JOHN ACTON

LETTERS OF LORD ACTON TO MARY, DAUGHTER OF THE RIGHT HON. W. E. GLADSTONE

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Содержание

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PREFACE

It does not seem likely that any one, after reading these letters, would question the desirability of their publication. In general they speak for themselves; a few notes have been added to explain allusions which by lapse of time have become obscure; some names and passages, and some letters, have been omitted. After 1885 Lord Acton touched upon questions which are still matters of controversy, and therefore the selection closes with that year. The letters were written to the daughter who lived with Mr. Gladstone from the time of her own birth, in the middle of the last century, to the day of his death, at its close. The idea of publishing a selection of them arose in 1898; and Lord Acton, with certain reservations, assented to it. But it was felt by competent judges that it would be trespassing in Mr. Morley's domain; and Mr. Morley himself was strongly of opinion that the mutilation which at that period would have been necessary,

would seriously impair the interest and the significance of the book. So, for the time, the project was abandoned. On the other hand, in the judgment of the eminent authorities to whom the letters were submitted, their value was of such a nature that it was evident they ought to be published as soon as Mr. Morley should have completed his task.

With the exception of passages critical of himself or his policy, the letters were not read by Mr. Gladstone; for, while he made it a rule to shun all that was laudatory of himself, he always welcomed and carefully studied anything deliberately thought out or written in an opposite sense. His own correspondence with Lord Acton extended over a period of some thirty years; but it does not cover nearly so wide a range of subjects, or appeal so much to general interests, as the series now printed.

To the recipient of these letters from Lord Acton they will always be precious, not merely for the judgments they contain and the memories they recall, but also as the outward symbol of an inward and priceless possession – the treasure of his friendship.

MARY DREW.

10th *January* 1904.

EDITOR'S PREFACE

In compiling the Introductory Memoir which follows I have been chiefly indebted to Dr. Shaw's excellent "Bibliography of Lord Acton," edited for the Royal Historical Society, and to a most interesting article in the *Edinburgh Review* for April 1903. I have also consulted Mr. Bryce's "Studies in Contemporary Biography," Sir Mountstuart Grant Duff's "Out of the Past," and an obituary notice in the *Cambridge Review* for October 1902, signed "F.W.M." Mr. Morley was good enough to lend me the copies of Lord Acton's letters to Mr. Gladstone which had been made for the purposes of his Biography. Neither the materials at my command nor the circumstances of the case justified me in attempting to write a Life of Lord Acton. I have merely sought to furnish such information as the readers of these letters would naturally desire to possess.

HERBERT PAUL.

INTRODUCTORY MEMOIR

Lord Acton was dimly known to the general public as a prodigy of learning. He left no great work behind him, and is often quoted as an example of natural gifts buried under an accumulation of excessive, or ill-digested knowledge. The image of a Dryasdust, of a bookworm, of a walking Dictionary was excited by his name among those to whom he was a name, and nothing more. To those who had the privilege of his acquaintance he appeared almost the precise opposite of a picture too unlike the truth to be even a caricature. For Lord Acton was a thorough man of the world. An insatiable, systematic, and effective reader, he was anything but a recluse. No man had a keener zest for the society of his intellectual equals. No one took a stronger interest in the events of the day, and the gossip of the hour. His learning, though vast and genuine, was never obtruded. Always ready to impart information, he shrank from the semblance of volunteering it. Indeed, if no direct appeal were made to him, he would let people without a tithe of his knowledge lay down the law as if they knew everything, and would betray no other sign of amusement than an enigmatical smile. He had something of Addison's tendency, exhibited in a much more remarkable and much less agreeable form by Mr. Froude, to draw out rather than to repress the sallies of conceited ignorance. But for any one who wished to learn his resources were in their

fullest extent available. To be in his company was like being in the best of historical libraries with the best of historical catalogues. A question produced not only a direct and complete answer, but also useful advice, about the books which the inquirer ought to consult. On matters of opinion he was much more reticent. Sometimes, without a moment's warning, he would utter a paradox which from any one else might have seemed the mere recklessness of sciolism, but which, coming from him, was treasured in the memory. I remember, for instance, his telling me that Rousseau had produced more effect with his pen than Aristotle, or Cicero, or Saint Augustine, or Saint Thomas Aquinas, or any other man who ever lived. But such sweeping assertions were few. His general attitude was one of rigid adhesion to certain facts, and careful avoidance of hasty judgments. It was not that Lord Acton had no strong opinions. Few people had stronger opinions than he, and their foundation was so solid that it was almost impossible to displace them. But he liked to hear all sides of every question, and to make allowance for all errors which did not involve a violation of the moral law. Any apology, or even excuse, for departure from the highway of the Decalogue he regarded as in itself a crime.

The force and originality of Lord Acton's conversation are reflected, and may be inferred, from his epistolary style. In absolutely uncongenial company he would maintain the silence of the tomb. But when there was any community of taste or subject, he shone equally as a talker and as a listener. It was not

that he tried to shine. He did not aim at epigram, and his humour was as spontaneous as it was delightful. He loved to stimulate conversation in others, and no man had more sympathy with a good thing which he had not said himself. His manner was such that his compliments sometimes suggested a faint suspicion of insincerity. The suspicion, however, was unjust, and was merely the result of a subtle, half ironic manner. He was entirely free from jealousy, vanity, and egoism. A merciless intellectual critic he could hardly help being. He had so trained and furnished his mind that it rejected instinctively a sophism or a false pretence.

> Antonio Stradivari has an eye
> That winces at false work and loves the true.

His intimate friends agreed that he was the raciest and most stimulating of companions, with an instinctive perception for the true significance of a hint, so that they never had to tell him a thing twice, or to explain it once. That letters take their tone from the recipient as well as from the writer is a commonplace, almost a platitude. While therefore only Lord Acton's half of this correspondence is printed, the nature of the other half may be surmised from what he says himself. Such letters as the criticism of "John Inglesant," or the view of Mr. Gladstone as he will appear to posterity, or the estimate of Ultramontane ethics, stand out as solid documents with a permanent and independent value of their own. The more numerous specimens of his more familiar writing will readily suggest why he found this correspondence so congenial, and what was the reason in each case for his choice

of topics. The pliability and adaptability of his mind, his easy transitions from grave to gay, his sympathy with all a friend's interests and feelings, are visible in every page.

Lord Acton's personality was a negative of all shams. His spacious forehead, his deep sonorous voice, his piercing eyes, and his air of vigilant repose, were the outward signs of genuine power, in which the latent force behind is greater than anything the surface displays. He might well have sat to Titian for one of those ecclesiastical statesmen whose mingled strength and subtlety have attracted the admiring gaze of three hundred and fifty years. He was a good talker because he was a good listener, always interested in the subject, not seeking to exhaust it, rather putting in from time to time the exactly appropriate word. To draw Lord Acton out, to make him declare himself upon some doubtful or delicate point, was a hopeless task. His face at once assumed the expression of the Sphinx. To students, on the other hand, his generosity was unbounded, and the accumulations of a lifetime were at the disposal of any one who was willing to profit by them. It will be seen from these letters that Lord Acton was not merely a learned man. His perceptions were quick and shrewd. His judgment was clear and sound. He watched every move in the political game with a vigilant keenness quickened by the depth of his interest in the great leader whom he followed to the end. Circumstances had made him from his boyhood familiar with the best political society not merely of England but of Europe. He was as much at home in Italy and in Germany

as in his native land, so that he could compare Mr. Gladstone with foreign statesmen of his own time as well as with British statesmen of the past. Although it has been roughly estimated by his friend Mr. Bryce that Lord Acton read on an average an octavo volume a day, as often as not in German, he was never a bookworm. When he was in London he constantly dined out, and he corresponded freely with continental friends. Few people were more agreeable in a country house. No one assumed more naturally the aspect of disengaged leisure, and it was possible to live in the same house with him for weeks without ever seeing him read. Even the frivolities of the world were not beneath his notice. He liked to know about marriages before they occurred. He was an excellent judge of cookery and of wine. Yet the passion of his life was reading. It was, as has been well said, like a physical appetite, and it seemed, if it changed at all, to grow stronger as he grew older. His reading was chiefly historical. He was no great classical scholar. The voluminous notes to his inaugural lecture at Cambridge do not contain a single quotation from any classical author of Greece or Rome. He cared little for poetry, for art, or for pure literature, the literature of style. Of physical science he knew only what most educated men know. But he was well versed in metaphysics, he was a deep theologian, and his knowledge of modern history was only bounded by the limits of the theme.

John Emerick Edward Dalberg Acton was born at Naples on the 10th of January 1834, the only son of Sir Richard

Acton, seventh baronet, and the heiress of the German house whose name, Dalberg, he bore. An Italian birthplace, a German mother, and an English father stamped him from the beginning as a citizen of the world. His grandfather, Sir John Francis Acton, had been Prime Minister of Naples under Ferdinand the Fourth, and had reorganised the Neapolitan navy. His maternal grandfather entered the service of France, and represented Louis the Eighteenth at the Congress of Vienna. No wonder that Lord Acton spoke German and Italian as well as French, or that the chief foreign languages were as familiar to him as his own. In fact, as well as in blood, he was only half an Englishman. His entire freedom from insular prejudice, which was peculiarly noticeable in his opinions on Irish affairs, must be attributed not less to his religion than to his origin. He adhered throughout his life, notwithstanding many difficulties which would have shaken a less profound faith, to the Church of Rome. Nor was he one of those Catholics who remain Catholics because they do not care enough about the matter to change. Liberal as he was, tolerant as he was, broad as he was, the central truths of the Christian religion and of the Catholic Church were not merely articles of his creed, but guiding principles of his conduct. If these letters show anything, they show that in Lord Acton's mind, and in his estimate of human affairs, religion overmastered all mundane considerations. It was with him first, and last, and everywhere. Upon that noble text, "Where the spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty," his life and writings are a sermon. Hating

Ultramontanism and Vaticanism as only a passionate believer in the Church which they disfigured could hate them, cherishing the right of private judgment within the widest limits which Rome had ever allowed, he died, as he was baptized, in the faith of his ancestors. Perhaps his allegiance was none the less staunch because it was ethical and rational; because he clung always and before all things, in the clash of creeds, to "those things which are certain still, the grand, simple landmarks of morality." "If," said the greatest preacher in the Church of England sixty years ago, "if there be no God and no future state, yet even then it is better to be generous than selfish, better to be chaste than licentious, better to be true than false, better to be brave than to be a coward." Lord Acton would have been unable to conceive the protasis. The apodosis he would not have denied.

Sir Richard Acton died while his son was a child, and at the age of nine Sir John was sent by his mother to the Roman Catholic College at Oscott, of which Dr. Wiseman was the head. Wiseman, until Mr. Wilfrid Ward published his excellent biography, was chiefly known to English Protestants as the instrument of papal aggression, and the subject of Robert Browning's satirical poem, "Bishop Blougram's Apology." He was in truth an able and accomplished man, a really great organiser, thoroughly well qualified to preside over an educational establishment like Oscott. He was not in any sense of the word a Liberal, and in later years the pupil did not always agree with the master. But of Oscott Lord Acton always

spoke with affection, and the five years which he spent there in the pursuit of knowledge were among the happiest in a happy existence. It was the young man's own desire to enter the University of Cambridge. For he did not, like some Catholics, hold it sinful to receive education from a Protestant source. The law would not even then have prevented him from matriculating at Cambridge, as it would at Oxford, and yet the colleges, more bigoted than the law, refused, on what they doubtless considered religious grounds, to receive a student as hungry for learning as ever sought admission within their venerable precincts. Sir John Acton, so peculiarly fitted by nature and education to adorn and illustrate a University, may well have asked with Macaulay, what was the faith of Edward the Third, and Henry the Sixth, of Margaret of Anjou, and Margaret of Richmond, from whose foundations the head of a Catholic family was turned away. If Acton had gone to Cambridge, he would have known more about Herodotus and Thucydides, Cæsar and Tacitus. Of history in its more modern sense, and its more specially ecclesiastical aspects, he would probably have learnt less. Instead of keeping his terms under the walls of the Fitzwilliam, he went to Munich, and studied with the illustrious Döllinger. Döllinger was distinguished for learning even among German professors, and though, unlike his pupil, eminent in classical scholarship, as well as in theology, was before all things an historian. He it was who taught Acton to look at everything from the historical point of view, and to remember that, in the immortal words of

Coleridge, "The man who puts even Christianity before truth will go on to put the Church before Christianity, and will end by putting himself before the Church." The time came both to Döllinger and to Acton, when the voice of the Church said one thing, and the voice of truth another. They did not hesitate. But the results to the priest were different from the results to the layman.

