

## LORD ACTON

As Lord Acton died a few months before the British Academy received its Charter from the Crown, he cannot, in strictness, be described as one of its Fellows. But he had borne a leading part in the action taken to secure its creation: and he was universally recognized, not only as one who would have been selected to be among the first members, but also as a man qualified beyond almost any one else both by his attainments and by his wisdom to guide its policy in the earlier years of its course. He ought therefore to be commemorated, if not as a member, yet in a certain sense as a founder, of the body which he so warmly desired to see called into existence.

Born at Naples, January 10, 1834, he belonged to an old Roman Catholic family of Shropshire, settled at Aldenham, not far from Bridgnorth. His father, Sir Ferdinand Acton, was son of the General Acton who had been first Minister of the King of Naples in the beginning of the nineteenth century: his mother was heiress of the renowned house of Dalberg in the Rhineland. After receiving his earlier education at Oscott College, then directed by Dr. Wiseman, afterwards Catholic Archbishop of Westminster and Cardinal, he pursued his studies at Munich under Dr. von Döllinger, whose influence upon his mental habits and the development of his powers was deep and lasting, and with whom he maintained thereafter a close friendship. In 1865 he married the daughter of Count Arco Valley, and thereafter resided partly in Germany, partly in England, till his death, which occurred on June 19, 1902.

During three periods of his life he came into the world of action. The first was while he was a member of the House of Commons from 1859 till 1865. He spoke only once there, but watched all that passed with a keenly observant eye. The second period covers the months that immediately preceded and that saw the sittings of the Vatican Council of 1870, months during which he was one of the most active and most learned of those who were opposing the efforts made to procure the declaration of the dogma of Papal Infallibility. The third period began with his appointment as a Lord in Waiting to the Queen in Mr. Gladstone's ministry of 1895, and lasted for

three years. Though the duties of the post were purely ceremonial, he occasionally represented the Irish Office in the House of Lords, and he was in close and constant touch with the politics of those eventful years. It is always interesting to see how the men of thought and learning comport themselves in the current of practical life, but Lord Acton descended too little into the arena to enable a judgement to be formed. His powers were indeed not well adapted to English parliamentary politics. He knew too much to find himself in full agreement with any party. He was what may be called highly individual in his ideas. Perhaps he was too strenuous in his search for truth. The public sphere in which he might best have shone would have been that of diplomacy, for to an extraordinary familiarity with the courts and leading personages of Europe he added subtlety, clearness and firmness of judgement, easy yet dignified manners, and perfect tact.

These occasional entrances into the world of action were however only episodes, and did little more than give him a better comprehension of that world. Study and composition were the main business of his life. From early years he had set himself to create a library, and when he formed the plan of writing a History of Liberty which should trace the growth of great formative ideas through long centuries, he found a line of inquiry which directed his selection of books.

The great History of Liberty was never written, because the plan was too vast. Many a man with learning and power inferior to Lord Acton's might have treated the theme in a creditable and profitable way. Perhaps some one may yet do so. But his conception of the subject and of the way in which it ought to be handled required so wide a range of knowledge, not only of events but of books, and so strong a stream of thought directed to explain the tendencies that had been at work through many centuries of history, that to complete the task he had set himself would have needed the labour of a lifetime. Years passed while he was preparing himself for it, and while these years were passing, the habit of accumulating materials so grew upon him as to check the impulse to creation. At fifty he had not abandoned the hope of his youth, but at sixty it was gone: nor did he ever produce any single book which can stand as a worthy witness to his amazing gifts. In earlier days he had written copiously. Many articles of his in the *Home and Foreign Review*, and a few in the *North British Review*, are enumerated in the excellent bibliography of his writings compiled by Mr. W. N. Shaw. Latterly he wrote more slowly and

sparingly. Three essays in the *English Historical Review*, one on modern German historical writing, a second on the work of Döllinger, a third on Wilhelm von Giesebrecht, are the most important contributions to literature of his later years.

In 1895 he was appointed by the Crown, on the recommendation of Lord Rosebery, to the Chair of Modern History at Cambridge, and filled that post until his death. Though already an elderly man when he came to this new home and new duties, he quickly adapted himself to the conditions of the one and threw himself heartily into the discharge of the other. His lectures were carefully prepared and drew large audiences. He took a warm interest in his pupils, was easily accessible to them, advised them, answered their questions, became a living force in creating a new school of historians in Cambridge, historians in whom learning and thought were to go hand in hand, learning illumined by theory, and theory never separated from facts<sup>1</sup>. Hardly any misfortune has befallen an English university in our time greater than the premature loss of this illustrious scholar and teacher, who until the Act of 1871 could not, as a Roman Catholic, have held a professorial chair in an English University.

