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Acton, Döllinger and History
by
Owen Chadwick

Owen Chadwick is emeritus professor of modern history at Cambridge and was formerly professor of church history there. He has long been familiar with the Acton Library and the Acton papers. His Creighton Lecture was published as Acton and Gladstone (Athlone Press, 1976.). His latest publication is Britain and the Vatican during the Second World War (Cambridge University Press, 1987).

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Döllinger of Munich and Acton of Cambridge: father and son, teacher and disciple; Acton, as a Catholic critic once said, only a pale reflection of Döllinger. German scientific history in its Catholic form passes by this route and generates English scientific history in its liberal form; an important stage in English historical writing; an important side of German intellectual influence on the English; its new standards of scientific history, its new attention to documents and archives, its encouragement of the polymath as well as of the specialist.

So the more liberal, anti-Prussian side of South German Catholicism helped to generate, not English Catholic history, not English church history, but a big school of British historians, especially those centred upon Cambridge, which flourished between 1902 and 1939. It consisted not only of Acton's direct pupils – R. V. Laurence, J. N. Figgis, G. P. Gooch, J. H. Clapham, G. M. Trevelyan, H. C. Gutteridge. It reached out more widely, so that a younger historian like Herbert Butterfield needed to spend much of his life wrestling with Acton, his personality, his historical outlook, and his moral commitment.

In this lecture I aim to show that this picture of a simple influence of German liberal history upon British liberal history by the extraordinary and unlooked-for route of two Catholic minds is only to be countenanced with much hesitation.

We need to begin with the famous breach between them of 1879. Dupanloup, the Bishop of Orléans, died on 11 October 1878. Dupanloup had been one of Acton's spiritual guides when he was young. They were close allies together during the great fight in Rome of 1869-70, the Catholic fight to stop the Pope from being declared formally to be infallible. When the Vatican Council declared the Pope to be infallible under certain conditions, Dupanloup submit-

ted to the decree. That ended the friendship between Acton and Dupanloup.

When Dupanloup died, Döllinger's other extraordinary pupil and disciple, Charlotte von Leyden who became Charlotte Lady Blennerhassett, wrote an appreciation for the English periodical *The Nineteenth Century*. Appreciations of the dead were things which Charlotte Blennerhassett could do with a mixture of critical power and sensitive appreciation. Her notice of Dupanloup¹ said good things about him. She asked Döllinger to write a preface to the notice. He sent her a letter. She printed the letter with the article. It said that the article was original and important; that he had known the bishop personally for twenty-five years, and could vouch for the truth of the appreciation. This amounted to a public statement by Döllinger that he saw a lot of good in Bishop Dupanloup. That was a proposition which an untroubled mind could not fail to accept.

Acton's mind was not untroubled. It took about two years for this utterance to sink into the depths of his consciousness. Any bishop who had been against infallibility and afterwards accepted it with seeming ease was to Acton now a traitor; or rather, a man who pretended to believe something which he did not believe, and therefore was playing with truth. Every such person in Acton's eyes – and some of them were big men, a Newman, a Hefele, a Theiner – was, if not a betrayer, at least corrupt. Because they professed publicly to believe what they did not believe, they embodied in his eyes all the worst sides of the history of Catholicism; apologists, for the sake of the institution, of what was not true. That linked them with everyone who thought that the Church did so much good that if you did good to the Church you could compromise your morality; and so it set them with the inquisitors. By convolution of mind he found in his heart the conviction that even his master Döllinger was compromising; and that he was near

the doctrine that the end justifies the means. Until 1879 Döllinger was Acton's father-figure, his guru, as well as his historical guide. For the next eleven years till Döllinger died, he was still the dear professor and a friend to Acton. But he had lost all the quality of father-figure and guru.

The situation was very curious. It was not intelligible when we first knew about it, and it is still unintelligible now that Victor Conzemius has laid out before us all the letters that passed between them – not quite all the letters because there is more than one obvious gap in the correspondence.² The situation was very curious because of Acton's own position. Döllinger, a Catholic priest, had been excommunicated for refusing to accept the Vatican decrees. Acton, a Catholic layman, had not been excommunicated. Archbishop Manning of Westminster wanted Rome to threaten Acton with excommunication. Acton's own bishop troubled him more moderately. He had made his opinion of contemporary Rome very plain in letters to *The Times*. But the situation was nevertheless very curious. Acton wrote letters to the two English bishops which evaded their demands, with verbal honesty, though only just with verbal honesty, in the strong desire to avoid excommunication. The years 1874-6 were the years when we find forcible utterances from Acton that to him membership of the Catholic Church was a matter of life and death. Of course that need not mean what many of the public might take it to mean. Döllinger the excommunicate was quite serene in still being a member of the Catholic Church. The excommunication was improper, illegal under canon law, and certainly (in his opinion) did not eject him from the Church.

Here is the oddity of the unexcommunicated layman being far more bitter against the hierarchy than the excommunicated priest. For the first time Acton began to ask himself critical questions about his master in the science of history; questions not only about his personal or

ecclesiastical attitude, but about his historical ideals and his historical methods.

Döllinger was less than tactful in trying to heal the breach. It is chiefly a difference of age, he said. I am forty years older than you. Forty years ago I used to make fierce judgements on people's characters and deeds. You will grow out of it in time. (Acton was already forty-seven years old.) Then, said Döllinger, we are of a different class in society. You were born with a silver spoon in the mouth, a citizen of the world. I was born in a narrow and provincial environment made narrower by hierarchy. I know more about prejudice than you do and so I am readier to forgive when I find it in other historians. Acton was so struck by this sentence that he wrote it down on a card in his card-index for use in that biography of Döllinger which he meant to write and never wrote. Neither conceded anything. Döllinger to Acton, 7 February 1881: 'I am sure you will come to agree with me.' Acton to Döllinger, 11 February 1881: 'I am sure you will come to agree with me.'

As the argument went on – it went on and on and on – a gulf began to appear which was not the original gulf. The original gulf was moral – you taught me when I was young that Catholicism is the truth and now I find you compromising about truth, my idol has thus far feet of clay. The new gulf which began to appear was intellectual. Once we concede that the idol has feet of clay and we start looking at him with a more critical eye, we start to ask not just whether the moral attitude is correct, but whether the truths for which he stands are in fact truths, and whether his methods of historical enquiry are the best methods of historical enquiry.

