

Edward Augustus Freeman: Making history

In October 2015, the British Academy published a volume of essays about the eminent Victorian historian, Edward Augustus Freeman (1823-1892).

In a discussion recorded in December 2015 to explore why Freeman is such an intriguing character, **Diarmaid MacCulloch Kt FBA** (Professor of the History of the Church, University of Oxford) put questions to the two editors of the volume, **Alex Bremner** (Senior Lecturer in Architectural History, University of Edinburgh) and **Jonathan Conlin** (Senior Lecturer in Modern British History, University of Southampton).

Who was Edward Augustus Freeman, and what sort of man was he?

He was a man of very outspoken opinions. He is perhaps known today largely for his *magnum opus* – *The History of the Norman Conquest of England* (Figure 1). However, as a medievalist colleague of mine described him, he is not so much the founding father of medieval studies, as the deranged great-uncle that – for your own sanity as well as his safety – you have walled up into your attic.

He was a great Victorian historian, who became Regius Professor at the University of Oxford. But when you start probing a bit more, he isn't exactly the sort of figure who would be seen as the ideal of a modern academic. In fact, he didn't spend most of his life in the university.

He didn't spend much of his time in libraries either.

That came up in one or two essays, and fascinated me. What is behind that, do you think?

Freeman was very much a member of the Somerset squirearchy. And he was very much a *paterfamilias* who – like other Victorians such as Gladstone – used their children and other members of their family as unpaid research assistants. It was a household built around his project, entirely subservient to churning out the volumes of his *magnum opus*, with their hundreds of footnotes and appendices, year after year.



Dr Jonathan Conlin and Dr Alex Bremner met the Reverend Professor Diarmaid MacCulloch Kt FBA at Trinity College, Oxford, to talk about the intriguing Victorian historian, Edward Augustus Freeman – in the shadow of his portrait.

So he is a bit like Darwin – changing the world in his study, rather than in the context of a university. And in one of your essays there is reference to him as 'a freelance historian and journalist'.¹ That essay emphasised the extraordinary volume of journalism that he brought out.

Stuart Jones points out that, for all the disdain Freeman might have expressed for journalistic approaches to history, his income from journalism was important for maintaining his life at his home 'Somersleaze' near Wells in Somerset. He could not have maintained the lifestyle to which he wanted to become accustomed had it not been for the fees that he received from the *Saturday Review*, the *Contemporary Review* and other periodicals.

In that sense he is rather a modern figure: he would have loved the internet. I was intrigued by the extraordinary mosaic of his opinions and interests.

In many respects Freeman is typical of the educated, Victorian elite of his time in having a view on most

1. Chapter 16: H.S. Jones, 'Historical mindedness and the world at large: E.A. Freeman as public intellectual', fn 13 (quoting Peter McNiven).

things worth pontificating about. He is certainly someone whose mind was very active, and that comes across very clearly in his letters. He was always musing about various topics and subjects, and you get the sense he really did want to express his opinion about these things, which is why he took to journalism in a big way.

Freeman was also born at the right time. The high Victorian period was a sweet spot in the development of various academic disciplines. You had the emergence of new 'sciences' – as history claimed to be – but they had not yet reached that point of specialisation where they had developed a jargon which would render their discussions impenetrable to a wider audience. An excellent example of this is the periodical named *The Nineteenth Century*, edited by James Knowles, which first appeared in 1877 and was the forum for high Victorian intellectual debate. This was perhaps the last moment at which it was still possible for the leading minds shaping subjects such as sociology or history to contribute an article – and feel that it was part of their duty to do so – in a form that was also accessible to a well-informed readership.

There is a rather amusing and entertaining essay on Freeman's visit to the United States.² It wasn't a terribly happy visit, was it?

There was a sense in which – as all British fans of the 'special relationship' are wont to do – Freeman was casting his American audience in a certain role, putting them in certain clothes which they did not recognise as their own, but which he insisted were those of a shared English national costume. Obviously, for the Irish-American community of the lower east side of Manhattan and other immigrant communities not from 'the old country' (as Freeman would see it), this was not very welcome at all. The idea of America as a melting pot was much cherished by them – a place where Old World identities were to be discarded, and a new identity was to be created in this crucible. Also, there was the very vital American belief, which they still have today, that 1776 was year zero: ideas of liberty were unknown until Washington and Jefferson taught us what they really meant. Therefore, for Freeman to come along and say '1776 is not the key date; it is 1066 that you should be thinking of' (and, patting them on the back in a rather patronising way, say 'You're doing an excellent job, keep at it; in a sense you are reliving our past, chopping down the trees of the Rocky Mountains as our Germanic ancestors did in the Teutoburger Wald') would not have gone down very well.