It was upon his learning that Lord Acton's fame among his contemporaries chiefly rested, because in that more than in anything else did he seem to overtop them. But the word 'Learning,' if it be taken simply to mean the possession of an immense store of knowledge, conveys no just notion of the nature and scope of his powers. What was most remarkable in him was not the mass of facts he knew and the number of books he had mastered<sup>2</sup>. It was the complete command he had of all his knowledge: it was the perfect order with which his resources were stored, and the power of bringing out of the treasure-house, at a moment's notice, things new and old as they were needed. It was the insight he had into the meaning of facts, the grasp of great principles running through and connecting facts and giving to them their true significance. He never seemed oppressed by his learning, nor indeed would any one have known, meeting him in ordinary society, that he was anything more than an accomplished and well-read man of the world.

His writing was always full and weighty, and in his earlier years

<sup>1</sup> Some remarks on Lord Acton's work as a University teacher, by Mr. W. A. J. Archbold of Cambridge, one of his pupils, follow this notice.

<sup>2</sup> Mr. H. R. Tedder, Librarian to the Athenaeum Club, has contributed a paper on Lord Acton as a master of books, which will be found at the end of this notice.

sufficiently clear. As he advanced in life it became more subtle, more allusive, and sometimes so overcharged with thought as to be obscure. He had formed the habit of making extracts from the books he read, and had, indeed, accumulated an enormous mass of such extracts, which he had arranged on slips of paper in cardboard boxes. His later articles abound in citations, which, by distracting the reader, sometimes perplex him more than they instruct him. A volume of his letters which has been recently published shows what admirable point and force his pen had when it ran straight on. They make one wish that he had been compelled to write, as one may say, against time, upon the great subjects which he was always preparing himself to treat of. So far from being a bookworm, he was not merely a man of the world for social purposes, fond of company and of talk, but was also keenly alive to whatever was passing in the public life of Europe. England was hardly more familiar to him than France, Germany, and Italy. His interest in politics, ecclesiastical and civil, was part of his interest in history. They were to him the same thing. In literature he cared most for what belonged to man and little for what belonged to nature. Dramatic poetry and fiction—for he was an assiduous reader of novels—attracted him more than lyric or epic or descriptive poetry. He studied philosophy, especially what may be called the more concrete side of philosophy, i. e. the philosophy of ethics, politics, and religion, more eagerly than pure metaphysics, and seemed nowise drawn towards the physical sciences. Neither did his friends discover in him any great love for the beauty of the external world, or any interest in its aspects. Human thought and human action occupied his mind almost to the exclusion both of art and of inanimate nature.

It may seem fanciful to connect this indifference to art with his dislike to rhetoric, which led him so far as to warn young students against the allurements of style. But that dislike had another and a deeper root. History is something different to every historian. To Acton it was above all things moral. He condemned alike the Relative School, which judges men's conduct by the standard of their time, and what may be called the Positive School, which judges by the results of the work a man has done. To him the moral standard was permanent and unchanging. Truth was sacred, and the truth of history lay not only in the exact ascertainment of what had happened, but also in the soundness of the judgement passed on the motives and character of the actors.

Accurate himself, and incomparably industrious in investigating a subject to the bottom, he had no indulgence for carelessness or

indolence in the examination and criticism of authorities. The standard of excellence which he set up was so high that few approached it. He would sometimes dismiss the successful work of an eminent writer with the remark, 'It contains nothing new.' If any one pleaded by way of excuse for not having exhausted all the sources of information available for the purposes of some inquiry that the time and labour required would have been disproportionate to any result to be expected, he would reply, 'That is to decline the character of a scientific historian.' But for the warmth of his appreciation of some great writers and great books, he might have seemed an altogether too stern and unappeasable critic. His published letters contain dicta regarding such eminent persons as Macaulay, J. H. Newman, and Thomas Carlyle which are startling in their severity; but these must not be pressed as conveying his deliberate opinions, for averse as he was to rhetoric, and judicial as the poise of his mind seemed, his power of expression sometimes ran away with him, and gave too sweeping a character to the condemnation of some particular defect. There was no constitutional asperity in him, no jealousy, no desire to belittle others. He stood far above that vile indulgence. There was often some tinge of moral displeasure in these grim deliverances, which only those who were familiar with his ideas could recognize. He was almost too austere a moralist, with an alarmingly keen insight into the weaknesses of human nature.