At Munich, meanwhile, Sir John Acton laboured prodigiously. Latin and Greek he never mastered as he would have mastered them under Munro and Kennedy. But he learned them well enough for the purposes of an historian, with more help than Gibbon had, though not with the same innate genius. Of French, German, Italian, and Spanish, he became a master. At any subsequent period he would just as soon have written or spoken in French or German as in English. About this time he began to collect the splendid library which he formed in his country house at Aldenham in Shropshire. It consisted, when complete, of sixty thousand volumes, many of them covered with his marginal notes. Unlike most libraries, this one had a definite object, and reason for existence. Lord Acton was from the schoolroom to the grave an ardent, convinced, and enthusiastic Liberal. It was his aim to write a History of Liberty. The book was never written. Not indolence but a procrastination, which resulted from cherishing an impossibly high ideal, prevented it from coming to the light. One of his reasons for not beginning the History of Liberty was that the whole truth about the French Revolution

had not yet been discovered. But the library was collected to illustrate the History, and thus the books, now at Cambridge, have a peculiar interest, or rather a peculiar character of their own. When they were at Aldenham, Lord Acton knew the precise position which each volume occupied in its case and shelf. It is related that on one of his visits to his beloved room, while the house was let, the servants found him reading when they came in the morning to open the shutters. He had forgotten to go to bed. Mr. Bryce ("Studies in Contemporary Biography," pp. 396-97) has described in a peculiarly vivid and impressive manner how Acton was dominated and haunted by the idea that he never fulfilled. Late one night, in his library at Cannes, while Mr. Bryce was staying with him, it found vent in speech. "He spoke for six or seven minutes only; but he spoke like a man inspired; seeming as if, from some mountain summit high in air, he saw beneath him the far-winding path of human progress from dim Cimmerian shores of prehistoric shadow into the fuller yet broken and fitful light of the modern time. The eloquence was splendid, yet greater than the eloquence was the penetrating vision which discerned through all events and in all ages the play of those moral forces, now creating, now destroying, always transmuting, which had moulded and remodelled institutions, and had given to the human spirit its ceaselessly changing forms of energy. It was as if the whole landscape of history had been suddenly lit up by a burst of sunlight. I have never heard from any other lips any discourse like this, nor from his did I ever hear the like again."

With Professor Döllinger Sir John Acton visited France, and made many distinguished friends, including the foremost among French Liberal Catholics, Montalembert; Alexis de Tocqueville, the famous author of "Democracy in America," whose memoirs record the blunders of the Second Republic in France with a concentrated irony not unworthy of Tacitus; and Fustel de Coulanges, whose *Cité Antique* was as well known thirty years ago in Oxford as in Paris. His German friends were innumerable. Bluntschli, the great jurist, and von Sybel, the historian of the French Revolution, were among them. Of the illustrious Ranke he proclaimed himself a disciple, and it is intensely characteristic of him that his favourite among the moral philosophers of his own day was a Protestant, Rothe. Rothe's *Ethik*, he said, was the book which he would give to any one whom he wished to turn out a good Catholic. But as Lord Acton would not have crossed the room to make ten proselytes, the value of this selection may easily be exaggerated. To Protestant theology he paid as much attention as to Catholic. Those who feared God and followed Christ in every nation belonged to his household of faith.

Lord Acton deserved as well as Cobden, though for quite other reasons, to be called an international man. Not a great traveller, as travelling is understood in these days of universal locomotion, he was familiar with the chief capitals of Europe, and, so soon as his formal education was completed, he paid a visit to the United States. He was then, and always remained, an ardent admirer of the American Constitution, and of the illustrious men who made

it. Its temporary breakdown in 1861 was scarcely then in sight. Slave States and Free States were flourishing side by side, and the vital question whether a State had the right to secede from the Union, which could only be determined by civil war, still slumbered in abeyance. Acton held strongly Calhoun's doctrine of Sovereign States, and that is why he "broke his heart over the surrender of Lee." If the point had been decided by the letter of the Constitution, so that the Supreme Court could have given an authoritative decision upon it as upon the right of recapturing fugitive slaves, many thousands of lives might have been spared. When Sir John Acton went to Washington, the Abolitionists, though busy, were a small minority; they carried their lives in their hands, and the Republicans were no better prepared than the Democrats to adopt abolition as a principle. The Constitution did not expressly forbid slavery. Neither, as was often urged, did the New Testament. But the one said that all men were born equal, without specifying white men; and St. Paul declared that, within the pale of Christendom, there was neither Jew nor Greek, neither barbarian nor Scythian, neither bond nor free.

At the age of twenty-two Sir John Acton found himself in a country whose institutions differed as widely as possible from those of the United States. His mother had married Lord Granville, and he accompanied his step-father to Moscow when Alexander the Second was crowned there in 1856. Lord Granville's reception was not a pleasant one, and even so accomplished a master of tact was driven to remonstrate against

the coldness of his treatment, which was made more remarkable, though not more agreeable, by the flattering attentions paid to the French representative, M. de Morny. The Crimean War was hardly over, the ink on the Treaty of Paris was scarcely dry, and already Russia was on better terms with France than with England, while England was on worse terms with France than with Russia. The Emperor Napoleon had taken no pains to secure the fulfilment of the Treaty, whereas Lord Palmerston could not have displayed more zeal on behalf of Turkey if he had been the Sultan's Minister instead of the Queen's. The singularity of the situation could not fail to strike such a mind as Sir John Acton's. For the result of a war in which England had sacrificed twenty thousand men and seventy-six millions sterling to maintain what were called in a licentious phrase the liberties of Europe, was that she had not a friend on the European Continent, except Turkey. The distinguished company with whom Sir John Acton associated at Moscow were astonished "by the vastness of his knowledge and his mode of exposition" (*Edinburgh Review*, No. 404, page 502). Between Sir John and his step-father there could not be much real sympathy of taste or disposition. Lord Granville, as Matthew Arnold says, had studied in the book of the world rather than in the world of books. Nature seemed to have destined him to lead the Liberal party in the House of Lords. A thorough and genuine Liberal he always was. He belonged to the Manchester school, the school of Cobden and Bright. At the same time his finished manners, his imperturbable temper, and

his ready wit, were just the right equipment for the chief of an aristocratic minority. He knew little, and cared less, about the serious study of historical ethics, and historical politics, which was the essential business of Acton's life.

When he was twenty-five, Sir John Acton came to live at Aldenham, his country house in Shropshire, where there was ample room for many thousands of books. At the General Election held in the summer of 1859 he was returned to Parliament. Although Catholic Emancipation was thirty years old, its effects were almost exclusively confined to Ireland. It was hardly possible for a Roman Catholic to find a seat in England, and Sir John Acton sat for the small Irish burgh of Carlow, disfranchised in 1885. He was counted as a Whig, and a supporter of Lord Palmerston. But there was no sympathy, no point of contact, between the jaunty Premier and the erudite, philosophical, reflective Member for Carlow. "No one agrees with me and I agree with no one," said Sir John, with unusual tautology. It was not quite true. During those almost silent years of Parliamentary life he watched with critical and yet admiring interest the career of the illustrious man who was destined to be Palmerston's successor. Although Mr. Gladstone had not time to acquire the learning of his disciple, and upon the negative results of German scholarship was inclined to look askance, he was the best theologian, as well as the best financier, in Parliament, and few men were so well qualified to appreciate the range or the depth of Acton's researches. Acton, on his part, was fascinated

by the combination of intellectual subtlety with practical capacity which made the Chancellor of the Exchequer the first man in the House of Commons. It was Palmerston's House, not Gladstone's, and the Derbyites were almost as numerous as the Palmerstonians. There was then no Gladstonian party at all. The Peelites were disbanded. Some had fallen back into the Conservative ranks. Some, like Sidney Herbert, who died in 1861, Cardwell, and Gladstone himself, sat in the Cabinet of Lord Palmerston. Others had fallen out of public life altogether. Mr. Gladstone was still to the general public somewhat of an enigma. So lately as May 1858 he had been earnestly entreated both by Lord Derby and by Mr. Disraeli to accept the Board of Control on the resignation of Lord Ellenborough. He had voted for the Conservative Reform Bill of 1859, and against Lord Hartington's motion which turned Lord Derby out. When he accepted office in a Liberal Administration, his Tory constituents at Oxford were so much surprised and annoyed that they did their best to deprive him of his seat, and almost succeeded. The Whigs regarded him as a Tory and a Puseyite. The Tories bore a grudge against him because he had imposed a succession duty on landed estates. The Radicals considered him a lukewarm reformer, and in short hardly any one except his personal friends knew what to make of him. Then came the opportunity, and with it was displayed the full grandeur of the man. The Parliament of 1859 passed no successful or memorable legislation which was not connected with finance. Mr. Gladstone's Budgets were the great

events of the Sessions from 1860 to 1865, and nothing at all like them has been known since. Almost every year taxes were repealed, expenditure was diminished, revenue was increased. After an obstinate conflict with the House of Lords the paper duty disappeared, and with it the power of the Lords to interfere with the taxation of the people. The duties on tea and sugar were so reduced as to bring those commodities within the reach of the working classes. The income-tax fell from ninepence to fourpence. The Commercial Treaty with France preserved the peace of Europe, and by the trade which it created between the two sides of the English Channel more than made up for the losses inflicted upon British commerce by the American War. The speeches in which Mr. Gladstone's Budgets were expounded, especially those of 1860 and 1861, are superb specimens of the eloquence which increases, while it dignifies, the force of reason. His speech on the taxation of charities in 1863, though it failed to convince the House that charitable endowments should be taxed, was pronounced by a French critic to combine the grandeur of Berryer with the subtlety of Thiers. Acton was no financier. Neither his tastes nor his training qualified him to be a critic of Budgets, and when he became, as will presently appear, a political editor, he left that business to Mr. Lowe, claiming, with some apparent justification, that he thus made him Chancellor of the Exchequer. But he loved historical processes quite as much as historical results, and the hours which he spent in the House of Commons while the future

leader of the Liberal party proved himself to be the economic successor of Walpole, Pitt, and Peel, fixed his political allegiance for the remainder of his life.