The basic difference growing between them rested at bottom in a difference about religion. Döllinger had been cast out of his Church. But he remained a Catholic priest: in feeling, sympathy, doctrine, loyalty. He opened his mind more to other traditional Christian denominations, Luther-

an, Anglican, Orthodox, Old Catholic, though he was never much of a participator in Old Catholicism and was blamed by its leaders for his lukewarm behaviour. He remained a Catholic ecclesiastical historian with a scientific spirit like that of the leading Old Catholic academics. His chief aims were now the reunion of all the true Catholic churches, and the reformation of moral ideas within the Churches. But Acton, who had not been cast out of the Church, was moving out of Catholicism; not in feeling perhaps, not in attitudes to history and society, and as time went on perhaps not in the practice of religion. At no point in his life would he have denied, when he was asked, that he was a Catholic. But he began to profess theories which sat more loosely to Catholic tradition than those of any other professed Catholic of the nineteenth century. And it was this very circumstance which helped to turn him into the force which he grew to be upon English Protestant historiography.

Thanks to the new letters we can chronicle these changes, though only in part. Here are some instances of what Acton now had to say, things he would never have said in what we might now call his true 'Catholic' period:

I never blame error or heresy in thinking. I have untroubled friendships with Protestants, agnostics and atheists. I understand how people can be legitimists or socialists and do not reproach them (undated, about 1881).

I was guilty, when I was younger, of naive enthusiasms – for men like Newman, or Montalembert (undated, about 1881).

Why has this breach between us happened? You, an excommunicated man, wanted not to look like someone out for revenge. And your society in Munich is of good heads and you do not meet humanity in its variety. You lived among Catholics, I among Protestants. The opinions of Rothe or Baur interested me more than the opinion of 500 bishops at a Council, probably because I was less interested in dogma (same letter).

What other Catholic of the nineteenth century could have said that last sentence? Five hundred bishops at a Council

nothing to do with truth. Anyway less to do with truth than Ferdinand Christian Baur, who set off the critics of the New Testament on their radical voyage; and Rothe, for whom Churches had almost ceased to matter and political institutions were the moral vehicles of the present and the future.

Or, again, a letter to Döllinger of 15 June 1882:

. . . men like Möhler, Lacordaire and Newman are much more repugnant to me than the *sancta simplicitas* of some old woman or the tricks of some indulgence preacher.

It was not superstition that he minded. It was not error. It was the hierarchy; even the liberal ones among them, even Gallicans like Bossuet and Arnauld. It was the conscious pursuit of power by a church organization.

A letter of the next day is still stronger: 'Respect of the hierarchy could not stand without disrespect for the law of God.' Or again, he wrote that the churchman

is dragged down by the best thing in him . . . It is when he is at his best, when he is swept and garnished, that he takes the devil into his soul. He never repents. His conscience is at rest, and his conscience is what he has made it . . . I am taking the finest specimens. I do not deal with common, obscure, incapable men, victims of a bad training, of a narrow sphere, of a backward age. I am thinking of men with whom I would not venture to compare myself, in knowledge, or talent, or yet greater gifts of God.

On 16 June 1882 he wrote: 'I find that I am alone.' The phrase and the date may be taken to mark a development important to English history: the mind of Acton, freeing itself, *qua* historian, from the mind of his first master and from a lot of the Catholic tradition of historical science. Of course, he had been learning his history for several years primarily from non-Catholic masters: Rothe for an ethical view of history, Roscher of Leipzig as a social and economic historian, Ranke as the new type of handler of archives and seeker after objectivity. But until now he had not fully realized what all this study was doing to his mind.³ In all the

later stage of his life it was Ranke and not Döllinger whom he looked back upon as his chief historical master.

It is interesting to note how the new materials threw out all the old studies of Acton. Ulrich Noack wrote three excellent volumes on Acton's mind, between 1927 and 1932: *Geschichtswissenschaft und Freiheit* (Frankfurt, 1935), *Katholizität und Geistesfreiheit* (Frankfurt, 1936), which was suppressed by the police, and *Politik als Sicherung der Freiheit*, which could not be published until 1947 and then only with the leave of the Allied military. These volumes are still useful. But they try, like all other studies, to draw a unified picture of Acton's mind, so that the Acton of 1863, Liberal and strenuous critic but deeply Catholic, at times half-Ultramontane, can be used to illuminate the mind of the Acton of 1888, twenty-five years later – still professing to be a Catholic but poles apart from anything like Catholic orthodoxy. No one fully realized, till the work of Conzemius, the gulf between the sixties and the eighties. The earlier Acton was influenced by Ranke, and by Rothe without being a convert. It is certain that the Acton of the sixties would never have had the influence on the English mind which was achieved by the Acton of the late eighties and nineties.

One other consequence follows. The more 'Protestant' the later Acton is seen to be intellectually, the less important to English history Döllinger is seen to be. The gulf between Acton and Döllinger is also a gulf between Döllinger and the English historical mind.

There are three lines in which this emancipation from tradition proceeded. The first was theology. Acton read Strauss and thought not much of him. Baur of Tübingen was far more important to Acton, although he also liked to read Ernest Renan. He accepted that parts of the New Testament might be legendary; that 'the apostolic age' (he wrote publicly, pointing to the apocryphal texts) 'was rich in poetic and theological fiction'. He accepted that miracles

‘crumble’ away when subjected to historical enquiries. It made no difference to him. His attitude to religion now rested far more on ethical than on dogmatic considerations. Such scepticism about historical origins was not open to Döllinger who still knew himself as a priest of the Catholic Church.

There is the famous story from James Bryce of his amazement at Acton’s reading. There were four at dinner: Creighton the historian of the papacy in the Renaissance, Robertson Smith the historian of Semitic religion, Acton and Bryce. When Creighton talked of Pope Leo X, Acton could cap his evidence – that does not surprise. When Robertson Smith talked of Old Testament history, Acton could cap his evidence. This anecdote from Bryce formerly used to look improbable. In the light of what we now know it is wholly credible, though of course Acton was a genuine master in the Renaissance, and only an omnivorous reader in the scholarship of the Old Testament.