Though nearly everything which he wrote bore upon history, he was much more than a historian in the popular or conventional sense of the term. He had read widely and thought deeply upon theology, and upon the political sciences, including constitutional law, the philosophy of law, the foundations of government. It was, however, from the historical side that he preferred to deal with these topics. There is not much speculative thought in his writings, nor did he in talking start speculative hypotheses, but seemed occupied in trying to probe and test the views of others, and to bring facts as well as doctrines into their true relations. Many persons were surprised that such a master of Old Testament and New Testament criticism should nevertheless adhere to the dogmatic teachings of his church, and that one who had so unsparingly exposed some of the historical errors on which the Ultramontane scheme of papal power has by some of its defenders been made to rest, should nevertheless cling devotedly to his membership of the Roman communion. To him there was in this no inconsistency. He saw the church as a living and persistent whole, whose formulæ could not bear quite the same meaning to

a later generation which they had borne to an earlier, and which could never hope to express all the truth, an institution which ought to be obeyed and followed in spite of its imperfections, because the human forms in which divine ideas are embodied must be always imperfect. He was a pious Christian; and he would possibly have been as much out of sympathy with any form of Protestantism as he was with Vaticanism.

Acton's figure was a unique one in modern England. He was hardly more an Englishman, in respect of his love for liberty, order, and good sense, than he was a Frenchman in the fine edge of his wit, a German in his learning, an Italian in his flexibility. Few persons who have known so much have been so free both from pedantry, and from the wish to display their knowledge: few possessed of such powers have cared so little for the applause of the world; few have combined such a passion for freedom with so complete a sense of the dangers incident to freedom, and with so much reluctance to disturb the existing ecclesiastical and civil order. He has left less than his unrivalled gifts might have given us, had they been spurred by the ordinary impulses or ambitions of literary men. But he remains one of the most remarkable personalities of his time, whose way of thought has entered into and affected all those who had the good fortune to know him either as friends or as pupils.

JAMES BRYCE.

## LORD ACTON AS A CAMBRIDGE PROFESSOR

To throw oneself into new duties involving new habits and new associates must always be a dangerous experiment for a man past middle age. Especially so in the case of one who was thoroughly interested in his work, and who had so high a standard of what was due as had Lord Acton. His lectures worried him a good deal. Even when he repeated them he was constantly revising them, and spent more time in the revising than most men do in preparing. As a rule—there were notable exceptions—he disliked public speaking, so that he did not take pleasure in lecturing, although his lectures aroused extraordinary interest. On his arrival he was, as is customary, made a member of various Boards and Committees, and attended, usually silently and patiently. Occasionally a question would be put

to him and he would answer in the manner and language so peculiarly characteristic of him. On the whole it may be said that the public duties of his position were something of a burden.

But the impression he made upon Cambridge was profound and far-reaching. One has to go back to Thompson to find anything of the same kind of influence; or possibly to Whewell. Not that Lord Acton really compares with these men, for he does not, but there was in all three weight, force, motivity. Whewell and Thompson were academic types, and therefore marked with the necessary limitations arising from interests mainly centred in university politics. But Lord Acton when he became a don, whilst sharing in the common task, remained a member of the great world without, of a world too that extended very far both east and west. Probably it was this great experience of life, in conjunction with his own character, that made him so interesting to scholars of so many kinds. Cambridge is the temple of the specialist, and Lord Acton's friends were chosen from many fields of thought. As all will know who have studied his writings, he was much more than a historian, and nothing was more characteristic of him than the fire that he struck from the mathematician, the economist, or the man whose days are passed in the laboratory; unless perhaps it was the inspiration, the suggestion coming from wide cosmopolitan reading, the learning matured by thirty years of leisured thought, which he contributed. If Lord Acton was at a university party every man felt it and did his best. And yet he was so simple and good natured, his laugh told you that clearly enough, that all this was unconscious. It was the natural working of a powerful mind. But it was also the ascendancy of an experienced man of the world.

Those who have read the first essay in the *English Historical Review* will understand the reverence which all teachers of history in the University felt for Lord Acton, though they will not realize the effect of his artillery at short range. If to read that essay suggested to some Keats and Chapman's *Homer*, to talk with its author has been to many the beginning of a new intellectual life. With his wide definition of history he suggested, as he would have said, new angles to the most experienced. He took his stand in mid Europe, and knew whole literatures that were either unknown when he began to teach or at best were neglected. His learning was arranged. He co-ordinated authorities, traced the progress of ideas, furnished new illustrations. Who is there, of those who discussed such matters with him, who has not profited, for instance, by his masterly expositions of American constitutional history? He had none of

that contempt for old lights so characteristic of the half-illuminated enthusiast. He had valued and placed the great masters, and would not allow them to be dethroned. A young man would tell him that So-and-so was out of date. 'He taught me more than any one else on his subject,' would be the reply. But he was rarely so downright as this, because, being keenly sensitive, he was afraid of wounding others. He could on occasions meet you with a firm negation, but he preferred to make his opinion known by a quotation or an epigram; earnest people occasionally triumphantly carried away an impression of agreement which cooled on reflection. But words are cold to describe the wealth he poured out, the learning, the sympathy, the encouragement, the books lent, the letters written, the advice given, the wonderful patience with some, the good nature with all.