The theme of religion was clearly present all through his life. Perhaps that is the most difficult thing for a modern audience to grasp.

Freeman was someone who from an early age was very interested in the church, church history and the Bible. It is easy for us to forget just how important religion was to the Victorian frame of mind. As Theodore Hoppen noted, 'Never was Britain more religious than in the Victorian age.'

2. Chapter 6: Jonathan Conlin, 'The consolations of Amero-Teutonism: E.A. Freeman's tour of the United States, 1881–2'.

THE HISTORY
OF THE
NORMAN CONQUEST OF ENGLAND,

ITS CAUSES AND ITS RESULTS.

BY
EDWARD A. FREEMAN, M.A.

LATE FELLOW OF TRINITY COLLEGE.

VOLUME III.

THE REIGN OF HAROLD AND THE INTERREGNUM.

Quum ingressus fueris terram quam Dominus Deus tuus dabit tibi et possederis eam, habitaverisque in illa, et dixeris; Constituum super me Regem, sicut habent omnes per circuitum nationes; eum constitues quem Dominus Deus tuus elegerit de numero fratrum tuorum. Non poteris alterius gentis hominem Regem facere, qui non sit frater tuus.—Deut. xvii. 14, 15.

Oxford;
AT THE CLARENDON PRESS.
M.DCCC.LXIX.

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Figure 1 Edward Augustus Freeman's great work, *The History of the Norman Conquest, its Causes and its Results*, was published in six volumes between 1867 and 1879. This is the title page of Volume III, published in 1869.

For Freeman, religion was also wrapped up in a cultural sense of progress through time. In the writing of his mentor Thomas Arnold, who had also been Regius Professor, there was the notion that we had reached the third stage of a historical relay race – Greece handing on the cultural baton to Rome, which was then handed on to the Teutons and the Britons. So there was a millenarian streak, the idea that we were approaching the end times. This is something profoundly strange to today's historians – the idea that the world has been created by God, certain actors have been given their assigned roles and, when the drama has been played out, that is the end.

What makes his history much less cerebral than it otherwise might be is his interest in architecture. Can you say something about Freeman as an architectural historian?

From his early days at the University of Oxford, Freeman became mixed up in the formation of what would become the Oxford Architectural Society. This group was



Figure 2
From left to right: G.G. Scott, E.A. Freeman, and Freeman's wife, Eleanor, on a visit to St David's Cathedral, Pembrokeshire, c.1876. Photo: © Crown Copyright, Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales.

formed in 1839 alongside a sister group at the University of Cambridge, and both of these organisations were concerned with dealing with the material dimensions of the Oxford Movement. This involved issues of liturgy, but also consideration of what proper Christian and religious architecture was. This aesthetic element attracted Freeman.

Freeman believed, like his mentor Thomas Arnold, in the idea of 'the unity of history'. Church architecture had a certain underlying spirit to it, which could be read in its overall planning, its overall massing. Freeman is way ahead of his time in the way he interprets architecture to tell a historical story, what these days we might call 'the material turn' in history. Freeman is doing this back in the 1840s, and this would not become mainstream in the history of architecture until sometime in the 20th century. And because he was ahead of his time in this respect, his ideas fell flat. This was partly because he was competing against the great architectural orator of the time, John Ruskin, who had whipped up a great deal of

enthusiasm with the publication of *The Stones of Venice*, and before that *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* – which appeared pretty much at the same time as Freeman's *A History of Architecture*. This explains why he despised Ruskin.

Freeman writes about the Gothic style as being almost an animate object, something like a tree that is growing, which is being manipulated and used by different races – sometimes successfully, e.g. when moulded by 'the plastic hand of the Northman', and sometimes unsuccessfully, e.g. by the Saracens (as he would call them) who actually invented the pointed arch of the Gothic style. In the end he becomes the champion of one of the greatest Victorian architects, George Gilbert Scott (Figure 2), in his efforts to get his way with the design of the new Foreign Office in London. Freeman comes out in defence of Scott like no other person in the world of British architecture, and he really presents himself as a champion of the Gothic Revival cause in that so-called battle of the styles between Classical and Gothic.

I was interested that his son-in-law was Arthur Evans, the great archaeologist.