All the time that Mr. Gladstone was dazzling the country by the brilliance of his finance, and convincing practical men by the hard test of figures at the year's end, he had to fight his colleagues in the Cabinet as well as his opponents at St. Stephen's. Lord John Russell nearly ruined the Budget of 1860 by the persistency with which he pressed his unlucky Reform Bill. Lord Palmerston was continually demanding money for safeguards against a French invasion in which the Chancellor of the Exchequer would not believe. Cobden, from the outside, was urging the one genuine economist in the Cabinet to promote the cause of economy by resigning. Acton, though dissatisfied with "bald Cobdenites," as he termed them, was always on Gladstone's, and never on Palmerston's side. On the other hand there was a question of European importance which united Mr. Gladstone hand and glove with the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary. Italian unity, and Italian independence, were as dear to Palmerston and Russell as to Gladstone. Lord John's famous despatch of October 1861, vindicating the right of the Italians to choose their own rulers, was greeted with enthusiastic delight throughout the Italian peninsula. The cause for which Cavour lived, only to die in the moment of its triumph, was nowhere pleaded with more persuasive power than by Mr. Gladstone in the Parliament of 1859. Although Lord Palmerston's Government could never

reckon upon a majority of fifteen, the opposition to their Italian policy came chiefly from a few Irish Catholics. Sir John Acton, though a Roman Catholic, and an Irish Member, took no part in it. He was deeply imbued with the spirit of liberty, and he held with all the strength of his mind that the cause of religion was the cause of freedom. To maintain Austria in Italy, or even the temporal power of the Pope, did not belong to Catholicism as he understood it. To identify soundness of faith with arbitrary rule was, in the eyes of a Liberal Catholic like Acton, one of those blunders which are worse than crimes. He was drawn to Mr. Gladstone both by admiration of his splendid capacity and by agreement with his continental Liberalism. In the House of Commons he hardly ever spoke. For six years he only put two questions, and made one speech (May 4, 1860). The questions were unimportant. The speech was characteristic. It was in effect an appeal for information about the government of the Papal States. No Catholic, said Sir John Acton, would defend bad government because it was exercised in the name of the Pope. In this case the evidence was contradictory, and all he wanted was the truth. Lord John Russell was unable to give a satisfactory reply, because the Queen had no accredited representative at Rome. Macaulay's description of the Papal States a few years before this time is well known. If, he said, you met a man who was neither a priest nor a soldier, and who did not beg, you might be pretty sure that he was a foreigner. Sir John Acton, though he deprecated hasty judgments, was incapable of defending

oppression or injustice. The fact that it was the work of Catholics, so far from prejudicing him in its favour, would simply have increased the severity of his condemnation. It would, in his eyes, have been falling from a higher standard.

The two political questions to which Sir John Acton attached most importance were ecclesiastical establishments and agrarian reform. The land laws were safe from disturbance under a Premier who flippantly remarked that tenant right was landlord wrong. The Irish Church, to which, as a Catholic and an Irish Member, Acton could not be indifferent, suddenly flashed into fatal prominence, when, on the 28th of March 1865, Mr. Gladstone declared that it did not fulfil its proper functions, because it ministered only to one-eighth, or one-ninth, of the community. This speech, coupled with his declaration of the previous year that every man not mentally or morally disqualified was on the face of it entitled to come within the pale of the Constitution, gave Mr. Gladstone for the first time the confidence of the working classes and of the Radical party. Sir John Acton went with him, then and afterwards, in all confidence and hope. As a Catholic he would naturally have been opposed to the maintenance of Protestant ascendency by law. As a Liberal he was in favour of extending the suffrage, and of religious equality. But indeed the foundation of his agreement with Mr. Gladstone lay deeper than any political principle or measure. Belonging to two different branches of the Christian Church, they both desired the reunion of Christendom, and both held that

religion was the guiding star in public as in private life. Between a High Churchman like Mr. Gladstone and a Liberal Catholic like Sir John Acton there was plenty of common ground. Both men became, in every sense of the word, more Liberal as they grew older, and Acton's belief in his leader ripened into a reverential devotion which nothing could shake.

At the General Election of 1865, Sir John Acton stood in the Whig or Liberal interest for Bridgnorth, the nearest town to Aldenham, and then a Parliamentary borough. "On that occasion he assured the electors that he represented not the body but the spirit of the Church of Rome" (*Edinburgh Review*, No. 404, pp. 375-76). What the electors made of this assurance we do not know, and it would be vain to conjecture. They placed him, however, at the head of the poll. But his majority was a single vote, which disappeared on a scrutiny, and he never again took his seat on the green benches of the House of Commons. He had none of the gifts required for winning large popular constituencies, even if his creed had not been a fatal objection in the mind of the average voter five-and-thirty years ago.

While Sir John Acton sat in the House and silently voted with his party, he had not been inactive. The views of the most cultivated and enlightened among English Catholics were expressed in the fifties by a monthly periodical called the *Rambler*. The editor of the *Rambler* was the greatest of converts, John Henry Newman. In 1859 an article of Newman's on consulting the laity in matters of doctrine was condemned by

authority at Rome, and Newman withdrew from the editorial chair. He was succeeded by Sir John Acton, and no better choice could have been made. He edited the *Rambler* till 1862, when it became merged in the *Home and Foreign Review*. His first contribution, in November 1859, was a criticism of Mill on Liberty, which he took up again in the following March. The subject was peculiarly his own, though he could not, as a Catholic, approach it from Mill's point of view. He wrote, contrary to his custom, in the first person singular, and signed the article "A"; which, in his own review, amounted to acknowledgment. "By liberty," wrote this Liberal Catholic, "I mean absence of accountability to any *temporal* authority," and he added, "I make no reservations." He afterwards learned that liberty was positive, and that spiritual as well as temporal authority might be pushed to a point inconsistent with freedom. These youthful contributions to his favourite theme show rather the wonderful knowledge which he had acquired at five-and-twenty than the delicate and subtle discrimination which distinguishes his later work. One exquisite quotation deserves to be quoted again. *Cui Christus vim intulit?* wrote Count Boniface to St. Augustine. *Quem coegit!* To whom did Christ apply violence? Whom did he coerce? The final failure of persecution was in Sir John Acton's opinion the act of Louis the Fourteenth when he revoked the Edict of Nantes. "Coercion," he added, "is an educational instrument which Western Europe has outgrown," though indeed it had not much success in the age of the Cæsars. On the Inquisition he was

discreetly silent. But he concluded with a plea for the sacredness of moral responsibility, which hardly came within the scope of Mill's eloquent and powerful treatise. For a Catholic organ, however, the treatment of Mill is, if not sympathetic, at least appreciative and respectful. Of this article Mr. Gladstone wrote to the author, "I have read your valuable and remarkable paper. Its principles and politics I embrace; its research and wealth of knowledge I admire; and its whole atmosphere, if I may so speak, is that which I desire to breathe. It is a truly English paper."

Among Sir John Acton's other contributions to the *Rambler* one of the most interesting is his account of Cavour, which appeared in July 1861, just after the Italian statesman's death. Acton had an abhorrence of Carlylean hero-worship, and he did less than justice to Cavour's regeneration of Italy. His criticism of a man who for many years of his too brief life was engrossed in a desperate struggle for national independence is cold and dry. He cannot conceal either the scanty resources which Cavour had at his disposal, or the magnitude of the results which those resources were made to achieve. But, true to his favourite subject, he analysed the Minister's conception of liberty, and found it wanting. It was liberty for the State, not liberty for the individual, nor for the Church. Yet Cavour's cherished ideal was "a free Church in a free State," and he would probably have replied that from the purely individual point of view Piedmont might well challenge comparison with the Austrian provinces of Italy or the States of the Church. If Cavour's life had been

spared, we may be sure that he would, as his dying words about Naples imply, have governed in accordance with the principles of constitutional freedom. A year later, in July 1862, Acton inaugurated the *Home and Foreign Review* with a characteristic article on "Nationality." He traced the rise of national sentiment in Europe to the infamous partition of Poland, of which Burke said that no wise or honest man could approve. It was fostered by the French Revolution, and became afterwards the instrument by which Napoleon fell. The Holy Alliance suppressed it for a time, but it soon revived in Italy. By Nationalism, which Englishmen forty years ago favoured everywhere except in Ireland, Acton meant, as he explains, "the complete and consistent theory that the State and the nation must be coextensive." "Exile is the nursery of nationality," he proceeds, "as oppression is the school of liberalism; and Mazzini conceived the idea of Young Italy when he was a refugee at Marseilles." To the idea of Nationalism, as he defines it, Acton opposed the principle that "the combination of different nations in one State is as necessary a condition of civilised life as the combination of men in society." To overcome national differences was the mission of the Church, and patriotism was in political life what faith was in religion. There could be no nationality with any claim upon men's allegiance except what was formed by the State. "The Swiss are ethnologically either French, Italian, or German; but no nationality has the slightest claim upon them, except the purely political nationality of Switzerland." The instance was

well chosen. Unfortunately Acton goes on to say that "the citizens of Florence and of Naples have no political community with each other," which had ceased to be true before the article appeared. Nor was it altogether a fortunate prediction that no organised State could be formed in Mexico, which after the departure of the French became a stable Republic. Paradoxical as the essay in some respects was, it is valuable as an analysis of political ideas, and its concluding sentence is full of suggestion even to minds which do not accept the opinions implied. "Although," so it runs, "the theory of nationality is more absurd and more criminal than the theory of Socialism, it has an important mission in the world, and marks the final conflict, and therefore the end, of two forces which are the worst enemies of civil freedom – the absolute monarchy and the revolution."

There is nothing in Sir John Acton's essay on "Nationality" which would be likely to excite suspicion at the Court of Rome. But the *Home and Foreign Review* was known to be a Liberal as well as a Catholic organ. It was marked by independence of tone, as well as by originality of thought, and it soon fell under suspicion. Even its motto, *Seu vetus est verum diligo sive novum*, "I love the truth, whether it be old or new," was ambiguous. For how can Catholic truth be new? In the month of August 1862, Cardinal Wiseman, the acknowledged head of the Roman Catholic Church in England, received an address from his clergy. His reply contained a severe censure of the *Home and Foreign Review* for the "absence of all reserve or reverence

in its treatment of persons or of things deemed sacred, its grazing even the very edges of the most perilous abysses of error, and its habitual preference of uncatholic to Catholic instincts, tendencies, and motives." The particular charge of personal misrepresentation against which the Cardinal protested has long since lost whatever interest it may once have had. The general tone of Acton's remonstrance, made in his editorial character and in the periodical condemned, illustrates his attitude towards the Church to which he belonged. Of Wiseman he writes not merely with the reverence due to his ecclesiastical rank, but with the affection of an old pupil at Oscott. "In the Cardinal's support and approbation of our work," he says, "we should recognise an aid more valuable to the cause we are engaged in than the utmost support which could be afforded to us by any other person." He then proceeds to describe the foundation of the *Review*. "That foundation is a humble faith in the infallible teaching of the Catholic Church, a devotion to her cause which controls every other interest, and an attachment to her authority which no other influence can supplant. If in anything published by us a passage can be found which is contrary to that doctrine, incompatible with that devotion, or disrespectful to that authority, we sincerely retract and lament it. No such passage was ever consciously admitted into the pages either of the late *Rambler* or of the *Review*." The aim of literature and the function of the journalist are declared to be on a lower level than the work and duty of the Church, though directed to the same ends as hers. "The

political and intellectual orders remain permanently distinct from the spiritual. They follow their own ends, they obey their own laws, and in doing so they support the cause of religion by the discovery of truth and the upholding of right." These manly and sensible words are followed by a still more eloquent and significant passage, which expresses the deepest convictions of Acton's mind. "A political law or a scientific truth may be perilous to the morals or the faith of individuals; but it cannot on this ground be resisted by the Church… A discovery may be made in science which will shake the faith of thousands; yet religion cannot regret it or object to it. The difference in this respect between a true and a false religion is, that one judges all things by the standard of their truth, the other by the touchstone of its own interests. A false religion fears the progress of all truth; a true religion seeks and recognises truth wherever it can be found."