Undergraduates know a man when they see him, and they appreciated Lord Acton. They were frightened of him at first—a very excellent symptom—but they became his disciples even though they never lost their awe of him. It may be doubted whether the relations between a Professor and those *in statu pupillari* could have been better managed. He was always glad to see them and talk with them; some he kept to historical studies, who would have gone astray; some he taught at the proper stage to do original work. The undergraduate who is not in the first flight is in danger, especially if he be at a college where there are many ahead of him, of thinking his studies unimportant, a respectable task. Lord Acton's kindly word and obviously genuine interest often transfigured such men. He formed too a small historical society where papers were read and discussions took place; it became the centre of an influence of the most important kind on both teachers and pupils.

There is one word that must not be left unsaid. Every one who came in contact with Lord Acton here felt that as well as being a learned man and a delightful companion, he was sincerely and truly a good man. No one had less of the prig in him, and any morality he preached was taught rather indirectly than directly. But apart from the reverence without which there never was a good teacher, there was a simplicity of life, a nobleness of purpose, and a solid basis of principle of which all were conscious, even those who were incapable of fathoming the gulfs and drifts of his wonderful mind.

W. A. J. ARCHBOLD.



## LORD ACTON AS A BOOK-COLLECTOR.

I HAVE been asked to put on paper my recollections of Lord Acton as a book-collector and the founder of a great library. For this task I may possess some qualifications as I knew Lord Acton intimately for about thirty-three years, and in 1873 and 1874 enjoyed the honour of acting as his librarian. This association I shall always regard as one of the greatest privileges of my life.

Lord Acton collected books at an early age. He seems to have begun his intellectual career with the noble ambition of mastering two subjects, which indeed interested him to the very end. One was the history of liberty in ancient and modern times, and the other the history of the papacy, more particularly during the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. Inspired by the enthusiasm of Döllinger, he planned a course of study of extraordinary thoroughness. He ransacked all the bookshops of Europe, he bought whole libraries, and acquired by inheritance the old Dalberg collection at Herrnsheim. In course of time he accumulated about 60,000 volumes which overran the family mansion at Aldenham. His chief activity as a book-collector lasted about thirty years, that is to say from about the age of twenty to fifty. After he was fifty or thereabouts he still bought and read books, but they were mainly modern works. The same chronological division may be partly applied to his mental life. For thirty years he read original authorities with the industry of a Benedictine; during the last fifteen or sixteen years of his life he seemed to turn more to the nineteenth century. He began to be more curious to learn what his own contemporaries thought. He gave more attention to modern political and economical history than to the scrutiny of dry sixteenth- and seventeenth-century writers.

It is not for me to speak of Lord Acton's writings or of his professorial work at Cambridge. I shall always remember him best in his library, the collection and arrangement of which was the great achievement of his life. There have been more famous historians: in modern days there have been few scholars of equal learning. In mere dogged power of reading he rivalled the heroic Dutch and German students of the seventeenth century. Seen among his own books, so familiar to him that they appeared to be not mere bundles of paper and leather but sentient entities, he was a never-to-be-forgotten figure. A whole subject was before him in its literature. His knowledge of books went far beyond the facts to be found in bibliographical

treatises and literary histories. It was so complete and exact that he never seemed to be speaking of dead and forgotten writers, but of living persons. Gradually all his books grouped themselves into a mighty storehouse for the history of the great religious struggles of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. I cannot believe any person can have studied the history of this period so minutely and thoroughly as did Lord Acton. He possessed and had read all the books of the famous controversialists, he knew their lives as if he were of their own days, he followed them in their epistolary correspondence, he knew their friends, their living places, their education and the very formation of their ideas. He was acquainted not only with printed but also with MS. sources, for all European archives were familiar to him either in person or by deputy. His industry was colossal, and equalled by the rapidity with which he read. Knowing so much, he had the art of only looking for what was new to him. Nearly every volume in his collection bore his special marks—a pencil tick in the margin to indicate a salient fact, and a thin slip of paper for a point of more importance.