The chief mark of these ethical consequences was the attitude to the good atheist. This was first evident in his enthusiasm for the positivist novelist George Eliot. Döllinger was astonished and amused to find Acton rating George Eliot on the level of Shakespeare. He disliked Acton’s article on George Eliot. On her Acton could write in 1885 what by then was almost a portrait of himself – one needs only to turn the feminine pronoun into the masculine:

It was the problem of her age to reconcile the practical ethics of unbelief and of belief, to save virtue and happiness when dogmas and authorities decay. To solve it she swept the realm of knowledge and stored up that large and serious erudition which sustains all her work, and in reality far exceeded what appears on the surface . . . It is her supreme characteristic in literature that her original genius rested on so broad a foundation of other people’s thought.⁴

She was a preacher of morality

far more impressive, more true, more elevated, than any but the very best Christian writers, and capable of reaching those whom no Christian could possibly touch. To me this is one of the most

wonderful facts, of the most wonderful feats, in the history of the human mind. Atheism, at the moment of its becoming a permanent and preponderant force, was rescued and redeemed . . .

The new and most puissant morality was even in some ways preferable to that of the current religion . . . The system of St. Francis was more lofty and heroic; but it proved the most efficacious and transitory of systems.

Atheism as a teacher of life became, roughly speaking, the equal of Christianity in moral dignity when it became its rival in mental power.

Or here is one of his cards on the ethics of politics and scepticism:

Morality is bound with Catholicism or Protestantism. By this dependence it will die. If persecution etc is wrong, then one cannot trust the religions that order it. Conscience must look elsewhere.

Or another card:

Politics are nothing but compromise. Especially Whig politics. A liberal will be satisfied with Liberty, apart from the use of it a political principle will be more to him than a religion, a party dearer than a Church.

Or again:

One must apply principles that cut either way in politics. If you are guided by any object, then that object must be the highest.

Men may then say, the highest object is religion –
Therefore persecution is the right thing.

To counter this you must have some object higher even than religion.
That is, either politics are affair of morality, or the purposes of religion transcend it.

If politics transcend religion, that is, if you are Liberals, it is because the ethical purposes are supreme.

Or another card: ‘You must prefer heresy to unity, if you prefer liberty. It can only be had that way.’²⁵

In the semi-self portrait, he went on, George Eliot was a woman who abandoned religious faith while she preached the highest standards of morality and contracted a great

liking for the solemn services of the Catholic Church. She touched 'the central problem of Catholicism', how 'private virtue and public crime could issue from the same root' (p. 301). The process of her life had brought her to the supreme point of solitude and neutrality that would have been chilling and fatal to the feebler mind, but gave her the privilege of an almost unexampled independence and mental integrity. Her secluded life had important literary consequences. It estranged her from general society and religious people (p. 294).

Here is Acton's sense of solitariness reflected. Because a Catholic rebel, distrusted by nearly all Catholics; because a Catholic at all, distrusted by some Protestants. Meanwhile he was moving towards historical neutrality of mind on all the great issues except moral conviction; and he felt the neutrality to be both a constituent of his solitariness and creative in his historical thinking. Here was a religious man who, without losing a religious sensibility, achieved the experience that a positivist attitude towards the historical sources and the historical controversies was necessary for the objectivity and the true creativity of the modern historian. This union of religious feeling, strong moral conviction, and a positivist attitude towards facts was not felt to be a mixture of incompatibles. He knew where he was. But he also knew himself to be solitary.

The solitariness was fostered by what happened in the German historical school. In the north several of the leading historians moved into nationalism, and Acton did not like it, nor think it other than a corruption of true history; Treitschke as the most nationalistic, 'never-flagging' as Acton called him, 'always vehement, always certain, overwhelming'; Droysen, confessed to be eminent but a pleader for the cause of the Hohenzollern; von Sybel; even Mommsen. These were now Acton's natural allies, the heirs of Ranke. But he was detached from them, partly by his English half and partly by his Bavarian half. He thought of

the northerners as a phalanx, or garrison, holding Berlin like a fortress. He admired all the heirs of Ranke for their energy, and their sympathetic accuracy, and assurances of steady advances, and willingness to correct in the light of better knowledge. What he could not bear was their identification of success with providence and their complacency if not their arrogance (see Acton's article, 'German Schools of History'⁶).

He concealed his radical mind from most. He was frank with Döllinger. He would say to Gladstone, or to R. W. Church, what must have disturbed them coming from a Catholic source. Church was Newman's pupil, probably his ablest. He was writing that history of *The Oxford Movement* which was published posthumously and became one of the classics of Victorian historical writing. He showed the draft to Acton. It was not a very good idea. To Church, Newman was a hero, to Acton he was as bad as the Grand Inquisitor. What Acton said about Newman and his colleagues was this: 'The trouble is that to these people dogma is too much the whole of religion. They don't understand that the chief measuring rod is moral.'⁷ Gladstone believed that good orthodox Christians were best for society. Acton wrote to him, 'What would have become of us all without the Independents and Socinians?' and said that this saying was like a cold douche over Gladstone's body.⁸

Acton's friend Edmond Scherer died in March 1889. The relationship between Acton and Scherer is worthy of attention. Scherer was a French citizen by being born at Lyons, but of a Swiss father and a mother who was half English and half Dutch. A period of study during his late teens in the house of an evangelical clergyman in England turned his mind to theology and he went to the university of Strasbourg. He was a stiff Calvinist, and fundamentalist about the Biblical text. As such he became a professor of theology at a Swiss seminary for training dissenting Protestant preachers. Till 1848 he remained militantly

orthodox. But in 1848-9 he became uncomfortable in his work. He realized that he no longer believed the literal inspiration of a Biblical text, and early in 1850 he was excommunicated, amid much passion and polemic in the Swiss press. He went on lecturing in Geneva, though to a very select audience, till 1860.

