

SIR GEORGE OTTO TREVELYAN,¹ BART.,
O.M., F.B.A.

1838-1928

MACAULAY born in 1800, George Otto Trevelyan in 1838, then the trio of Trevelyan sons, Charles, Robert, and George Macaulay, the last born in 1876—few families in England can show such consistent achievement and success in literature and public life as these three generations of one family extending over more than a century and a quarter; there is even a fourth now knocking at the door of historical literature. In the last year of his life Macaulay, essayist, poet, historian, and statesman, saw and gave his warm approval to the first essay in Cambridge satire published as a freshman by his Trinity nephew. Sir George himself, more fortunate, lived to see his eldest son in the Cabinet, his second a notable poet, and his youngest recognized as among the greatest of living English historians. All three generations have maintained that characteristic tradition of some of the greatest English writers—Chaucer, Bacon, Milton, Addison, Gibbon, to name only a few—who seem to have written all the better for being also public-spirited citizens and men of affairs. Even had he never written his *Essays*, his *Lays* and his *History*, Macaulay would have won fame as a great administrator in India and a notable orator and statesman in Parliament. Sir George not only wrote one of the best biographies and one of the best interpretations in our language of eighteenth-century politics and society, but, like his uncle, took a distinguished part in the government of the country; while, during the War, and in many public activities, both before and since, Professor Trevelyan has taken his due share in administration and in promoting public objects. At any

¹ This memoir is based on an article published in *The Times Literary Supplement* on 23 August 1928.

rate, Macaulay and the two George Trevelyan have adopted the spirit of Gibbon's remark that 'the captain of the Hampshire Grenadiers was not useless to the historian of the Roman Empire'.

The second link in this remarkable family chain was removed by the death of Sir George Trevelyan, a member of the Academy since 1906, at the ripe age of over ninety. Born in 1838, after Harrow he naturally went to Trinity, Cambridge, where his uncle had kept in rooms in Great Court, religiously appropriated by successive members of the family, down to the latest generation, Macaulay's great-great-nephews. Though second in the First Class in Classics, to his lasting regret he skipped a generation by not obtaining a Fellowship of Trinity; but even earlier than Macaulay he showed his happy turn for society verses. His two Cambridge skits, the *Cambridge Dionysia* of 1858 and *Horace at the University of Athens* of 1861, are still amusing even to those who have not been to Cambridge, as is testified by their republication in *Interludes in Verse and Prose*, first issued in 1905 and again in 1912 and 1924. This is partly due to the admirably witty notes that explain dark allusions to the profane, and to the rollicking knock-about fun of such incidents as that of the drunken Trinity sizar who went into St. John's, and after successfully dancing 'on an inflated pigskin' was given a flagon of St. John's ale, 'but when he had tasted, he cursed, and spit, and swore no Trinity shoeblack would condescend to drink it'. Even riper in 1861 becomes the humour of *Horace at the University of Athens*, where we are told:

We still consume, with mingled shame and grief,
Veal that is tottering on the verge of beef,
Veal void of stuffing, widowed of its ham,
Or the roast shoulder of an ancient ram.

A delightful paper on 'An Ancient Greek War', delivered in 1866 to literary societies at Edinburgh and Newcastle, attests the soundness of Trevelyan's classical learning, which, as in the case of Macaulay, was no mere envelope to be cast

aside after the Tripas, but became a lasting joy and means of recreation throughout his life. Like his uncle, he delighted during his moments of leisure at Wallington in reading and re-reading the classics, both Latin and Greek and those of our own country, and annotating them with pungent notes. Even now the illustration of the Peloponnesian War by imagining 'a jealousy to spring up between the borough of the Falkirk district and the boroughs of the Stirling district, in consequence of the authorities of the latter community having assessed to poor rates the sacred soil of Bannockburn', is illuminating, especially with the ingenious elaboration of the comparison; while the penetrating analysis of the chief elements in Greek life already reveals the statesman's eye for essentials. But this was his last published work on academic or purely classical topics. Already in 1863, two years after his degree, he had been preparing for a Parliamentary career by acting as private secretary to his father, Sir Charles, then Financial Member of Council in India. One year he spent in India, but that year was extraordinarily fruitful in its resulting output of literature, which comprised the *Letters of a Competition Wallah* and a comedy, *The Dawk Bungalow*, published in 1863, and *Cawnpore*, published in 1865. These three works do not profess to give any conception of the Indian point of view; but the first two were considered at the time so accurate and convincing a picture of Anglo-Indian society that it seemed to many Anglo-Indians inconceivable that Trevelyan had not himself spent several years in the Indian Civil Service. His description in the *Competition Wallah* of the Service of his day, with its boundless liberty, its good pay, its security and its sense of deep responsibility acquired even by the youngest civilians, may not be so true in all particulars to-day as it was in 1863, but at any rate it sets up a standard of English public life which for the last hundred years or more has been regarded among us as the ideal of public work. Discussing the choice of a profession by those who think that life should be one long education . . . and

that any one who wishes to preserve a high tone of thought and a mind constantly open to new impressions must look for a calling which is an education in itself. . . . Such [he adds] is pre-eminently the career of a Civil servant in India. There is no career which opens out such certain and splendid prospects to honourable ambition. But, better far than this, there is no career which so surely inspires men to do something useful in their generation—to leave their mark upon the world for good, and not for evil. The public spirit among the servants of the Government at home is faint compared with the fire of zeal which glows in every vein of an Indian official.