When Acton wrote thus, the Darwinian controversy was at its height, and many Protestants, who thought that they believed in the right of private judgment, showed much less tolerance than he. Against the timid faith which feared the light, against the false morality which would do evil that good might come, Acton waged incessant war. Truth, morality, and justice could not in his eyes be inconsistent with the doctrines of the Church. If they appeared to be so, it must be because the doctrines were erroneously expressed or imperfectly understood. To identify the Church with a cause, with a party, with anything lower than

morality and religion, was a betrayal of duty and a surrender of the fortress. The policy of the *Home and Foreign Review*, as expounded by the editor, was to leave the domains of faith and ecclesiastical government alone, but on all other matters to seek the highest attainable certainty. The progress of political right and scientific knowledge, the development of freedom in the state and of truth in literature, were its objects. Here for the time the quarrel rested. It is not to be supposed that Pius the Ninth and his advisers were satisfied with this lucid and pungent exposition of Liberal principles. But Wiseman had learned from experience that the interests of Catholicism in England were not promoted by a policy of aggression, and he was aware that Sir John Acton spoke for most of those Catholics who did not belong to the extreme or Ultramontane school. For nearly two years Sir John remained editor of the *Home and Foreign Review*. Then the final thunderbolt was launched by a higher power than Wiseman. At the Congress of Munich in 1863 Acton's friend and teacher, Professor Döllinger, delivered an eloquent plea for the union of Christendom, lamenting the want of dogmatic standards among Protestants, and at the same time urging Catholics "to replace the mediæval analytical method by the principle of historical development, and to encounter scientific error with scientific weapons" (*Edinburgh Review*, No. 404, page 513). Sir John Acton attended this congress, and reported its proceedings to his *Review*. In March 1864 the Pope addressed a brief to the Archbishop of Munich, in which he

declared that the opinions of Catholic writers were subject to the authority of the Roman congregations. After this Acton felt that it was useless to continue the struggle, or to carry on the *Home and Foreign Review*. In a farewell article, entitled "Conflicts with Rome," he explained that he was equally unable to admit the doctrines of the brief or to dispute the authority which proclaimed them. In these circumstances he had only one course to take. He could not abandon principles he sincerely held. He could not reject the judgment of the Holy See without committing the sin of apostasy. "The principles had not ceased to be true, nor the authority to be legitimate, because the two were in contradiction." He could only sacrifice the *Home and Foreign Review*. He regretted its discontinuance, because, while there were plenty of magazines to represent science apart from religion, and religion apart from science, it had been his special object to exhibit the two in union. But he had no alternative, if he were to preserve his intellectual honesty and also his loyalty to the Church.

It would have been difficult to emerge with more credit from a peculiarly painful and delicate position. The article, and with it the last number of the *Review*, appeared in April 1864, when Sir John Acton was thirty years of age. The surpassing prudence which accompanied him from boyhood through life had no connection with weakness nor timidity. It resulted from a very rare faculty of apprehending all aspects of a question at once, and of keeping them separate in his mind. In this same year 1864

Acton told one of his parliamentary friends, now Sir Mountstuart Grant Duff, that he had never felt the slightest doubt about any dogma of the Catholic, meaning the Roman Catholic, Church. A time was to come when his faith would be more severely tried. But, independent as he had always been, Acton was not formed by nature to be a leader of revolts. Moral or intellectual anarchy was the last thing he desired. If he had been brought up a Protestant, he would probably have remained one. In that case, however, he would have seen the danger of private interpretation even more clearly than the perils of dogmatic despotism. He would have asked, if, as Bishop Butler says, we must judge of revelation itself by reason, whose reason it was to be.

At the close of the year 1864, the tenth anniversary of the date on which he had himself proclaimed the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin as a dogma, the Pope issued his Encyclical Letter against modern thought. In the Syllabus of Errors which this epistle condemned, Pius the Ninth, who had once been reckoned a Liberal, included the heresy that the Holy See ought to seek reconciliation with progress, with Liberalism, and with modern thought. He further pronounced that the Catholic religion should be the exclusive religion of the State; and that liberty of worship, and freedom of the Press, promoted moral corruption and religious indifference. There was, he added, no hope for the eternal salvation of those who did not belong to the true Church. Although Sir John Acton had had some share in provoking the publication of the Syllabus, he made no reply. He had withdrawn

from the controversy without surrendering either his faith as a Catholic or his principles as a man.

In 1865 Acton's connection with the House of Commons ceased, and in the same year he married a Bavarian lady, the eldest daughter of Count Arco-Valley. From this time too he abandoned the practice of regular editing and reviewing, nor did he write again for avowedly Catholic organs, though he was throughout the remainder of his life an occasional contributor to secular organs on historical and theological subjects. The popular idea that he wrote little, and passed his whole time in reading or talking, is erroneous. That he did not put out much in his own name is true. But the list of his anonymous articles fills more than twenty pages of an octavo volume, and their variety is quite as remarkable as their number. He read every new German book of the smallest importance. In the *Home and Foreign Review* alone there are more than seventy critical notices from his pen. The pen, however, was not the only instrument by which he imparted to others some fragments from his vast stores of knowledge. To his neighbours, one can hardly call them his constituents, in the little town of Bridgnorth, he delivered several lectures, now out of print and scarce, which for range and quality must have been very different from anything his audience had heard before. The first, delivered on the 18th of January 1866, when he was still supposed to be Member for the borough, is now only to be found in the *Bridgnorth Journal* for the 20th. Its subject is "The Civil War in America: Its Place in History." Nothing can be more

characteristic than the tone and temper of this discourse. Though dated only a few months after the fall of Richmond, when, as Acton says in one of these letters, he "broke his heart over the surrender of Lee," it is as calm and judicial, not to say as dry, as if he were investigating an antiquarian problem. Its dryness never becomes dulness. Unless, however, the Literary and Scientific Institution of Bridgnorth was far above the ordinary level of such bodies, they must have been puzzled and perplexed by the paradoxical subtlety which traced the causes of the war back to the birth of the American Constitution. "Slavery," he said, "was not the cause of secession, but the reason of its failure." Then what was the cause of secession? According to Sir John Acton, it was the failure of Jefferson, Hamilton, and their colleagues to provide against the omnipotence of the majority, which he regarded as inconsistent with true freedom. They might have answered, if they could have been heard, that they had made the method of choosing a President indirect, and had given the Supreme Court control even over Congress itself. The first expedient had, no doubt, entirely failed, and the electoral college was a mere machine for registering the popular vote. But the Supreme Court was a substantial reality, and it had before the war decided that a fugitive slave could be reclaimed by his master even in a free State. Nobody will now dispute Sir John Acton's proposition that by the middle of the nineteenth century slavery was an anachronism. Yet, if the Southern States had been more instead of less numerous than the Northern, they would have

probably won, and they would then undoubtedly have set up a great Slave Power in the heart of western civilisation. The immediate, or proximate, cause of hostilities was not slavery, but the claim of South Carolina to secede from the Union. Not till the third year of the war did Lincoln proclaim the abolition of slavery. Yet without slavery there would have been no war. If not the *causa causans*, it was the *causa sine quâ non*. The value of Sir John Acton's lecture lies chiefly in the ability with which he dissects the American Constitution, and indicates, sometimes in the words of its authors, its weak points. Whatever may be thought of his constructive faculty, his critical acumen was not surpassed by any of his less learned contemporaries.

In 1867, and the early part of 1868, Sir John Acton wrote regularly for the *Chronicle*, a weekly paper of high repute during its brief existence, contributing a narrative of current events in Italy during the period of Mentana and the second French occupation of Rome. On the 10th of March 1868 he lectured again at Bridgnorth on the Rise and Fall of the Mexican Empire. [1] This is in my opinion the best popular lecture that Acton ever gave, and I do not know where I could lay my hands on a better. It is clear, spirited, eloquent, and so perfectly well arranged that the whole story of Louis Napoleon's Mexican Expedition, with its plausible pretext, and its miserable failure, was told, not meagrely but completely, in the compass of an hour. The joint intervention

[1] I owe the opportunity of reading and quoting from this lecture, reported in the *Bridgnorth Journal* of the 14th, to the kindness of Sir Mountstuart Grant Duff.

of England, France, and Spain in the affairs of Mexico did not last long. Its object, like the object of the Anglo-German intervention in Venezuela, was to obtain redress for injuries to European residents, and payment of debts due to subjects of the three Powers. England and Spain soon discovered that the French Emperor had quite other designs, being minded to substitute a Mexican Empire for the Mexican Republic. Sir John Acton explained why in his opinion, which has not been justified by experience, Mexico was unable to stand alone. "A society so constituted could not make a nation. There was no middle class, no impulse to industry, no common civilisation, no public spirit, no sense of patriotism. The Indians were not suffered to acquire wealth or knowledge, and every class was kept in ignorance and in rigorous exclusion; when therefore the Mexicans made themselves independent, the difficulty was to throw off not the bondage but the nonage in which they had been held, and to overcome the mental incapacity, the want of enterprise, the want of combination among themselves, and of the enlightenment which comes from intercourse with other nations. They formed a Republic after the model of their more fortunate neighbours, and accepted those principles which are so inflexible in their consequences, and so unrelenting in their consistency." Between the Mexican Republic and the Republic of the United States there is no doubt all the difference between Alexander the Coppersmith and Alexander the Great. But Benito Juarez was both a better and an abler man than Acton gave him credit for

being, and his successor, Porfirio Diaz, proved himself to be a most efficient ruler. A Civil War in Mexico, simultaneous with Civil War in the United States, gave Napoleon the opportunity he wanted. The one furnished a pretext, the other removed a barrier, and it was not till long after the Austrian Archduke Maximilian had been put upon his pinchbeck throne that President Johnson was in a position to order the French troops out of the American Continent. The poor Archduke himself, basely deserted by the unscrupulous potentate who had sent him to his doom, showed a chivalrous honour and an unselfish courage that fully justify Acton's description of him as "almost the noblest of his race." The lecture describes the pathetic isolation of Maximilian in a passage of singular power. "There was nothing for him to look forward to in Europe. No public career was open to the man who had failed so signally in an enterprise of his own seeking. His position in Austria, which had been difficult before, would be intolerable now. He had quarrelled with his family, with his Church, and with the protector to whose temptations he had hearkened. And for him there was to be no more the happiness of the domestic hearth.[2] In Mexico there were no hopes to live for, but there was still a cause in which it would be glorious to die. There were friends whom he could not leave to perish in expiation of measures which had been his work. He knew what the vengeance of the victors would be. He knew that those who had been most faithful to him would be most surely slaughtered;

[2] His wife had become insane on the failure of her mission to France.

and he deemed that he, who had never been seen on a field of battle, had no right to fly without fighting. Probably he felt that when a monarch cannot preserve his throne, nothing becomes him better than to make his grave beneath its ruins." Sir John Acton closed his lecture with the expression of a hope that the United States would not undertake the government of Mexico. "A confederacy," he observed, "loses its true character when it rules over dependencies; and a democracy lives a threatened life that admits millions of a strange and inferior race which it can neither assimilate nor absorb." The warning was unneeded, for the days of American Imperialism were not yet. But the words have a perennial wisdom which the new owners of the Philippines might find it worth their while to consider.

Sir John Acton stood again for Bridgnorth, this time unsuccessfully, at the General Election of November, 1868. His personal friend and political leader, Mr. Gladstone, became Prime Minister in December of the same year, and his first legislative work was the disestablishment of the Irish Church. With this policy Sir John Acton, not as a Catholic, but as a Liberal, was in full and complete sympathy. He regarded it as "no isolated fact, but an indication of a change which is beginning to affect all the nations of Christendom, and bears witness to the consciousness that political obligation is determined, not by arbitrary maxims of expediency, but by definite and consistent principles." "The political connection," he added, that is, the Liberal party, "which, in spite of many errors and shortcomings,

has been identified with the development of our constitutional liberties, and with the advance of science in our legislation, has entered on a new phase of its existence. And it follows a wise and resolute leader, at whose call the nation has arisen, for the first time in history, to the full height of its imperial vocation" (*Edinburgh Review*, No. 404, p. 516).

Although, as has been said, Acton held that the two great political questions of the time were first the relations of the Church with the State, and secondly, the reform of the Land Laws, events were impending which affected him for a time far more deeply than either. Believing, as he did, that "the full exposition of truth is the great object for which the existence of mankind is prolonged on earth," he could not allow the Papal Syllabus to deter him from following truth with all the knowledge and ability he could command. The *Chronicle*, for which he had written so often, came to an end in 1868. But the same editor, Mr. Wetherell, took over next year the *North British Review*, to which Acton contributed a learned essay on the Massacre of Saint Bartholomew, marshalling the facts in favour of the theory that the murder of the Huguenots had been premeditated at Rome. Researches such as these, and the consequences which they involved, were not congenial to the Vatican, nor to the personally amiable, dogmatically unbending Pontiff who was still under the protection of foreign bayonets. But to no one was Acton's freedom of speculation and inquiry more repugnant than to the able and ambitious prelate who had succeeded Wiseman

as Catholic Archbishop of Westminster. Dr. Manning was at that time a rigid supporter of extreme Ultramontane doctrine, and of authority as opposed to freedom in opinion. With the ardent zeal of a convert, and a convert, as his recent appointment (1865) showed, much in favour at Rome, he strove to suppress the religious independence of the English Catholics. But an historical controversy with Acton was a serious affair. It resembled nothing so much as going in for a public examination with a reasonable certainty of being plucked, and that prospect did not smile upon dignified ecclesiastics impressed with a due sense of their own importance. Moreover, Manning was already absorbed in a policy which would put down moral and intellectual rebellion in the Church of Rome once for all.