Now he was coming near to Renan and the radical attitude to the New Testament. In 1860 he abandoned theology, formally. He marked the revolution by giving away all his theological books, either to friends or local libraries. He moved to Paris and turned himself into a well-known literary critic, with Sainte-Beuve as his hero. Here for the first time he came to know Acton. The acquaintance was slow to ripen. He lived at Versailles and was drawn into politics by the Prussian occupation. After a time in the National Assembly he was elected a senator. He hardly ever spoke. He exercised influence far more by political journalism.

Meanwhile he had become Acton's principal adviser on all French matters. Acton started to acquire his books. Acton acquired the eight volumes of literary criticism, the fierce attack on the Catholic notion of infallibility in *Lettres à mon Curé*, the pamphlet against the dangers of too much democracy for France in *La Démocratie et la France*. But he did not read them with diligence. At least he did not make marginal lines on passages which he thought important. It was Acton's habit to put a line against passages which struck him in his books. He marked the passages which agreed with his own cast of mind rather than the passages which best represented all the thought of the author of the book which he was reading.

Soon after Scherer died a friend and pupil, Octave Gréard, brought out a memoir of his life (Paris, 1890). Acton not merely acquired this, he marked passages extensively, from the long quotations of Scherer which Gréard printed. These markings disclose how the

friendship with Scherer fitted the radical religious mind which was now Acton's.

For example:

The deepest revolution in our lives is when the absolute escapes us, and with the absolute, the fixed contours, the privileged sanctuary and the oracles of truth. It is difficult to describe the unsettlement of heart when we begin to recognize that our Church and our system has not the monopoly of what is good and true . . . , when we discover that no error is unmixed with truth, and there is no truth which is not partial, limited, incomplete, sullied with error; when the relative appears to us as the earthly absolute; and the absolute as an end pursued for ever but forever inaccessible . . . Authority and the absolute have disappeared simultaneously.

Or again: 'There is only one heresy at bottom – the denial of sin.'

Or again: 'To give up Biblical criticism is to give up sincerity and reason.'

Or again:

He thought the progress of history the greatest intellectual revolution of our times. The scholars seem to play games with trivial details of the past. Then the works start to make a coherence; then you get general conclusions – and history is transformed; and with history, even the moral perception of humanity.'

It is clear that the bond between Scherer and Acton was more intellectual than personal. Yet Acton felt Scherer's death as a personal loss. He wrote to Döllinger:

Scherer's death was a true loss to me. We saw each other every year. For me he was a remarkable whetstone for all things French. They'll soon forget that this was the most learned Frenchman of our age. His intellectual development, rightly analyzed, would be very instructive.¹⁰

There was a rapport between the minds. The one had come out of Protestant ultra-orthodoxy, the other out of Catholic orthodoxy; both had lost faith in authority as any absolute concept; and both saw history as inseparable from the conscience of the human race.

The word orthodoxy had lost for Acton any virtue it might have possessed. 'Occasional conformity', he wrote in 1888, 'is the nearest practical approach to orthodoxy';¹¹ that means the best a man could do to be a Catholic would be to look like a Catholic on relatively rare occasions by going to mass on relatively rare occasions. At much the same time he wrote his canons on the writing of history. They included this:

The ethics of history cannot be denominational. Judge not according to the orthodox standard of a system religious, philosophical, political, but according as things promote, or fail to promote, the delicacy, integrity and authority of conscience.

That is: get out of history a religious cause. Get away from Ludwig von Pastor or R. W. Church. Get out of history the philosophic cause, from Hegel and all his heirs in the historical schools from Ferdinand Christian Baur and Karl Marx onwards. Get out of history the political cause. Get away from the Liberal party politicians like Macaulay or George Otto Trevelyan, or from nationalists like Treitschke or Sybel. 'Anyone who writes with a national or denominational preconception will find no countenance from me.'¹²

Get away from all these but to what? Is there a historian's yardstick also to judge conscience?

Here is another canon: 'History deals with life, religion with death; much of its works and spirit escape our ken.'¹³

He was moving into an intellectual agnosticism. This was not, or not much, an agnosticism about religious practice. He encouraged his son to go to confession, though this was a practice which Döllinger had come to doubt at least as early as 1876.¹⁴ Acton loved *The Imitation of Christ* as true Catholicism, what he described as more normal Catholicism. But in the traditional sense of faith as applied to dogmatic propositions, he was growing increasingly agnostic. When he defined what was the highest book of

Christian teaching he chose the *Fioretti*. And those Little Flowers of St. Francis of Assisi are the vehicle not at all of doctrine but of a pure and childlike moral compassion.¹⁵ In the very numerous letters surviving from Acton's later years, it is curiously difficult to find evidence of his practising his religion except on some rare and public ceremonial occasion. The letters suggest a detachment not only from hierarchy but from churchgoing. The evidence of the letters is by silence only, but they are detailed letters.

Acton found much to reflect his mood in the opinions of the Protestant radical, Rothe of Heidelberg. He admired Rothe as much as any of his masters. Dogma is mainly superfluous. The creeds are not to be trusted as law. The task of the Church is to organize its own decline. Sermons are not good because words cannot reach that far. We are at a decisive point in human development to maturity; that is, the coming in of unchurched, secular, Christianity. The pious Christian is nothing else but the truly good man. The special bearer of Christian history in our age is not the Church but the culture of society. The revelation of God is not doctrine but history. The longer the Church goes on the longer it gets lost in the history of human culture . . . Not that Acton could have accepted all these propositions of Rothe without qualification. But he felt very near to Rothe. There is evidence that, during his last years, asked what book he would give to anyone whom he hoped to turn into a good Catholic, he replied Rothe's *Ethik*.¹⁶

A not quite reliable test, but still a test, can be got from Acton's letters between 1879 and 1894. Which Roman Catholic friends did he meet, and which Anglican? The Roman Catholics are not there. He must have met the chaplain at Aldenham, and the priest at Tegernsee. We do not hear of them. But he met many of the leading Anglicans – Stubbs, Talbot, Liddon, Church, Archbishop Trench, Talbot, Harold Browne, Jowett, Mark Pattison, J. F. Bright, Arthur Lyttelton, Paget, E. C. Wickham, Bishop

