real time without the hindsight of its consequences, something that is, I believe, not sufficiently stressed. The bombing of Germany was stupid, Taylor admits, it cost a lot and did not break the German spirit, just as little as the Blitz had softened the upper lips of the English. His preoccupation with the Mediterranean scene probably prolonged the war with two years, Taylor intimates, but how can you draw such categorical conclusions from counterfactual reasoning, an exercise that the author professes to disdain in the serious historian. As to the final months of the Second World War, Taylor points out that the Soviets were exhausted, and that it was the Allies that overstepped the agreed on zonal boundaries¹. As to the postwar situation, Taylor would be too old and demented to experience the fall of the wall, he resented the fact that the Russians were the only ones asked to compromise. What if, he suggests, the Russians would have offered to abandon their secret police and labour camps on the conditions that the Anglo-Saxon powers divest land and industrial production of private ownership.

As noted Taylor ends his collection with an essay on Manchester. The capital city of Lancashire, out of where he was grown, and to which he had a deep sentimental attachment. It was a city who had its heydays during the days of industrial growth, becoming a champion of the classless British Society and the home of a great newspaper - the Manchester Guardian. But the city deteriorated, its architecture becoming ugly and its seat of learning decaying, and the newspaper dropped the 'Guardian and moved their headquarters to London. Taylor did time in Manchester University, an institution and a city with which he was in spiteful love.

¹ The Soviet and American armies met at Torgau by Elbe, which was to be deep into the DDR.