So early as the 8th of December 1867 the Pope had signed a Bull, convening the whole episcopate of his Church to an Œcumenical Council at Rome in the same month of 1869. Although it was not officially stated, it was perfectly well known, that the object of the Council was to proclaim the infallibility of the still Sovereign Pontiff. A famous book, emanating from Munich, "The Pope and the Council," by "Janus," which from the Catholic point of view combated the doctrine of Infallibility, received appreciative notice from Lord Acton in the *North British Review*. This magazine, though short-lived, and never very widely circulated, appealed more successfully than any of its contemporaries to the lettered and learned class. Some of its articles, such as the essays of Thomas Hill Green, the

Hegelian philosopher of Balliol, occupy a permanent place in the literature of metaphysics. The article on "The Pope and the Council" was therefore sure to be read by those who, by voice or pen, exercise an influence over the minds of others. The reviewer did not mince his words. He pointed out to the bishops that they had already committed themselves to a very grave extent. In 1854 they had allowed the Pope to proclaim a new dogma, the Immaculate Conception. In 1862 nearly all of them had pronounced in favour of the temporal power. In 1864 they accepted the Syllabus. In 1867 they expressed their willingness to believe whatever the Pope might teach them. "Janus" had passed lightly over the Council of Trent, the subject of a work by Fra Paolo Sarpi which Macaulay considered second only in historical value to the books of Thucydides. Lord Acton, who had much in common with Fra Paolo, expressed his own view with unmistakable energy and force. "The Council of Trent," he said, "impressed on the Church the stamp of an intolerant age, and perpetuated by its decrees the spirit of an austere immorality." It should be the object of the forthcoming Council to reform, to remodel, and to adapt the work which had been done at Trent.

What actually happened was very different from that which Acton desired, though not very different from what he expected. Sir John went to Rome some time before the opening of the Council, full of interest in the result, and full of sympathy with the distinguished minority who were prepared to resist the forging of fresh chains upon their freedom. Among this minority

the most conspicuous was Monseigneur Darboy, Archbishop of Paris, whose tragic death at the hands of the Commune encircled his name with the halo of a martyr and a saint. "The Archbishop of Paris," wrote Acton, "had taken no hostile step in reference to the Council, but he was feared the most of all the men expected at Rome. The Pope had refused to make him a Cardinal, and had written to him a letter of reproof, such as has seldom been received by a bishop. It was felt that he was hostile, not episodically to a single measure, but to the peculiar spirit of this pontificate. He had none of the conventional prejudices and assumed antipathy which are congenial to the hierarchical mind. He was without pathos or affectation, and he had good sense, a perfect temper, and an intolerable wit" (*Edinburgh Review*, No. 404, page 521). By the end of December 1869 Darboy had exacted a promise that the dogma of Infallibility would not be proclaimed by acclamation, so as to take the majority by surprise. Lord Acton wrote frequent reports of the Council and its proceedings, chiefly to Mr. Gladstone and Professor Döllinger, some of which were afterwards collected and published as the "Letters of Quirinus" in the *Allgemeine Zeitung*. Lord Acton considered that the cause of the minority was lost when, on the 24th of April 1870, the Council adopted the Supplement to the First Decree. This was to the effect that the judgments of the Holy See must be observed, even when they proscribe opinions not actually heretical. Lord Acton's comment upon this vote of the episcopal majority does not lack

incisiveness. "They might," he wrote, "conceivably contrive to bind and limit dogmatic infallibility with conditions so stringent as to evade many of the objections taken from the examples of history; but in requiring submission to Papal decrees on matters not articles of faith, they were approving that of which they knew the character; they were confirming, without let or question, a power they saw in daily exercise; they were investing with new authority the existing bulls, and giving unqualified sanction to the inquisitor and the index, to the murder of heretics and the deposing of kings. They approved what they were called on to reform, and blessed with their lips what their hearts knew to be accursed."

A private letter to Mr. Gladstone, written a month before the first meeting of the Council, shows how gloomy were Lord Acton's apprehensions. "Everything," he says, "is prepared here for the production of Papal infallibility, and the plan of operations is already laid down in a way which shows an attentive study of Sarpi's 'History of the Council of Trent.' They are sure of a large majority." A majority, however, would scarcely do. Œcumenical Councils, if not absolutely unanimous, are supposed to attain that moral unanimity which the insignificance of a minority implies. The attitude of the French, and still more of the German and Austro-Hungarian bishops, inspired the Vatican with some alarm. Darboy and Dupanloup were names known and esteemed throughout the Catholic world. Bishops Strossmayer and Hefele, the latter a man of prodigious learning, were still

more strongly opposed to the Papal policy than their French colleagues. Against the expediency of promulgating the doctrine there was a resolute and well-organised mass of opinion in the Council. There were few prepared to call the doctrine itself false, and therefore ready to resist it in the last extremity. To drive a wedge between the majority of the minority and the minority of the minority was the obvious tactics of the Pope and his Ultramontane advisers. "If the Court of Rome is defeated," Lord Acton wrote, "it can only be by men of principle and of science." He believed that a letter from Mr. Gladstone, dealing with the secular side of the question, and with the effect which the decree would have upon the future of English and Irish Catholics, might do much to counteract the influence of Manning. It was impossible for the English Premier to interfere directly with the affairs of another Church. But he allowed Lord Acton to state what he thought about the effects of Ultramontanism on the prospects of educational measures in England. Lord Acton estimated that the bishops opposed to the expediency of the dogma were about two hundred in number, while only as many score would vote against its truth.

No sooner did the Council meet than regulations were issued which gave the Pope the sole right of making decrees and defining dogmas. To this the Council submitted. "The sole legislative authority," Lord Acton wrote on the 1st of January 1870, "has been abandoned to the Pope. It includes the right of issuing dogmatic decrees, and involves the possession of all

the Infallibility which the Church claims." "We have to meet," he added, "an organised conspiracy to establish a power which would be the most formidable enemy of liberty as well as science throughout the world. It can only be met and defeated through the Episcopate, and the Episcopate is exceedingly helpless." So it proved. But Lord Acton, besides helping the minority with the resources of his knowledge and the power of his logic, endeavoured to invoke the secular arm. He was sanguine enough to hope that, as the Pope had anathematised modern civilisation and progress, the governments of Catholic and even of Protestant countries would take some steps in self-defence. The opposition in the Council, he held, was "almost sure to prevail if it were supported, and almost sure to be crushed if it were not." The change of Ministry in France at the beginning of 1870, and the substitution of M. Ollivier for M. Rouher, alarmed the Vatican, although the French ambassador, the Marquis de Banneville, declared that there would be no change of policy. De Banneville was wrong. The new French Government announced that if the dogma were carried the French troops would be recalled, although Cardinal Antonelli assured Count Daru, the French Minister for Foreign Affairs, that the Council was purely theological, and had nothing to do with secular affairs. The threat, however, had no effect. The Pope had gone too far to recede, and the forces of the opposition became daily weaker. There was no hope, and no future, for those bishops who set themselves against the majority of their colleagues and the head

of their Church. Except in France, they could not look for the protection of the Government, and the French Emperor was a bruised reed. "Two days ago," wrote Lord Acton on the 16th of February, "a definite message was sent by the Emperor to Cardinal Antonelli, in which the Emperor declared that he could not afford to have a schism in France, where all the *employé* class, all the literary class, and even the Faubourg St. Germain are against the Infallibility of the Pope. He added that it would dissolve all the engagements existing between France and Rome." But Antonelli, a remarkably shrewd specimen of the Italian diplomatist, calculated that if the bishops yielded, the rest of the practising Catholics would follow them. In another passage of the same most interesting letter Lord Acton says that the *Schema de Ecclesiâ*, already adopted by the Council, "makes civil legislation on all points of contract, marriage, education, clerical universities, mortmain, even on many questions of taxation and common law, subject to the legislation of the Church, which would simply be the arbitrary will of the Pope. Most assuredly no man accepting such a code could be a loyal subject, or fit for the enjoyment of political privileges. In this sense the French bishops have written to the French Government, and that is what they ask me to write to you." How deep an impression this letter made upon Mr. Gladstone's mind became apparent when, a few years afterwards, he entered into controversy with the Church of Rome. Strange as it may seem, these Gallican prelates appealed through Lord Acton to the Government of the Queen, seeing "no

human remedy for this peril other than the intervention of the Powers." But the British Government could not have acted, even in concert with France, unless they had been prepared to face a storm of indignation, Protestant as well as Catholic, which no British interest required them to encounter.

After the decree of Infallibility had been produced, the German prelates made an important protest against bishops without sees, chiefly Roman Monsignori, being allowed to vote, and also complained, in words furnished by Lord Acton himself, that the claim to enact dogmas by a majority endangered the freedom, as well as the universality, of the Council. But "the minority were in great confusion and uncertainty, and disposed to rely on external help." That help they never received. Lord Acton put the danger as strongly as he could. Catholics, he declared, would "at once become irredeemable enemies of civil and religious liberty. They would have to profess a false system of morality, and to repudiate literary and scientific sincerity. They would be as dangerous to civil society in the school as in the State." But between Catholics who held that with such matters it would be profane for any Protestant to meddle, and Protestants who rejoiced that now at last the Catholics were coming out in their true colours, the Cabinet, if they had taken Lord Acton's advice, would have had an uneasy, and barely defensible, position. So what Acton calls "this insane enterprise" of conferring upon the Pope an unconditional and unlimited infallibility was suffered to proceed without

any political remonstrance from England. Mr. Odo Russell, afterwards Lord Ampthill, Lord John's nephew, was instructed to keep the Foreign Office informed of what happened the Council, but his information was much less copious than Lord Acton's. He was not instructed to do anything more, and officially he was a member of the Legation at Florence. While other governments did nothing, the Italian Government, in Lord Acton's opinion, made matters worse. Their measures of what he called confiscation against the property of the Church would, he thought, prevent some Italian bishops from voting in the minority who would otherwise have been disposed to do so. Yet, if Lord Acton were right in his description of the Papal policy, he could hardly have been surprised that Liberal governments in Catholic countries should regard the Church as an enemy.

On the 15th of March 1870, a curious protest was presented to the Council by some bishops of the United Kingdom. The substance of it is thus described by Lord Acton: "They state that the English and Irish Catholics obtained their emancipation, and the full privileges of citizenship, by solemn and repeated declarations that their religion did not teach the dogma now proposed; that these declarations made by the bishops, and permitted by Rome, are, in fact, the conditions under which Catholics are allowed to sit in Parliament, and to hold offices of trust and responsibility under the Crown; and that they cannot be forgotten or overlooked by us without dishonour." Lord Acton complained bitterly of France because she maintained the

temporal power of the Pope, and excluded Italians from their national capital, by her troops, while yet she would not attempt to restrain him from abusing the jurisdiction she enabled him to exercise. "The religious houses are suppressed, the schools of divinity reduced, the priesthood almost starved, because France is determined to keep the Pope on his despotic throne. It is a policy which degrades the Italian Government in the eyes of the nation, nurses the revolutionary passion, and hinders the independence of the country, and which can no longer be defended on the score of religious liberty. The French Protectorate has become as odious to Catholicism as to the Italian State, and it is about to prove as pernicious to other countries as it is to Italy." When a division was taken on the dogma of Infallibility, 451 bishops voted with the Pope, 88 against him, and 62 for further inquiry. Then the minority gave up the struggle, and when, on the 18th of July, three days after the declaration of war between France and Germany, the principle was formally defined, only two bishops resisted the acclamation of 533. A few weeks later the French troops left Rome, and the temporal power was at an end.