Creighton, the Anglican bishop on the Continent Bishop Sandford of Gibraltar. In Montreux and in Mentone it was the Anglican parson with whom he lunched. The British theologian who most interested him was the Anglican critic of Newman, James Mozley.¹⁷ Moreover, oddly at first sight but consistent on reflection, he took not the slightest interest in Döllinger's efforts to bring the Catholic anti-papalists into a union – Orthodox, Old Catholics, Anglicans; except by advising Gladstone on the part which the Anglicans might play. No one suggested that he might advise on choosing bishops for the Roman Catholic Church in England. But he cheerfully, and without hesitation, advised Gladstone in his choosing bishops for the Church of England and evidently felt no qualm that he might be unqualified for the purpose. To his children he was reading the Anglican Revised Version of the Bible. In 1880 his children went to the Passion Play at Oberammergau. Acton refused to go with them; his motive was in no way a criticism of a simple Catholicism, but a sense of reverence.¹⁸

The nearest that he came to Anglicanism was in the matter of *John Inglesant* (1882). In the story, Inglesant is ready to become a Roman Catholic but is told by a Jesuit that he is safe if (believing as a Roman Catholic and wishing to be a Roman Catholic) he continues to be an Anglican. In contemplating this incident of fiction, Acton gave grounds why he could be an Anglican: first, he would not need to believe the 39 Articles, for they do not bind the laity and hardly bind the clergy; and secondly, the Church of Rome tries to enforce on him opinions which are not morally safe for the soul. If he is a Roman Catholic he cannot escape ungodly ethics. If he is an Anglican he might be at risk of heresy but that is a lesser risk.

In 1981 Conzemius published the fourth volume of the correspondence of Döllinger. This contains the letters to and from Charlotte Blennerhassett. On 11 May 1886 she

wrote an important letter to Döllinger about Acton's state of mind. The crucial paragraph runs as follows:

It seems to me that Lord Acton's standpoint then was a little different from his standpoint now. At that time doctrine was not yet a matter of indifference; in comparison to the importance of the ethical problem, which has now become for him the only question that matters, and besides which every other question is subordinate . . .

But no man is so clever that he is cleverer than everyone else put together. Anyone who can't find people to understand him must have gone wrong somewhere. Lord Acton must feel that the spearhead of his argument is sharp against more than Catholicism; just as (and thus he sees himself) in the same way the repudiation of Ultramontaniam cannot alone get over the difficulty which more and more seems to him insuperable.¹⁹

One might expect a man in that predicament not quite to know where he was. During those years between 1882 and 1890 Acton changed, or dramatically modified, the basis of his outlook upon history and the world. One might expect that situation to leave traces of unsettlement of mind. There was an extraordinary review written during 1888. He seems in it to be becoming less of a historian than more of a historian. It is a review of the *History of England from 1837 to 1880* by the Oxford scholar J. F. Bright. Even now the review is almost unintelligible. It is crammed with rare information, pedantic corrections of detail, obscure adages and fascinating asides. The whole piece has no pattern. No reason exists why any one paragraph should come before any other. It is pedant's writing, not historian's writing. What was happening to Acton? Once he had been clear-headed. He was to be clear-headed again.

The new letters throw an unusual light upon this incoherent review. The book, he told Döllinger, has no scholarly importance. 'Only this Bright is my good friend, and can be very helpful to my son at Oxford. Hence I have written an unashamed panegyric.' About political murder Acton's standards of morality were lofty, but not always on every other subject.²⁰

On 10 January 1890 Döllinger died at the age of 90, still with the portrait of Acton by Lenbach hanging above his lengthened high desk, and in his house 2000 volumes belonging to the Munich State Library, besides his own large collection. The death to Acton was like the death of a father with whom the son's relationship has been chequered. He was in Rome. He wrote to all his children about it. We have the letter to his favourite correspondent Mamy:

And so, on my birthday, came the end of our forty years' unbroken friendship. And it has been more than that; for of all the many priests and prelates I have known in many countries the Professor, now lying dead in the rooms where I was educated, was the one who took the deepest and the most earnest view of Religion. He did not agree with me in many things, and sometimes he was angry with me; but to talk to him was altogether different from talk on such matters with any other man. The void, for me, is a very great one; for I always knew that he knew more than I.

Much nonsense will be written, and I fear you will hear some nonsense spoken about him. The whole story is in what I have just said. Believe only that.

What makes me sorry now is not his death, at such an age and with such work done, but the sense that he never really understood me and my ways, though I am sure he liked me better, at one time, than any one else. On that account he was not always a good adviser, and he felt sometimes unpleasantly, that there was a gap between us.

My recollection is of the day after he walked with the Gladstones and Dick over from the other lake. He was over-tired and faint, and he thought that perhaps the end was coming. He came up into my room and said very solemnly and kindly that I was right, but that it was hard to adopt and follow lines of thought not one's own. Perhaps, if I had taken the other route from Genoa he would have given me the consolation of saying so once more upon his deathbed.²¹

Something in that letter gives the reader pause, considering that it is a letter written immediately after the death of a father. It is a warm letter and affectionate. Yet also it is extraordinarily detached, in the circumstances; with criticism of the dead man's side in the breach but no expressions of regret for his own part in the breach. Acton did better to Mamy in another letter of 27 January: 'I feel the void in my

life more and more. He was a tremendous background; now when I don't understand, there is nobody to go to.'

He began to collect the materials to write Döllinger's life. The letters show that Döllinger's death did not resurrect the old intimacy. Acton was a critic of his former mentor. Half affection, half detachment, was the best condition for brilliant reflection on Döllinger and, more important, on the nature of history, using Döllinger as a peg. The biography of course never appeared because nothing long that Acton undertook ever appeared. The materials for it lie in fascinating profusion at Cambridge. They are coherent, illuminating, repetitive because never finally sorted, and sometimes profound.

So we have a very curious, at times almost hostile, verdict on a man who once had been his foster-father. Döllinger, according to Acton, was an intelligent and perspicuous man who was not even in the second rank for narrative or description. He was not good at suspending judgement, and sometimes said more than he could be sure of. He suffered from a premature certitude. He could impart knowledge better than learning. Nobody ever learnt from him the mechanism by which history is written. He had a wide-ranging learning, the erudition of centuries.