Freeman was certainly someone fascinated by walking the ground on which historical actors had trod and on which battles such as that of Hastings (which he insisted we call the Battle of Senlac) had been fought. He was an inveterate traveller, though not necessarily the most cheerful of companions for those that were forced to travel western Europe with him.

One of the most striking appointments that Freeman made was of William Boyd Dawkins – whom we know as a natural scientist – to be, in Freeman's words, 'geologist to *Norman Conquest*'. It seems extraordinary to have a historian writing about the 10th, 11th and 12th centuries who feels that he needs a geologist to help him understand how the rocks on which the characters moved had been formed. There is a sense in which he almost sees certain landscapes as only existing or only justifying their existence as the backdrop for historical events.

It is strikingly modern this interest in the material and the sense of place, a really impressive dimension of the man. Less impressive is his great obiter dictum, the phrase that was inscribed on the wall at Johns Hopkins University, 'History is past politics and politics is present history'. It sounds good, but what on earth does it mean?

This again is 'the unity of history'. I think one of the most surprising things that Freeman says is that 'the past and the present are alike realities.' We as historians can be more present in historical events than those who were actually there could be. This is not simply because we have hindsight, but also because we have a historical mind and a certain intuition. It is not about having technical historical expertise. It is an authority that comes with historical mindedness, and it can allow us to recognise patterns as they happen in a way that those whom we would call eyewitnesses could not.

He ended up in a very conventional role in the University of Oxford. How did that happen?

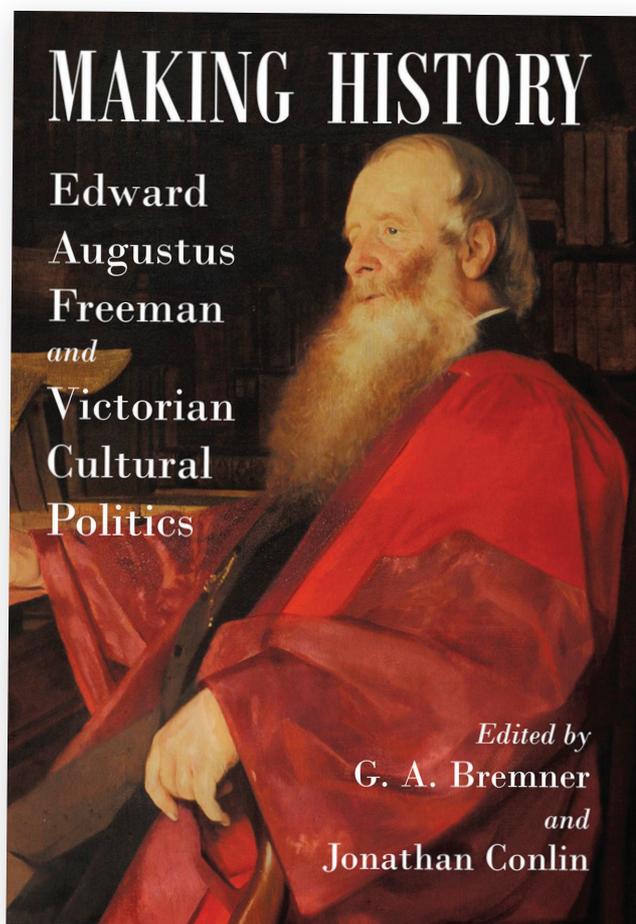
It happened way too late. He had felt himself to be the natural choice for the Regius Chair twice before he actually received it. When he did finally get this glittering prize that he had been yearning for, it was something of a disappointment to him. He never filled any of the large lecture halls that he hoped to fill, unlike his predecessors at Oxford and his equivalents at Cambridge – such as Goldwin Smith or Charles Kingsley, historians whom he did not consider worthy of the name. He was also suffering from poor health at this point, so the realisation of the dream was not as happy as I am sure he had depicted to himself when he first began writing *The History of the Norman Conquest* several decades before.

In the end, what is Freeman's legacy to us?

Freeman perhaps remains ahead of his time in seeing history as something that is not about the strangeness or the otherness of the past. As L.P. Hartley famously said, 'The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.' Freeman thought the exact opposite of that. Today we are very nervous when history is too marked by ownership – when it is claimed by one group, whether it is a class or a nation state or, God forbid, a race, and is seen as a possession denied to others. Though we may not go as far as Freeman does, it is important to remind ourselves that history *is* a human possession, and also a national possession. It was ever thus and will always be so, even if there are people who want to try and give us that purely objective history which Freeman fought against for his entire career.



This article is an edited version of the conversation. A longer version can be heard via www.britishacademy.ac.uk/freeman/



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