Such was the miserably futile result of the Opposition led by Darboy, Dupanloup, Rauscher, Schwartzenberg, Kenrick, Conolly, Hefele, and Strossmayer. They were borne down by the dead weight of numbers, and the traditional authority of the Holy See. Catholics were offered the choice of submission or excommunication. The official head of the English Catholics,

Manning, was among the most zealous supporters of the Papacy. Newman deeply deplored, but humbly submitted. So even did Strossmayer, the brave and eloquent Croat, who had been shouted down at the Council in violent and abusive language when he denied that Protestantism was the source of Atheism, and pleaded for the old Catholic rule of unanimity. Döllinger, challenged by the Archbishop of Munich to accept the decree, refused, and was cut off, like Spinoza, to his eternal honour, from the congregation of the faithful. Lord Acton, on the other hand, the stay and support of the minority throughout the Council and before it, was not molested, perhaps because he was a layman, perhaps because he was a peer.

While he was at Rome, in November 1869, Acton had received from Mr. Gladstone, and accepted, the offer of a barony. For a young man of thirty-five this was a great and most unusual distinction. It was made all the greater by the fact that his name occurred in the first list of such recommendations submitted by the Prime Minister to the Queen. At that time the general public hardly knew Sir John Acton's name. But he had all the usual qualifications for a peerage, except wealth, being connected with the aristocracy by birth and marriage, the head of an old English family, and the inheritor of an old English baronetcy, who had gained six years' political experience in the House of Commons. "His character," Mr. Gladstone wrote to the Queen, "is of the first order, and he is one of the most learned and accomplished, though one of the most modest and unassuming,

men of the day" (Morley's "Life of Gladstone," ii. 430). No praise could be better deserved, or expressed with more studious moderation. Lord Acton pursued in the House of Lords the same silent course that he had adopted in the House of Commons. He remained, unlike many peers of Mr. Gladstone's creation, faithful to the Liberal party, at that time, and for so many years afterwards, led by his step-father, Lord Granville.

Lord Acton was made an Honorary Doctor of Philosophy by the University of Munich in 1872, the last year of the *North British Review*, after which he ceased to write regularly for the Press. In 1873 a very different honour was in contemplation. He had been consulted by Lord Granville upon the European situation, then regarded as critical, and showed such remarkable knowledge of it that the idea of sending him as Ambassador to Berlin was seriously entertained (*Edinburgh Review*, No. 404, page 528). The appointment would in many ways have been desirable, and in some unexceptionable. For Lord Acton was a born diplomatist, and, though the German Emperor was a Protestant, half the empire was Catholic. But the prize was apparently thought too high for a man outside the diplomatic service who had filled no other post under the Crown. Lord Acton remained at home, and in 1874 found himself suddenly once again in the thick of a theological battle. The echoes of the Vatican Council, and of Papal pretensions, seemed to have died away, when, in November 1874, Mr. Gladstone, freed from the trammels of office, and regarding his leadership of the Liberal

party as near its close, startled the world by a pamphlet on "The Vatican Decrees in their Bearing on Civil Allegiance." He had previously, in an article on "Ritualism," contributed to the *Contemporary Review*, expressed his opinion that Romanising in the Church of England was least to be feared at a moment "when Rome had substituted for the proud boast of *semper eadem* a policy of violence and change in faith; when she had refurbished and paraded anew every rusty tool she was fondly thought to have disused; when no one could become her convert without renouncing his moral and mental freedom, and placing his civil loyalty and duty at the mercy of another; and when she had equally repudiated modern thought and ancient history." While in this frame of mind, Mr. Gladstone paid a visit to Munich, and had many long talks with the venerable Professor Döllinger. The spectacle of a man so wise, pious, learned, and holy under the ban of the Church seems to have kindled in him a burning indignation against the authors of the Vatican decrees. He wrote a pamphlet, and informed Lord Acton from Hawarden in October that he meant to publish it. Lord Acton deprecated this step. He was far nearer to Mr. Gladstone in opinion than he was to the Court of Rome. But he had no desire to see the subject reopened, knowing that the withdrawal of the decrees was impossible, and fearing that public opinion might be dangerously excited against his fellow-Catholics by so powerful an onslaught. He did not sufficiently allow for the great progress in the direction of tolerance made since the passing

of the Ecclesiastical Titles Act, which Mr. Gladstone himself had repealed three years before. The pamphlet appeared in November 1874, and more than a hundred thousand copies of it were sold. The English Catholics were disturbed. Some were indignant, and some were alarmed. But in the end they were none the worse. On the contrary, Mr. Gladstone did them a service by giving them an opportunity to declare that they were, and always would be, as loyal and patriotic as their Protestant countrymen. It is impossible not to trace in Mr. Gladstone's pamphlet, as in the passage already cited from the *Contemporary Review*, the effect of Lord Acton's letters from Rome in 1870. The substance of the argument is that the Catholics obtained emancipation by denying that Papal infallibility was a dogma of their Church, and that the Power which had changed their faith might change their allegiance. The Vatican decrees reversed the policy of Clement the Fourteenth, who, by overthrowing the supremacy of the Jesuits, had "levelled in the dust the deadliest foes that mental and moral liberty had ever known." Equality of civil rights should be maintained without regard for religious differences. But Mr. Gladstone thought himself entitled to ask the Catholics of England and Ireland whether they would assist in the re-erection of the temporal power by force. Many were the answers to this famous pamphlet. The most eloquent was Newman's. The most hostile was Manning's. The most interesting was Acton's. It is characteristic of Lord Acton's courage and candour that he should have answered at all.

He was regarded at Rome with something more than suspicion, and nobody quite understood why he had escaped the fate of Döllinger. There was nothing that Mr. Gladstone could say of the decrees too strongly condemnatory to command his assent. But his invincible integrity of mind would not allow him, for the sake of his own peace, to acquiesce in the practical conclusions which Mr. Gladstone drew from irrefragable premises. In several letters written for the *Times*, one of them addressed personally to Mr. Gladstone, Lord Acton gave the only reply which could in the circumstances be given. Mr. Gladstone's reasoning was unassailable in argument. But man is not a logical animal. People are sometimes better than their principles, sometimes worse, very seldom consistent. As Mr. Gladstone himself had said a few years before, "The limit of possible variation between character and opinion – aye, between character and belief – is widening and will widen." Lord Acton, with all his subtlety and all his learning, could only take refuge in the old and familiar truth that what a man will do cannot be inferred from what he believes. The *Corpus Juris*, he said (*Times*, November 9, 1874), makes the murder of Protestants lawful. Pius the Fifth justified the assassination of Elizabeth. Gregory the Thirteenth condoned, or rather applauded, the massacre of Saint Bartholomew (*Times*, November 24). Was it therefore fair to assume that all Catholics who accepted the Vatican decrees, or even all Ultramontanes, were potential murderers? "Communion with Rome," he said at the same time, "is dearer to me than life." He concluded his

letters in dignified and moving sentences, which made a deep and just impression upon Catholics and Protestants alike. "It would be well if men had never fallen into the temptation of suppressing truth and encouraging error for the better security of religion. Our Church stands, and our faith should stand, not on the virtues of men, but on the surer ground of an institution and a guidance that are divine. I should dishonour and betray the Church if I entertained a suspicion that the evidence of religion could be weakened or the authority of councils sapped by a knowledge of the facts with which I have been dealing, or of others which are not less grievous or less certain because they remain untold." It was not to be supposed that this language would give satisfaction to the dominant party in the Church of Rome, which had already been much tried by Lord Acton's energy behind the scenes during the Vatican Council. An apology which was more injurious than the attack added fuel to the flames. "If I am excommunicated," he wrote to Mr. Gladstone from Aldenham on the 19th of December 1874, "I should rather say when I am." Yet he was not. He satisfied his bishop, Browne of Shrewsbury, that he was dogmatically sound, and that it would have been inconsistent with his argument to attack the Vatican decrees. He had indeed accepted them as the foundation of his case. What he wanted to show was that neither the Jesuits nor the Inquisition, neither false doctrines nor bad Popes, had made Catholics indifferent to the moral law. Manning, now a Cardinal, was not so easily contented as Bishop Browne, or as Bishop Clifford, who also

absolved Lord Acton. His haughty and commanding temper had been stimulated by promotion, and by the favour of the Pope. It was one of his most cherished aims to humble the pride of the old Catholic families, and make them feel the discipline of the Church. He wrote three letters to Lord Acton, and received, it need scarcely be said, the most courteous replies, which left him as wise as he was before. But he went no further, and the correspondence was never published. Manning was not without prudence, and he shrank from proceeding to extremities with a man whose intellect was as keen as his, and whose knowledge was vastly superior. It would not have cost Lord Acton much research to produce a summary account of the Inquisition, or a biographical sketch of selected Popes, which would have done more to prove the soundness of his position than to edify the Christian world. The new cardinal, if he had indulged in an historical controversy with "Quirinus," might have emerged from it with less credit to himself than amusement to the learned society of Europe. For these, or for other reasons, he concluded to leave Lord Acton alone.

Henceforth, Lord Acton abandoned theological polemics, and devoted himself to his true life, the life of a student. He loved truth too much to love controversy for its own sake, and he was conscious that, though he had escaped penalties, orthodox Catholics would not receive his arguments without prejudice. Mr. Gladstone wrote another pamphlet, in which, while maintaining his own position, he accepted the loyal assurances of the

Catholics as sincere, and with that the controversy ceased. But in June 1876 Lord Acton wrote him a private letter, which contains the clearest statement of his own opinion upon Ultramontanism and Ultramontanes. "I have tried in vain," he wrote, "to reconcile myself to your opinion that Ultramontanism really exists as a definite and genuine system of religious faith, providing its own solutions of ethical and metaphysical problems, and satisfying the conscience and the intellect of conscientious and intelligent men. It has never been my fortune to meet with an esoteric Ultramontane – I mean, putting aside the ignorant mass, and those who are incapable of reasoning, that I do not know of a religious and educated Catholic who really believes that the See of Rome is a safe guide to salvation… In short, I do not believe there are Catholics who, sincerely and intelligently, believe that Rome is right and that Döllinger is wrong. And therefore I think you are too hard on Ultramontanes, or too gentle with Ultramontanism. You say, for instance, that it promotes untruthfulness. I don't think that is fair. It not only promotes, it inculcates, distinct mendacity and deceitfulness. In certain cases it is made a duty to lie. But those who teach this doctrine do not become habitual liars in other things."