He was grave and unimpassioned. He preferred books full of information. He preferred books not to raise real problems. He was not an innovator and made little use of the new archives. Everybody felt that the power was out of proportion to the work, and that he knew too much to write. It was so much better to hear him than to read all his books. He stuck too much by the traditional view of the Old Testament. He would not even give up the verses about the woman taken in adultery.²² He could not be shaken out of the belief that the religion of history was Catholicism.²³ His conversation was worth far more than all his twenty-five books. He cared very little for his books. He outgrew them all.²⁴

All this means that the creative German influence on English historical writing owed little to South German Catholicism and the new Catholic school of history. It was not Döllinger but reaction against Döllinger which is the key. It was not the Catholic range of a polymath. It was the man who looked back on Ranke as his historical hero and who had made a dissociation between Catholicism as it should be and any form of Catholicism in dogma or hierarchy. In fact the influence of Acton on English history is much more from radical German Protestants than it is from the Catholic historical schools. And that freedom of mind, together with the range of apprehension, was the secret of its power in England.

In England, for the Germans were not much aware of him, although the Inaugural Lecture and the article on German schools of history were translated into German. On a visit to the court at Sandringham he was surprised by a German guest who asked him whether he knew Ranke's *History of the Popes*.²⁵

We have no evidence of it, but it would be psychologically probable that the death of Döllinger, and Acton's reconsideration of Döllinger's mind, would soften Acton's attitude to traditional Catholicism. But the real change came five years later, with the appointment of Acton to the chair at Cambridge and the coming of a different cardinal.

The Catholic parish priest at Cambridge was bothered about the coming of a Catholic heretic into a professorship at Cambridge. By his own confession, he was deeply prejudiced against Acton. He was anxious about how to behave to a Catholic or alleged Catholic who had just been elected professor amid maximum publicity.

The parish priest consulted Cardinal Herbert Vaughan, the archbishop of Westminster. Vaughan's predecessor Manning had had no communication with Acton since the quarrel over Acton's letters to *The Times* in 1874. Vaughan

showed the parish priest an exchange of letters between himself and Acton, February-April 1895.

Vaughan to Acton (from Collegio Inglese at Rome), 27 February 1895: he was writing to congratulate on the appointment to the chair and being infuriated by the sight of an article in an Irish Catholic newspaper attacking Acton.

I write to congratulate you . . . and to say how much I rejoice . . . and how confident I feel in your goodness and fidelity to the church.

I know and understand something of the awful trials you must have gone through in the years past, and I cannot but thank God that you are what I believe you to be – faithful and loyal to God and His Church, though perhaps by your great learning and knowledge of the human – in this same Church – tried beyond other men.

And Vaughan signed it: ‘Your faithful and devoted servant.’

It is obvious that Acton was very much moved by this letter. After a quarter of a century of suspicion and coldness from the hierarchy (which he had done almost everything possible to deserve) he found that on being elected to a Cambridge professorship he was not only a forgiven man but forgiven in generous language. He evidently did not know how to reply at first, for although he was down with a congestion of the lungs when the cardinal’s letter arrived, he was able to write other letters during the next six weeks in which he failed to reply to the cardinal.

When at last he replied (20 April 1895) he wholeheartedly accepted the olive-branch:

. . . I received from your Eminence the kindest and most consoling letter that it has ever been my happy fortune to possess. If I was not afraid of being presumptuous I would in reply assure you that you have judged me rightly as well as most graciously, and I beg that you will believe in my sincere gratitude for all you say . . . My Cambridge office is full of interest and promising opportunities; but the danger is that it is almost more a platform before the country than a Cathedra with serious students under it.

And Acton signed himself: ‘your Eminence’s most faithful and obedient servant.’²⁶

Thus Acton had been put, so to speak, into a state of grace with his Church without any need to recant, or profess anything which he could not profess, or make any declaration about the sense in which he accepted or put up with the Vatican decrees. The hesitation about the reply could only be because he must have wondered whether in accepting the olive-branch he was necessarily giving the cardinal the impression that he was a more conventional Catholic than he was and whether he had a duty of honesty to say so. Vaughan had said that he believed him to be faithful and loyal to God and his Church. That was just what Acton believed himself to be. On reflection he felt no duty to explain in detail to Vaughan that they were likely to hold different opinions on what the faith of a faithful and loyal Catholic ought to be; for Vaughan had shown no disposition to enquire. When the parish priest at Cambridge consulted Vaughan how he was to treat this formidable and heretical figure, Vaughan showed him Acton's letter and told him to treat Acton as one of the faithful. Hence the parish priest invited Acton to carry the canopy over the host in procession, and Acton accepted – coming in academical dress.²⁷ Hence Vaughan invited Acton to attend the laying of the foundation stone of Westminster Cathedral and to speak at the luncheon afterwards; which invitation also Acton accepted. It was as important to him to be seen to be a Catholic as not to have to retract. It was the scholarly Jesuit Father Herbert Thurston who was to point out, eleven years later, that Acton had retracted nothing.²⁸ Yet Acton did tell the parish priest, according to that priest's testimony, that he could now look back upon his trials as on 'a hideous nightmare from which the glory and peace of waking has been intense'.

When we say that Cardinal Vaughan acted with generosity and as a cardinal, we must not overlook the fact that he was not a new cardinal, for he had been the archbishop for

four years and a cardinal for three. At first sight he might be open to the charge that he cared nothing about Acton until suddenly in the spring of 1895 he was faced with a national figure. But this would probably be unjust to Vaughan. Acton's home was not in his diocese. When Acton became professor, he moved as a resident into Vaughan's diocese and so gave Vaughan for the first time the chance to try to reconcile him.

The Inaugural Lecture which Acton gave at Cambridge on 11 June 1895 has often been accused of obscurity. In the light of all this it is far more intelligible. It becomes a coherent summary of Acton's historical ideal.