My own work at Aldenham was in the first instance to make a catalogue of the whole library, but this was interrupted by much reclassification on the shelves and the duty of turning out the duplicates, which ran to some thousands of volumes. Some other pieces of interesting work fell to my share. One instance may be mentioned. I had to make an index of all the letters and other MS. authorities used by Pallavicino in his *Istoria del Concilio di Trento*. This, by the way, is an illustration of Lord Acton's method. For his studies of the Council of Trent he had acquired from the Vatican and other archives copies of the original letters and diaries of the ecclesiastical dignitaries who attended the Council. He then intended to use my index to compare the authorities and to test the accuracy and trustworthiness of Pallavicino in writing his book. Lord Acton's own method in reading was to copy passages which specially interested him on slips of paper of a uniform size. Long lists of authorities were also written on similar slips and all arranged in a multitude of boxes under subjects.

It has been found necessary to reclassify the Acton Library in its new home at Cambridge, but I like to dwell in memory on the books as I recall them arranged under the eye and by the hand of the owner at Aldenham, where they formed a part of himself. Here on the left hand of the entrance hall was the study, where stood the bibliographical works, library catalogues, indexes of MSS. in all countries, which formed his working tools. From the entrance

hall one reached the saloon or billiard-room, a kind of inner hall, in which on the left hand were arranged English, Irish, Scottish and Colonial history with that of the United States, and on the right-hand side the history of the various states of the German Empire. There was a gallery above. The shelves of a large and a smaller drawing-room on the right of the entrance hall were filled with English, French, German, and Italian *belles-lettres*. From the drawing-room one passed through the dining-room to a small anteroom, in which was a large press full of copies of MSS. from the Vatican and other archives. One then entered the library proper, a fine cruciform apartment specially built nearly forty years ago. The great mass of the collection was in this large room, which was lighted by lantern lights and large French windows opening upon a formal garden. An iron gallery, also shelved with books, ran all round the walls. On entering one saw Greek and Latin classics on the one hand, and Fathers of the Church on the other. Turning to the left was a large recess devoted to the various Italian states. In the recess and elsewhere about the room were large upright stands with books on both sides. At the end facing the entrance door was French history and French local collections. Turning back to the entrance one found theology at the right hand with special sections devoted to ecclesiastical history, moral theologians, canon law, councils, the Inquisition, Jesuitica, indexes of prohibited books, the Massacre of St. Bartholomew, the Reformation, the Port Royalists, Jansenism, the French Huguenots, the Jews, liturgies and biblical controversy. In the gallery were universal, ancient, and oriental history, the history of Hungary, Holland, Scandinavia, Russia, Spain, Portugal, &c., letters and epistolary correspondence, jurisprudence, political economy, science, art, and geography. In the garrets were a great collection of pamphlets, periodicals, and the remainder of the Dalberg library.

Lord Acton was not a mere bibliomaniac, curious in title-pages and rarities. He knew and valued a fine book and had a taste for bindings, but he never despised an imperfect or shabby volume if it contained what he wanted. He used a handsome half morocco for clothing his unbound books, and indeed spared no money on the acquisition and upkeep of his treasures. His library contains not many rarities which would be highly priced in booksellers' catalogues, but it is full of very scarce books of no great pecuniary value. For this reason the probable selling price of the collection would be much less than the cost to its owner. Unfortunately, some years before Lord Acton's death he found it necessary to dispose of the great

library which had been the chief work of his life, and the collection was completely disorganized in the course of being shifted for the purpose of being catalogued for sale by auction. Before it came to the hammer, however, it was bought privately by Mr. Andrew Carnegie, who left it in Lord Acton's possession for life. It was then given by Mr. Carnegie to Mr. John Morley, and by him presented to Cambridge, where it is now being catalogued and arranged as a worthy memorial of a great historical scholar and an illustrious University Professor. Lord Acton's own estimate of the number of his books at about 60,000 volumes may probably considerably outnumber the collection now at Cambridge, as it included a vast number of duplicate, triplicate, and quadruplicate copies of favourite books, and it is possible that the library may have suffered in its travels.

With all his great acquirements Lord Acton was perhaps not seen at his best in formal literary composition. His pen seemed to be cramped by too much knowledge, and the clearness of the thought was hindered by excessive literary and historical allusion, but he was an admirable letter-writer, with a crisp style and delicate touch, wanting in his more serious writing. His chief charm was in his conversation. A fine presence, a most courtly manner, a thoroughly amiable and kindly nature gave added grace to rich and varied mental gifts, to extraordinary knowledge of books and men, to a wonderful aptness in quotation and illustration, to a keen interest in all modern phases of thought.

To have known Lord Acton was to respect and admire the man and the scholar. To remember him now is to regret the great loss which the learned world has sustained by his early death.

HENRY R. TEDDER.