With this plain and straightforward language we may leave Lord Acton as a theologian, and pass to other aspects of his busy life. His great work should have been, and was intended to be, a History of Liberty. For that purpose his library at Aldenham was collected, and to frame different definitions of

liberty was one of his favourite pastimes. He loved liberty with all the ardour of Milton, and investigated it with all the science of Locke. Even Liberalism, which may be thought an inferior thing, was with him "the beginning of real religion, a condition of interior Catholicism" (Acton to Gladstone, March 22, 1891). This History was never written, nor even begun. All that there is of it, all that there ever was of it, except books and notes, materials for others to use, consists of two lectures delivered at Bridgnorth in the year 1877. One was called "The History of Freedom in Antiquity," and the other "The History of Freedom in Christianity." These lectures are exceedingly rare, and the only copies I have seen are in the British Museum. If the audience listened to them with pleasure, and absorbed them with ease, they had intellects of unusual calibre, and employed them to the best advantage. Read carefully and at leisure, they are full of suggestion and of insight. Their fault is that, in homely phrase, they pour a quart of liquor into a pint pot. They are so much crowded with names and references, that to follow the chief thread of the argument is made needlessly hard. "It would be easy," the Bridgnorth Institute was told, "to point out a paragraph in St. Augustine, or a sentence of Grotius, that outweighs in influence the Acts of fifty Parliaments; and our case owes more to Cicero and Seneca, to Vinet and Tocqueville, than to the laws of Lycurgus, or the five codes of France." The sentence and the paragraph should have been pointed out. Something should have been said, if not about Vinet and Tocqueville, at

least about Cicero and Seneca. A geographer may have too many names in his map, and a learned man may condense his knowledge until it has no meaning for those who know less than himself. But, on the other hand, these lectures contain passages at once lucid and worth their weight in gold, which could only have come from a mind at once acute, meditative, and well stored. Such, for instance, is the declaration, "By liberty I mean the assurance that every man shall be protected in doing what he believes his duty against the influence of authority and majorities, custom and opinion." "Liberty," proceeds the lecturer, "is not a means to a higher political end. It is itself the highest political end… A generous spirit prefers that his country should be poor, and weak, and of no account, but free, rather than powerful, prosperous, and enslaved. It is better to be the citizen of a humble commonwealth in the Alps than a subject of the superb autocracy that overshadows half of Asia and of Europe." This will seem a hard saying to many, and it is indeed far removed from the sensual idolatry of mere size that vulgarises modern Imperialism. But it was with Lord Acton a fundamental principle, and it is not the size of Periclean Athens, or of Elizabethan England, which made them imperishably great. "It is bad to be oppressed by a minority, but it is worse to be oppressed by a majority." Worse, because more desperate, with less hope of rebellion, or escape. We must look, Lord Acton warns us, to substance and essence, not to form and outward show. The martyrdom of Socrates was the act of a free Republic,

and it was Caæsar who liberated Rome from the tyranny of Republican institutions. The fault of the classical State was that it tried to be Church and State in one, and thus infringed upon individualism by regulating religion. The three things wanting in ancient liberty were representative government, emancipation of slaves, and freedom of conscience. In Christian times Thomas Aquinas anticipated the theory of the Whig Revolution. The worst enemy of freedom in modern times was that mock hero of sham greatness, Louis Quatorze. The only known forms of liberty are Republics and Constitutional Monarchies. "It was from America that the plain ideas that men ought to mind their own business, and that the nation is responsible to Heaven for the acts of the State, ideas long locked in the breast of solitary thinkers and hidden away in Latin folios, burst forth like a conqueror upon the world they were destined to transform under the title of the Rights of Man." Ever since his visit to America in the days of President Pierce, if not before, Acton had made a special study of the American Constitution in its strength and its weakness, in the amplitude of its safeguards, and in its fatal want of elasticity. A Monarchy cannot be too constitutional. But a too constitutional Republic is a difficult machine to work. England, said a French critic, is a Republic with an hereditary President: the United States are a Monarchy with an elected King.

From this time forward Lord Acton wrote less, and read, if possible, more. Dr. Shaw's careful Bibliography, my obligations to which I have already acknowledged, contains nothing between

1877 and 1885 except a review of Sir Erskine May's "Democracy in Europe" for the *Quarterly* of January 1878. Sir Erskine May, the well-known Clerk of the House, was a pleasant and popular writer, who dealt largely in generalisations, and sometimes condescended to platitudes. He was an earnest Liberal, though his office imposed some restraint upon his opinions, and it is creditable to the impartiality of the late Sir William Smith that he should have allowed a Liberal critic to deal with a Liberal author in the traditional organ of Conservatism. He certainly had his reward. For it would be difficult to find in the *Quarterly Review* from the days of Gifford and Southey to our own an article of more fascinating interest and more solid value than this masterly essay, which its author never took the trouble to republish. Notwithstanding Lord Acton's minute and conscientious accuracy in points of detail, he is always best and most characteristic in broad, luminous inferences from large masses of history and long periods of time. He contented himself on this occasion with a few civil remarks about the public servant who made so industrious a use of his leisure, and devoted the rest of his space, which was far too small, to a comparison or contrast of democracy with freedom. He showed that for eleven hundred years, from the first Constantine to the last, the Christian Empire was as despotic as the pagan; that it was Gregory the Seventh who made the Papacy independent of the empire; that Luther bequeathed as his political testament the doctrines of Divine right and passive obedience; and that Spanish

Jesuits, in arguing against the title of Henry the Fourth to the throne of France, had anticipated the doctrines of Milton, Locke, and Rousseau. Passing on, with the ease of a man at home in all periods of history, to the dynastic change of 1688, he described the Whig settlement not as a Venetian oligarchy, but as an aristocracy of freeholders, while from the American rebellion of the following century he drew the moral that a revolution with very little provocation may be just, and a democracy of very large dimensions may be safe. The defect in the principles of 1789 was that they exalted equality at the expense of liberty, and subjected the free will of the individual to the unbridled power of the State.

After 1879 Lord Acton ceased to live at his country house in Shropshire, dividing the months when he was not in London between Germany and the Riviera. Besides his great Library at Aldenham, there was a smaller but complete library in each of his three houses. He usually spent the winter at Cannes, and the autumn in Bavaria, at Tegernsee, which belonged to the family of his wife. This cosmopolitan existence was by no means uncongenial to him, and, correspondence apart, he was not cut off from his English friends. Cannes in the season is as much English as French, and when Lord Acton was in London he made the best use of his time. The hours he spent in reading were so disposed that he could enjoy at the close of the day the sort of society he liked best. He was a member of Grillions, and of The Club. He knew almost everybody worth knowing, and no one so fond of study was ever more sociable. But, as these letters

show, the man whom above all others he esteemed and revered was Mr. Gladstone. Mr. Gladstone, with characteristic humility, always deferred to Lord Acton's judgment in matters historical. On the other hand, Lord Acton, the most hypercritical of men, and the precise opposite of a hero-worshipper, an iconoclast if ever there was one, regarded Mr. Gladstone as the first of English statesmen, living or dead. The reason for this opinion will be found in the following pages. The opinion itself is not the less important because Lord Acton was in many respects cautious to a fault, and had little of the enthusiasm which sustained his idol. Except Döllinger, "the glory of Catholic learning," as Mr. Bryce well calls him, there was no other contemporary for whom Lord Acton felt unqualified reverence. Mere oratory had not much effect upon him, even if it were John Bright's or the Duke of Argyll's. Admiring, as he could not but admire, the charm and power of Newman's style, he considered Newman himself to be a "sophist, the manipulator, and not the servant, of truth." Knowing Mr. Gladstone from the inside, as few outside his own family knew him, he felt his simplicity as well as his greatness, and realised that he had no object except to learn what was true, and to do what was right. In politics there was no difference between the two men, unless it were that Lord Acton could never quite forgive Mr. Gladstone's eulogistic tribute to the memory of Lord Beaconsfield. Even in religion that which divided them was small indeed when compared with that which united them. Lord Acton was as staunch a believer in religious liberty as

any Protestant, and no Catholic could desire more fervently the reunion of Christendom. In politics, as I have said, the sympathy was complete. Unlike most Catholics, Acton had been in favour of Italian independence, so dear to Mr. Gladstone's heart. He had always belonged to the school of Liberals who put the rights of the individual above the claims of the State, and he had as little liking for Socialism as Mr. Gladstone himself. He held in utter detestation the foreign policy of Lord Beaconsfield, and that temper of mind which goes by the cant term of "Jingoism." No one rejoiced more heartily over the Liberal victory of 1880, or attributed it more exclusively to Mr. Gladstone. No one worked harder to keep him at the head of the Liberal party, and no one can have foreseen more clearly the disastrous consequences of his final retirement. Perhaps the nearest approach to a schism between Lord Acton and his political chief was that each had a favourite novelist, and that neither would acknowledge the transcendent merits of the rival. Lord Acton was unjust to Scott. Mr. Gladstone underrated George Eliot. Lord Acton's estimate of George Eliot may be found in some of the ensuing letters, and in the *Nineteenth Century* for March 1885. This article, one of the most elaborate Lord Acton ever wrote, was translated into German, and, so far as the general public were concerned, might as well have appeared in that language at first. It is an extreme and provoking instance of the writer's passion for condensation, reference, and innuendo. It is well worth the trouble of reading, although fiction is not the province in which Lord Acton's

opinion was most valuable. But the trouble is due to congested sentences, and might easily have been spared.

When in 1886 Mr. Gladstone made his great attempt to settle the Irish question by Home Rule, Lord Acton gave him a zealous and cordial support. Although, as we have seen, he was far from holding the doctrine of nationality in an unqualified form, he had grasped for many years with increasing strength the conviction that Ireland could be orderly and peaceably governed by Irishmen alone. So far back as October 1881, when the Liberal Government and the Land League were in open hostility, and Mr. Parnell was arrested under the Coercion Act, he wrote, "The treatment of Home Rule as an idea conceivably reasonable (in the speech at Leeds) which was repeated at the Guildhall, delighted me." There were not many readers besides Lord Acton who discerned at that time the trend of Mr. Gladstone's ideas. But a very few months later, in February 1882, Mr. Gladstone, speaking on the Address, used language of a much more significant kind, to Lord Acton's great delight. "I have long wished," he wrote on the 20th of February, "for that declaration about self-government… The occasion last week gave extraordinary weight to the words… The risk is that he may seem to underrate the gravity of a great constitutional change in the introduction of a federal element." Lord Acton, it will be observed, much as he desired the change, did not ignore its risks, or even its perils. When the decisive moment came, which Mr. Morley has described with so much eloquence and

power ("Life of Gladstone," vol. iii. pp. 311-12), Lord Acton sounded a note of warning in the midst of his felicitations. "From the point of view of the ages," he wrote on the 18th of March 1886, "it is the sublime crown of his work, and there is a moral grandeur about it which will, I hope, strengthen and console him under any amount of difficulty, and even disaster." It was this faculty of seeing the case against his own most deeply cherished principles and predilections which made Lord Acton so valuable a friend and counsellor to Mr. Gladstone. Mr. Gladstone's splendid enthusiasm, and indomitable optimism, sometimes led him to ignore obstacles against which he might have provided. Acton, whose temperament was critical, as his mind was judicial, pointed out, with the sincerity of true friendship, though with unfailing tact, the clouds above, and the rocks ahead. No man admired Mr. Gladstone more. No man flattered him less.

The following letter to Mrs. Drew expresses his opinion at the time, and also the judgment of a distinguished Italian statesman who was always friendly to England: —

"Your letter comes in the midst of the living echoes of the speech, and of the uncertainty that follows, and does not quite relieve my feeling of apprehension. Rome is not a good place for accurate news, and I hope for more letters at Cannes in a couple of days. My old friend, Minghetti, is sinking under an incurable illness. The other night, when several people were attacking me about the Irish Bill, he said, very solemnly and in his best Italian: 'The one will be happy even if he fails, and the other will repent

even of his success.' The other was Bismarck. Next morning came Herbert's letter saying that he feels that for himself the best thing would be defeat.

"I hope that there is not any real inconsistency in my language or in my thoughts at this crisis. I am more decidedly in favour of the principle of the measure than anybody; and there can hardly be one among your father's friends who urged it more decidedly, though some followed more or less contentedly. The Bill is better than I sometimes expected it to be, on one or two important points. It is not only right in my eyes, but glorious as the summit of his career, and if I was on the spot I should be the warmest and the most convinced of its supporters.

"But what makes it more admirable to me is that the stimulus is not hope but duty; that it is very much more clearly dictated by principle than by expediency, that the supreme motive is not strongly sustained by sordid calculation. I do not see a real likelihood of its succeeding in this Session, and I am not sanguine about success in Ireland.

"Arguments founded on the presumed good qualities of the Irish do not go very far with me, and I am ready to find the vices of the national character incurable. Especially in a country where religion does not work, ultimately, in favour of morality; therefore I am not hopeful, and it is with a mind prepared for failure and even disaster that I persist in urging the measure."

His adhesion to the cause, though it had no weight with the mass of electors, who did not know his name, had a deep

meaning of another kind. When many men of the lettered, scientific, and learned classes left the Liberal party rather than vote for Home Rule, one of the few English names that enjoyed a European reputation did something to counterbalance others which were paraded so often that they seemed indefinitely numerous.