Medieval history is not interesting because people looked backwards and cluttered the sources with forgeries and mendacity. Modern history is what helps us; the more modern the better, until we come to contemporary history where we cannot get at the sources. Inside modern history we must give a certain priority to big men when we can find them; but the archives have been opened, and men's stature is diminished when all the truth about them is known, and therefore big men are harder to find and fewer. He allows Napoleon, and Fénelon, from whose eyes, he says in a strange figure, 'genius poured in torrents'. But we are not using them as subjects for biography – more than once Acton criticized Döllinger for paying too much attention to biography. Our purpose is the growth of society, in its constitution and its social system. In this study it is ideas which most claim our attention. Therefore international history is forced upon us because ideas know no frontiers. We must give a certain priority to ecclesiastical history because its materials are graver, and because the first of human concerns is religion. But when we talk of the priority of ecclesiastical history what we see in the modern world is the ethical ideals of humanity being divorced from Churches and denominations, and taken over by secular political parties. Acton talks of the superiority of politics

over divinity. In the realm of ideas his key figures here are Socinus, and Roger Williams, and William Penn, as apostles of toleration – that is, minds as far as could be from Catholic orthodoxy – an anti-Trinitarian, a Baptist, a Quaker; and then Acton went on to Auguste Comte.²⁹ And thus we trace the growth of liberty on earth, which is the true result of history, and is the wisdom of divine rule in the improvement of the world. ‘History is the true demonstration of religion.’ He cited (p. 19) an anecdote about Ranke: that an eloquent theologian who wrote the history of the Reformation hailed Ranke as a colleague; and Ranke repulsed him, saying ‘you are first a Christian. I am first a historian. There is a gulf between us.’ So history can attain a total impartiality in everything but its ethical standards; totally undenominational; totally unpartisan; totally unphilosophical; until the study of Luther could satisfy Catholics and Protestants equally, and no one reading it would know the religious affiliation of the author. On ethical questions the historian cannot compromise, because on ethical questions human beings cannot compromise. ‘Modern history is so deep a question of life and death, that we are bound to find our own way through it.’ ‘If we lower our standard in history, we cannot uphold it in Church and State.’

So ended the Inaugural Lecture. In the course of it he painted two little portraits: of the good and free society towards which modern history leads, and of the nature of the good citizen within that society. It is a society with a long and arduous experience of which it is aware, and by this experience it has acquired a lot of knowledge and reaches certain tried convictions. Within the society there exists a fair level of general morality, education, courage and self-restraint. The constitution should be by representative government; disallow slavery; allow public opinion to reign, but in such a way that minorities are always protected, for this last is the essence of the free state;

and that protection of course includes liberty of conscience. Within this, not too impossible, society, what is the ideal of the individual? He loves liberty. He loves the human virtues. He stands for the poor against oppression. He is not bound by his surroundings but rises above them; above the pressures of his age, or of his race, or of his circumstances. He has a resolute conscience. How does he correct this conscience or these convictions? Acton gave a reply at first sight startling in view of his past, but now the only answer possible for him. By the light within. No external authority, in Church or State, can guide him. And history is entangled with his character. Because history cannot but be ethical, 'our historical judgments have as much to do with hopes of heaven as public or private conduct' (p. 8).

The extraordinary impact of Acton upon English historical feeling – despite the total absence of any published work which changed anyone's historical view about any particular event – must in good part be seen here. He was telling the English in sometimes strange, and sometimes rhetorical, but always in magnetic language that they could not be an individual without history and that they could not be a healthy society, politically and constitutionally, without a strong historical apprehension as part of their ethical axioms. He was telling them about the function of history, and the vocation of the historian, as a necessity of social health.

We may divine the sources of this attitude of mind in both aspects of his past – the Catholic and the near-Protestant moralist. In his Catholic life history had been the key to truth, trampling upon the opinions of five hundred bishops who do not even matter. In his moralist life, we may almost say his anti-Catholic life, certainly his antipapal life, he had come into the edges of the northern German historical school who were in fact the leaders of scientific history in the Europe of that age: they were associating the vocation of the historian with German national feeling.

Certainly the circumstances of German reunification made European history a key to the self-understanding of the German people. Acton hated historical nationalism. But since he came into the fringe of that great historical movement, he superimposed its sense of vocation upon his Catholic past where history was already a matter of faithfulness to the conscience, against people trying to compromise about the truth.

If I may give a personal testimony. As a young student I started to study history at an English university thirty-five years after Acton's death. It was impossible then to study the past without having the sensation that the operation in which you were engaged was of essential importance to the present. And the name which was particularly associated with that sense of social relevance was Acton.³⁰ And it had sunk into the English academic mind, somewhere about 1900, that no one could be rightly trained as a historian unless he spent at least a year at a German university. You ask, did this feeling evaporate after 1933? I remember being shown by my tutor one or two prefaces of German books with dubious overtones, and the tutor lamenting the decline of German universities in an age of ultra-nationalism. But, looking back, I now find it bizarre that the axiom on how to train an English historian remained in force. In June 1939 my college said that I must spend a year at a German university and gave a generous grant of money for the purpose. In October 1939 I wrote to them pointing out that their plan was not easy to carry out, and would they like their money back?

Of course I am not saying that Acton was solely responsible for this axiom on how to train English historians. He was but a small part of a far wider sensation, which had to do with projects like the *Monumenta*, with the development of English medieval history after Stubbs, and with the post-war diplomatic historians. But I can give this personal testimony that in the 1930s at my university, the

memory of Acton still spoke in this sense. No one could be a true historian if he or she was English and nothing more. He must also be, at the least, a European.