No wonder, as Trevelyan said with pardonable pride, some of his contemporaries were drawn by these 'Letters' into a service of which they have been bright ornaments. But undoubtedly the best of his Indian pieces is *Cawnpore*, a serious attempt, written only eight years after the event, to reconstitute, from official documents and oral testimony, a picture of the moving events in that long-drawn-out tragedy. It may be admitted that in some parts the narrative would be more effective for some compression; to-day too we should be more inclined to seek for some deeper explanation of the Indian attitude than Trevelyan thought it necessary to look for. It is not, indeed, all one-sided; it does point out many of the weak points in our military system that rendered the Mutiny possible, and a few native loyalists are picked out for eulogy. But above all it displays for the first time in Trevelyan, barely twenty-seven years old when he wrote it, the family gift for marshalling intricate and in themselves confusing details so as to give a limpidly clear and arresting account of the main facts; and on occasion it shows a power of rapid, telling description, especially in the episode of Neill's energetic march to Cawnpore, that his famous uncle would not have disowned.

Already, however, Trevelyan had been meditating a political career, such as even Macaulay himself had found incompatible with his best literary work; in 1865, the year of the publication of *Cawnpore*, he obtained a seat for Tynemouth on the Whig side, and for thirty-two years he

remained in the House of Commons. In politics one of his most cherished aims, as with Macaulay, as with his son Charles, was that no one, however poor, should be shut out from the highest benefits of education; in addition, during a large part of his political career he was absorbed either in departmental duties as a member of the Government or in almost equally exacting preoccupations on the Front Opposition Bench. But for two years only, perhaps, between 1882, when he succeeded the murdered Lord Frederick Cavendish as Secretary for Ireland, and 1884, were his duties in office so strenuous and absorbing that they gave him no time or opportunity for literary work, then or for long afterwards. Yet though he began publishing historical work again in 1909, at the age of seventy-one, all his best work had been accomplished by 1880, the year when the *Early History of Charles James Fox* was published. Literature, indeed, is a hard taskmaster, as also are politics when taken seriously, and perhaps few besides Macaulay have been able after a hard spell of the latter to recall the spring and enthusiasm needed for the former. And even in Macaulay's case his difficulties in politics were child's play compared to those two strenuous years of Trevelyan's in 1882-4. But at any rate a modicum of practical experience in current politics and a vigorous appreciation of the humours and joys of social life, such as Trevelyan possessed almost from the outset, are the best preparation for the kind of historical writing to which, following his uncle's example, he turned.

First, however, he had once more shown, in a wider field than Cambridge, his happy knack for light society verse.

My dear Miss White, forbear to weep
Because the north-west breezes keep
At anchor off Rangoon
That youth who, richer by a lac,
May safely be expected back
Before the next monsoon—

so sang he during his Indian years. In London, stirred by the rejection of Gladstone's Reform Bill of 1866, he published

the *Modern Ecclesiastusae* in the following year. In this, his last published verse, the best things are the delightful description, in the Praed manner, of the still small and exclusive society of London; the Aristophanic chorus—

We must revere our sires, who were a mighty race of men.

They set those meddling people down for Jacobins or fools
Who talked of Public Libraries and grants to Normal Schools;
Since common folks who read and write and like their betters
speak,
Want something more than pipes and beer and sermons once a
week;

and the Macaulayese passage—

A moment yet with shivered blade, torn scarf and pennon reft,
Imperial Gladstone turned to bay amidst our farthest left,
Where shoulder tight to shoulder set, fought on in sullen pride
The veterans staunch who drink the streams of Tyne and Wear
and Clyde.

Then came the two works which have made Trevelyan's reputation as a man of letters—*The Life and Letters of Macaulay* and *The Early History of Charles James Fox*, published, during the comparative leisure of the Beaconsfield Administration, within four years of one another, in 1876 and 1880. The *Macaulay* is no doubt frankly uncritical, as one might expect from a nephew writing about a beloved and indulgent uncle. But it is none the worse for that. Macaulay not only was a great writer and historian, but he was successful in all he touched; to treat this great, rollicking, genial character in a critical spirit would have given an entirely inappropriate idea of him: as it is, Trevelyan's biography is one of the best in the language, inasmuch as it gives so lifelike and sympathetic an account of this generous and successful man.