Lord Acton, however, did not come forward as a popular champion of Home Rule, for which he could have furnished a host of historic precedents. In the sphere of action he was too apt to distrust himself. The House of Lords was not favourable for the purpose, and he never appeared on public platforms. He was more congenially occupied in founding the *English Historical Review*, of which the late Bishop Creighton, then Professor of Ecclesiastical History at Cambridge, was the first editor. In 1887 he criticised, not without severity, the third and fourth volumes of the editor's great work on the Papacy. Some editors might have demurred to the insertion of the article. But Creighton was far above all petty and personal feelings of that or any kind. Among the other books noticed by Acton in the *Historical Review* were Seeley's "Life of Napoleon," Bright's "History of England" (by the Master of University), and Bryce's "American Commonwealth." Academic honours were now coming in rapid succession. In 1888 Lord Acton was made an Honorary Doctor of Laws at Cambridge, in 1889 a Doctor of Civil Law at Oxford, and in 1890 an Honorary Fellow of All Souls, thereby becoming Mr. Gladstone's colleague. For a man who had published scarcely

anything in his own name these compliments were as rare as they were just.

When Mr. Gladstone formed his final Administration in 1892, Lord Acton was appointed a Lord-in-Waiting to the Queen. This may seem a singular method of rewarding literary merit. But the circumstances were peculiar. Lord Acton was desirous of showing his devotion to the Prime Minister, and his belief in the cause of Home Rule. His Parliamentary career had not been distinguished enough for more purely political office, and I am told by those who understand such matters that the lowness of his rank in the Peerage precluded him from a higher place in the Household. The incongruity, however, though Lord Acton felt it himself, was not quite so great as it looked. Besides their month's attendance at the Court, the Lords-in-Waiting are sometimes employed to represent public departments in the House of Peers, and Lord Acton represented the Irish Office for the Chief Secretary, Mr. Morley. In that character he showed, when occasion came, that his long silence in Parliament had not been due to incapacity for public speaking. At Windsor he was agreeable to the Queen from his German tastes and sympathies, not to mention the fact that he could speak German as fluently as English. Every moment of leisure during his "wait" there was spent in the Castle library. Yet the position was an unnatural one, and Lord Acton soon became anxious to escape from it. His thoughts turned to his favourite Bavaria, and he humbly suggested the Legation at Stuttgart as a possible sphere.

But something infinitely better than any political or diplomatic post remained for this born student and truly learned man. In 1895, just a year after Mr. Gladstone's resignation, Sir John Seeley, Professor of Modern History at Cambridge, departed this life. The Chair was in the gift of the Crown, that is, of the Prime Minister, and Lord Rosebery appointed Lord Acton. The appointment was singularly felicitous, and the opportunity came in the nick of time. For the Liberal Government was tottering to its fall, and Lord Salisbury was not wont to overlook the claims of political supporters. Lord Rosebery's choice was bold and unexpected. But it was more than successful; it was triumphant. Lord Acton was of the same age as his predecessor, and it is a dangerous thing for a man to begin the business of teaching at sixty. An academic Board would not have had the courage to appoint Lord Acton. They would have dreaded his want of experience. The advantage of retaining a connection of this kind with the State is that a Minister, rising above the purely academic point of view, will sometimes overlook or ignore technical disqualifications in favour of learning or genius. Even Cambridge herself was at first a little startled by the nomination of this famous, but rather mysterious stranger. Lord Acton had to make his own way, and he was not long in making it. The opening sentences of his Inaugural Lecture on the Study of History put him at once on good terms with his audience, and through his audience with the University. "I look back to-day," he said (June 11, 1895), "to

a time before the middle of the century, when I was reading at Edinburgh, and fervently wishing to come to this University. At three Colleges I applied for admission, and, as things then were, I was refused by all. Here, from the first, I vainly fixed my hopes, and here, in a happier hour, after five-and-forty years, they are at last fulfilled." It is probable that the happiest hours of Lord Acton's life were spent at Cambridge. As the writer in the *Edinburgh Review*, so often quoted, says, "He loved Cambridge from his soul; loved the grounds and the trees, the buildings and the romance of the old colleges, the treasures of the libraries, the intercourse with scholars." In his first lecture he tried to find some point of agreement with Seeley. But their views of History were fundamentally different. To Seeley, History was purely political. In Lord Acton's view it included social and intellectual movements neither propelled nor impeded by the State. Lord Acton reckoned Modern History as beginning with the close of the fifteenth century, "when Columbus subverted the notions of the world, and reversed the conditions of production, wealth, and power; Machiavelli released Government from the restraint of law; Erasmus diverted the current of ancient learning from profane into Christian channels; Luther broke the chain of authority and tradition at the strongest link; and Copernicus erected an invincible power that set for ever the mark of progress upon the time that was to come." That "history is the true demonstration of religion" was one of the maxims which Lord Acton impressed upon his pupils at the first opportunity. But

perhaps the most characteristic feature of the discourse is his insistence upon the necessity of keeping up the moral standard. Better, he exclaimed, err, if at all, on the side of rigour. For "if we lower our standard in history, we cannot uphold it in Church or State." When this brilliant and fascinating lecture came to be published, it was unfortunately encumbered by more than a hundred notes, all quotations, many of which merely expressed Lord Acton's meaning in language less forcible than his own. "As if," says Macaulay of some pointless reference to a Greek play by a Shakespearean commentator, "as if only Shakespeare and Euripides knew that mothers loved their children." Lord Acton was rather too apt to think that an expression of opinion, like a statement of fact, required an authority to support it.

Even under the stimulus of Cambridge Lord Acton did not work quickly. During the five years of his active professorship he only delivered two courses of lectures. The first was on the French Revolution. The second was on Modern History as a whole. He would naturally and by preference have begun with the more general subject. But the exigencies of the Tripos, or of the Curriculum, prevailed, and the thoroughbred animal was put, not for the first time in this world, into the harness of a hack. Lord Acton's lectures were, as they were bound to be, crowded. But they were only a small part of what he did for Cambridge. An Honorary Fellow of Trinity, he received graduate or undergraduate visitors with equal courtesy and kindness at his rooms in Nevill's Court. To them, and to any one who could

appreciate it, he would always readily impart the knowledge he had spent his life in acquiring. He was not merely a willing answerer of questions, and a generous lender of books. He had boxes full of the notes he had made since boyhood, each box appropriated to its peculiar subject, and these notes were at the disposal of all historical students who could make a proper use of them. His pupils were, as Mr. Bryce puts it, "awed by the majesty of his learning." "When Lord Acton answers a question put to him," said one of them, "I feel as if I were looking at a pyramid. I see the point of it clear and sharp, but I see also the vast subjacent mass of solid knowledge."[3]

The following letter from Dr. Henry Jackson, Fellow of Trinity, for which my warmest thanks are due to the distinguished writer, will be interesting to all who desire to know more of Lord Acton's Cambridge life: —

"You ask me for information about Acton's life and work at Cambridge. I am not competent to write anything systematic about either the one or the other; but it is a pleasure to me to put down some of my recollections and impressions, and I shall be glad if my jottings are of any use to you.

"When Seeley died in 1895, my first thought was – 'If they are good to us, they will send us Acton;' but I hardly hoped that he would be thought of, and I did not expect that, if he had the offer, he would accept it. So the news of his appointment was to me a very joyful surprise. When he came, he appeared

[3] "Studies in Contemporary Biography," 398.

heartily to like his new surroundings – his rooms at Trinity, the collegiate life, the informal conversation, his lectures, his pupils, and the University library. Quietly but keenly observant of men and things, he was very soon completely at home in the University, with which, as he related in his inaugural lecture, he had wished to connect himself forty years before.

"In hall, in combination-room, and where men smoked and talked, he took an unobtrusive but effective part in conversation. His utterances, always terse and epigrammatic, were sometimes a little oracular: 'I suppose, Lord Acton,' said some one interrogatively, 'that So-and-so's book is a very good one?' 'Yes,' was the reply; 'perhaps five per cent. less good than the public thinks it.' But a casual question not seldom drew from him an acute comment, an interesting reminiscence, or a significant fact. 'When was London in the greatest danger?' asked some one rather vaguely. 'In 1803,' was the immediate answer, 'when Fulton proposed to put the French army across the Channel in steamboats, and Napoleon rejected the scheme.'

"Others will tell you of his influence upon the historical studies of the University, of his help given freely to teachers and to learners, and of his judgment and skill in planning and distributing the sections and the subsections of the 'Modern History,' which he did not live to edit. He was an active member of the committee which recommends books for purchase by the University Library. But, in general, he shunned the routine of business. Even at the Library Syndicate, though he followed

the proceedings attentively, he seldom or never took part in discussion or voted. Indeed, I thought that I noticed in him a paradox which extended beyond the limits of academic affairs. On the one hand, he was observant of everything, and he made up his mind about everything. On the other hand, except where supreme principles – Truth, Right, Toleration, Freedom – were in question, he was cautious and reserved in the expression of opinion, and he always preferred to leave action to others.

"Like other specialists, I found that my own study had not escaped his attention. He had a good general knowledge of the work done by modern students of ancient philosophy, and his criticisms of them showed a sound, clear, and independent judgment. One or two trifling incidents seemed to me significant. The first time that he came to my rooms, looking quickly along a bookshelf, he soliloquised: 'I never knew that Bonitz had translated the *Metaphysics*.' It surprised me, not that Acton did not know of the posthumous publication of this work, but that he expected to remember all that a specialist in Greek philosophy had written. On another occasion he was talking of German professors – first of professors of history, afterwards of others. He could tell us about all: he had heard many. At last it occurred to me to ask him about a forgotten scholar who had written a treatise about Socrates. The book was in no way important, but it had given me a very agreeable impression of the writer's personality. I found that Acton had known the man, had attended his lectures, and could testify to the personal attraction which I

had surmised.

"When Acton died, writers of obituary notices appeared to regard him as one who, while he devoured books and accumulated facts, passed no judgments, framed no generalisations, and cherished no enthusiasms; and I fancied that Sir Mountstuart Grant Duff, in his very interesting letter to the *Spectator*, unconsciously encouraged this misapprehension. Nothing could well be further from the truth. To me it seemed that Acton never read of an action without appraising its significance and morality, never learnt a fact without fitting it into its environment, and never studied a life or a period without considering its effect upon the progress of humanity.

"His judgments were severe but just. Neither glamour of reputation nor splendour of achievement blinded him to moral iniquity. He had a wealth of righteous indignation which upon occasion blazed out fiercely. 'Are you aware,' he once asked, 'that Borromeo was a party to a scheme of assassinations?' 'But,' said some one, 'must we not make allowance for the morality of the time?' 'I make no allowance for that sort of thing,' was the emphatic answer; and the contrast with the measured and sedate tones of Acton's ordinary utterance made the explosion all the more impressive.

"This righteous indignation carried with it a corresponding appreciation of anything good. I remember well how he told me the supplement to the old story of the Copenhagen signal – that Parker made it with the expressed intention of relieving

Nelson from responsibility, but in the confident expectation that, if skill and daring could do anything, Nelson would disobey. Acton could admire Parker's magnanimity as well as Nelson's genius.

"It would be presumption in me to say anything about Acton's historical attainments; but I may note one or two peculiarities which I noticed in his attitude to the study. History, as he conceived it, included in its scope all forms of human activity; so that scholars whom others would describe as theologians or jurists were in his eyes great departmental historians. This, I thought, was the explanation of his miscellaneous reading; for he was always methodical, never desultory.

"But despite this width of view, he did not grudge the expenditure of time and trouble upon details. On the contrary, he would not only ransack archives, but also interrogate those who had witnessed, or been concerned in, great events. Of course he minutely scrutinised and scrupulously weighed the testimony thus obtained; but when once he was satisfied of the accuracy of his information, he was prepared to use it for the interpretation and explanation of documentary evidence.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.