References

- 1 *The Nineteenth Century*, February 1879.
- 2 Cf. Ignaz von Döllinger. *Briefwechsel 1820-1890*, ed. by V. Conzemius, Vol. 3: *Ignaz von Döllinger – Lord Acton. Briefwechsel 1871-1890* (Munich, 1971), pp. 212-3.
- 3 H. Butterfield, *Man on his Past. The Study of the History of Historical Scholarship* (Cambridge, 1955), pp. 86-7, pointed out that until the 1870s Acton's references to Ranke are 'slighting'.
- 4 Lord Acton, *Historical Essays and Studies*, ed. by J. N. Figgis and R. V. Laurence (London, 1907), p. 283. Cf. Döllinger. *Briefwechsel*, Vol. 3, p. 342 and Lord Acton, *Selections from the Correspondence of the First Lord Acton*, ed. by J. N. Figgis and R. V. Laurence (London, 1917), pp. 291-2.
- 5 Cambridge University Library, Add. MSS, 4916; 4908/7; 4908/48.
- 6 Lord Acton, 'German Schools of History', *English Historical Review*, January, 1886, reprinted in *idem*, *Historical Essays and Studies*, pp. 344-92, esp. pp. 378 ff.
- 7 We can infer from a letter of Acton (*Correspondence*, p. 201), what Acton said to Church about the draft, apart from correcting minor errors of fact. He wanted more of a critique of Newman. He wondered whether Newman's Oxford opponents were so wrong in charging him with dishonesty. He rebuked Church's unfavourable use of the word *Liberalism*. He criticized the book as partial and one-sided, and commented on the prominence given to minor unknowns – Bowden, Marriott, R. H. Froude.
- 8 Döllinger. *Briefwechsel*, Vol. 3, pp. 398-9.
- 9 See O. Gréard, *Edmond Scherer* (Paris, 1890), esp. pp. 115ff., 127, 169, and Acton's markings in the Acton Library copy, Cambridge University Library, Acton d. 26.2061.
- 10 Döllinger. *Briefwechsel*, Vol. 3, p. 402; cf. also p. 321.
- 11 Acton, *Historical Essays and Studies*, p. 489.
- 12 Acton to Döllinger, Döllinger. *Briefwechsel*, Vol. 3, p. 304; and Acton, *Historical Essays and Studies*, p. 505.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 304.
- 14 L. von Kobell, *Conversations of Dr. Döllinger*, English translation (London, 1892), pp. 117-8 (Acton thought this book inaccurate); cf. also H. P. Liddon's unpublished Diary (Liddon House, London), entry of 9 September 1876 (Liddon was out walking with Döllinger at Munich): 'Döllinger regretted the introduction of habitual confession into the Church of England . . . The frequent confession of venial sins, he thought, had caused a great deal of mischief.' In 1874-5 Acton's confessor was Dr Green at Aldenham, who seems to have been uncomfortable in the position in view of Acton's public attacks on the Papacy at that period, but behaved pastorally and honourably. What happened after Dr Green is still not clear. If Acton was able to maintain the practice of regular confession during the eighties, it would have been essential for him to find a confessor who would not ask him questions about the nature of his faith or his relation to the hierarchy. If he found such a complaisant or wise confessor, it is surprising that we do not at present know who he was.

Gladstone wrote to Acton a letter important for this point. Gladstone visited Cologne in January 1880 to see about his sister Helen's burial, and wrote (26 January) to Acton explaining how she, who had become a Roman Catholic, would be buried as an Anglican, and why. On 6 March Gladstone marked a letter *most private*. He had found among Helen's papers a letter from Helen to Acton probably dated 1874. She asked him to find out from Döllinger (the excommunicated Döllinger!) whether she could go to confession. She rejected the Vatican decrees. Could she go to confession without mentioning that she rejected the Vatican decrees?

- 15 Acton, *Historical Essays and Studies*, p. 304.
- 16 Herbert Paul, Introduction to Lord Acton, *Letters to Mary Gladstone*, 2nd edn (London, 1913), p. xvi.
- 17 Acton, *Letters to Mary Gladstone*, p. 126.
- 18 *Ibid.*, pp. 26 and 95.
- 19 Ignaz von Döllinger. *Briefwechsel*, ed. by Victor Conzemius, Vol. 4: *Ignaz von Döllinger – Charlotte Lady Blennerhassett. Briefwechsel 1865-1886*. (Munich, 1981), pp. 686-7. 'Mir scheint es, daß der damalige Standpunkt von Lord Acton mit seinem heutigen *nicht* ganz identisch ist. Damals war das Dogma noch nicht gleichgültig; im Vergleich zur Bedeutung des ethischen Problems, welches sich jetzt für ihn in die *eine* Frage concentrirt hat, neben welcher alles andere ganz untergeordnet erscheint . . . Aber so klug ist kein Mensch, daß er klüger ist, als alle Andern zusammen genommen. Wer kein Verständnis mehr findet, der hat sich eben geirrt und Lord Acton muß selbst fühlen, daß die Spitze seines Argumentes nicht gegen den Katholizismus allein gerichtet ist, so wenig als, wie er ganz richtig bemerkt, die Verurtheilung des Ultramontanismus allein über die Schwierigkeit hinweghelfen kann, die ihm mehr und mehr als eine unüberwindliche erscheint.'
- 20 Döllinger. *Briefwechsel*, Vol. 3, p. 398. U. Noack, *Geschichtswissenschaft und Freiheit* (Frankfurt/M., 1935), p. 158, blamed the Acton of this period for another failure. Creighton edited the *English Historical Review* at this time and asked Acton to review his book there. Acton wrote so slashing a review that it looked absurd for the editor to print an attack upon himself. Why, asked Noack, did he not return the book to Creighton and say that he did not agree with its principles and suggest that someone else ought to review it?
- 21 11 January 1890, Cambridge University Library, Acton Papers, Box 22.
- 22 Add. MSS, 4912/63.
- 23 Add. MSS, 4910/98.
- 24 Add. MSS, 4909/115.
- 25 Acton to Mamy, 26 November 1899, Add. MSS, Box 10.
- 26 Westminster Archives, V.1/13/8. I owe help over this to the archivist, Miss Poyser. Cf. J. G. Snead-Cox, *Life of Cardinal Vaughan* (London, 1910), Vol. 2, pp. 298-9.
- 27 C. Scott to Acton, 18 October 1895, Add. MSS 8119/1/555. Cf. *Tablet*, 108 (1906), p. 656.
- 28 *Ibid.*, pp. 615, 656.
- 29 But he was strongly of the belief that ethics was not safe in the hands of Comte's form of positivism; cf. Acton, *Correspondence*, p. 211.

30 Butterfield, *Man on his Past*, p. 22, said that Acton grew to be of special interest to British historians after the Second World War. Memories are unreliable and individual. My memory says that the name of Acton was far more magnetic in 1937 than in 1950.