Of his historical writings little can be added to the masterly estimate given in his Raleigh lecture of 1928 by the President of the Academy. *The Early History of Charles James Fox* was the first instalment of what

Trevelyan intended to make his main historical work, a life of the great Whig hero, Charles James Fox. But it was not planned as a mere biography, rather as a picture of the whole eighteenth-century scene as a background to Fox, the hero of the piece. This first instalment is almost entirely taken up with the setting of the scene. Fox himself appears very little, and then only in his unregenerate Tory days, a phase brought to an end by the due punishment for his impertinences, that famous letter in which North wrote that he had failed to perceive Fox's name in the new Commission for the Treasury which it had pleased the King to issue. But in the setting of the scene the book is a masterpiece. Trevelyan had obviously not made deep researches into the unpublished records of the period, but he had read his Walpole and all the diaries and most of the literature of the day, and from his uncle was steeped in the traditions of Holland House. Saturated with their spirit, he could play with the characters of the time, as if they were familiar living acquaintances, and always had at his fingertips the bit of gossip or the scandalous story aptly to illustrate a man or the manners of his great little world. He brings out, as no other historian has done, the almost unique condition of English politics and society of the eighteenth century, when a few powerful families with their hangers-on monopolized the plums of office and of sinecures as a matter of course, so that it became almost a matter of chance if a man capable of government rose to the responsibilities of office. He luxuriates in the humours of a Chancellor like Northington, of a High Steward of Cambridge like Sandwich, of a frankly cynical place-hunter like Rigby and his friends of the Bloomsbury gang, of that 'poor dumb creature' the Prime Minister Rockingham, or of that plausible scoundrel Wilkes. But always at the back of his mind you feel that he is preparing himself for the contrast to all this self-interested world which he means to bring out when he comes to the regenerated Fox. Even in this volume he gives a foretaste of what he can do in the way of dramatic changes in the few telling

paragraphs, more impressive than pages of description, in which he recounts that wonderful and terrible scene at Court when one far greater than ever Fox became, the great Earl of Chatham, suddenly appears with his flashing eye and all his haughty bearing before a world that thought and hoped he was dead to all its interests, and when for the last time he makes his portentously humble bow within the Closet. This joyful book has not merely had readers by the thousands, it has also produced writers. So contagious is the charm and fascination of eighteenth-century politics and social life as they appear in it, that others have been tempted, less successfully indeed, to quarry in the mine from which Trevelyan had already extracted the richest nuggets.

Trevelyan never wrote anything equal to this, and waited twenty-nine years more before publishing the next instalment of his life of Fox, in the form of the four volumes of his *American Revolution*, followed in 1912-14 by the two volumes of his *George III and C. J. Fox*. It is indeed remarkable that, especially after so long an interval, a man turned seventy-six should still be producing books requiring the labour and displaying the powers of description involved in these six volumes. And they contain much attractive writing. Trevelyan's cunning in clear description of a scene or a movement of popular feeling, in hitting off a character and in explaining the intricate movements of a campaign or a battle, was still almost unimpaired. But though these volumes still show his capacity for voracious reading and for retaining the effective points of what he has read, they show more saliently than the *Early History* the absence of original research and of a scrupulous weighing of evidence, since they deal with a period over which controversy still wages and on which authoritative opinion is above all essential. Again, while one was prepared, owing to the brilliant setting of the stage, to put up in the first volume with Fox's fugitive appearances, it is less excusable that in these last volumes the hero does not dominate the scene.

As it is, they fall between two stools. We should have welcomed an authoritative and impartial account of the American Revolution from one of Trevelyan's eminence; still more should we have welcomed such a biography of Fox as we had been led to hope for, since Fox's life has never yet had the brilliant exposition needed to justify the worship with which his Whig admirers have always regarded him. That, alas! we do not get, and Trevelyan was perhaps the last in the true Whig tradition—he said when he entered Parliament that he had hoped to have the honour of serving under Palmerston—who could have given us such a life with the knowledge and enthusiasm required. On the other hand, his account of the Revolution suffers from that very Whig tradition which he held so dear. His hatred for George III's policy and his determination to prove the Whig dogs right led him not only to under-estimate what can be said for the King's point of view and for the popularity of the war in England, which can hardly be said to have failed until Yorktown itself, but also greatly to exaggerate the virtues and the honesty of some of the American leaders, and of the strength of their supporters in the Colonies. As an achievement these last six volumes are interesting and indeed remarkable, but for their intrinsic merit they add little to their author's reputation as an historian. Nevertheless, Trevelyan remains notable in a notable family of writers and men of affairs not only for the joyful ease and fun of his early verses, for his impressive account of Cawnpore, for his almost perfect biography of Macaulay, and for the rich and stimulating *Early History*, but also for the deep interest he maintained almost to the end in all that was afoot in the literary, and especially the historical, world, and for his sympathetic encouragement of young men who showed a capacity to carry on the torch of sound, honest, and effective historical writing.

B. W.