

LORD ACTON'S MORALITY: THEORY & PRACTICE¹

by

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To the modern recrudescence of interest in the life and works of Sir John Emerich Dalberg, first Lord Acton I have but slight, though in my opinion important, contribution to make. It has been said that his projected *Histoy of Liberty* on which he spent a life time of research and for which he left so many thousands of notes, is the greatest book that ever was written; and it is no mere coincidence that no successful biography of this character so extraordinary on the English historical scene has ever been attempted. That has not prevented many modern historiographers from finding support for their theories by seizing on isolated statements and disjointed phrases in his writings. But the time must come when a serious attempt is made to produce a definitive estimate of Acton's life, influence and historical thought, and for that reason I have chosen to concern myself with one small aspect of his life and activities for the examination of which I had special opportunities.

The customary accounts of Acton's life and work devote but a few lines to his early political career as a member of parliament for the Irish borough of Carlow between 1859 and 1865 and to his subsequent election, only to be unseated for bribery, for the English borough of Bridgnorth in 1865. Even Archbishop

(1). A PAPER READ TO THE IXth. INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS OF HISTORICAL SCIENCES

Mathew's volume *ACTON: THE FORMATIVE YEARS*, (2) the first in a projected full length biography, makes but the barest reference to the parliamentary career though a diffuse chapter of some nine pages has for its title «The House of Commons». (3) It has always seemed to me a man must be judged by his actions as well as by thoughts and while Dr. Mathew is superb etcher in of background the successful biographer of Acton will have to concern himself not only with writings and environment but with the evolving practical character of the man himself in so far as it can be caught at this late stage. Professor Butterfield in his Historical Association pamphlet *LORD ACTON* (4) emphasis the point that Acton's later historical work seems to have been affected by some emotional failure in his personal life and his private papers give us a glimpse of a profound unhappiness. Professor Butterfield also stresses, with so many others including especially Dr. Mathew, (5) the profound influence exercised by Burke on Acton's political thinking while at the same showing how this influence developed and altered during Acton's career. As against this the American historian Dr. Gertrude Himmelfarb contends that the influence of Burke on Acton has been much over estimated. However it is important from my point of view that she does admit that in his very early years Acton was a faithful disciple of the Anglo-Irish political thinker and she shows that during the period when Acton edited the *RAMBLER*, 1859-1862, he did hold a philosophy consciously indebted to Burke. Supporting a moderate and well ordered liberty he exalted the constitution and the law above reason and deplored the « abstract, ideal absolutism of the modern temper. » (6) That his private papers record judgements of Burke

(2). David Mathew — *ACTON : THE FORMATIVE YEARS*. LONDON : 1946.

(3). *Ibid.* pp. 131 - 140.

(4). H. Butterfield — *LORD ACTON*, Historical Association Pamphlet G. 9, London : 1948.

(5). Mathew *op. cit.* p. 5. « Edmund Burke was the one teacher Acton came to early and never left ».

(6). Gertrude Himmelfarb — *THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION IN THE POLITICAL THEORY OF LORD ACTON*. In the *Journal of Modern History*, Vol. XXI, pp. 293-312, Chicago 1949.

which conflict with his public statements, and that in the last twenty five years of his life he increasingly hardened against Burke's policy of balance and compromise present problems still to be dealt with.

For my part I am concerned in this paper with two things. In the first place it is uniformly accepted that the early Acton was a disciple of Burke and that that discipleship had been stressed rather than undermined by the continental stay as a pupil of Dollinger. In the second place all judgements on Acton stress not merely his historical but his moral influence. In the *DICTIONARY OF NATIONAL BIOGRAPHY* he is described as « Historian and Moralist »; 7 Herman Finer in a high-sounding but unbalanced introduction to Miss Himmelfarb's excellent edition of Acton's *Essays* 8 asks the rhetorical question : « To what is the perennial appeal of Acton due ? » and answers : « Above all to Acton's moral integrity. » 9 He asserts that, pre-eminently, Acton was a man of conscience, and quotes with approval Acton's own assertion that « the inflexible integrity of the moral code is... the secret of the authority, the dignity, the utility of History. » Professor Finer's preface re-echoes the commonly held opinions and is but distantly related to the scholarly introduction in which Miss Himmelfarb shows how unsystematic and contradictory are the different strands in Acton's thought and how essential it is for some one to apply himself to the conscious effort of disentangling.

(7). Article by Acton's pupil J.N. Figgis, editor of his collected works.

(8). Acton — *ESSAYS ON FREEDOM AND POWER*, selected with an introduction by Gertrude Himmelfarb, Boston, 1948.

(9). *Ibid* p.p. VII — XII.

The disentangling must we think be attempted not only in the field of Acton's thought but also in that of his practical life. No man set out a higher ideal than did Burke regarding the duties of a representative elected to parliament. « It ought to be the happiness and glory of a representative to live in the strictest union, the closest correspondance and the most unreserved communication with his constituents 10 But his unbiased opinion, his mature judgement, his enlightened conscience, he ought not to sacrifice to you, to any man, or any set of men living. » 11 The famous addresses to the electors of Bristol cannot have been unknown to the historian who asserted a permanent moral standard and refused to make allowance for the climate of public opinion in any given era.

Accordingly when Acton was elected to parliament he knew where his duty lay, he was proud of his new position in society, 12 he held a sufficient knowledge at least of international affairs and of the problems of his co-religionists to cut some figure in the House. Yet all the commentators, friendly and unfriendly alike, agree that as a politician he was a complete failure. But he was much more than a failure. Failure betokens incapacity, and no one questions Acton's abilities had he used them. But he never even tried to be a success, and it is this lack of all feeling of responsibility to his constituents, this selfish appreciation of membership of the House of Commons as a step in the social ladder which makes us feel that Acton's political career has never been sufficiently closely examined nor it should be, nor even sufficiently condemned.

The exact circumstances of Acton's election for the borough of Carlow I have already described in detail in a paper published

(10) *THE SPEECHES OF THE RT. HON. EDMUND BURKE*, ed. by J. Burke, 1865 ed. Dublin p. 129

(11) *Ibid* p. 150.

(12). Mathew — *op. cit.* p. 146. *Letter of Earl Granville to Lord Gunning.*

in the *English Historical Review*. 13 Here it is only necessary to recapitulate the main facts. Although only 25 at the time of his election in 1859 Acton had already been looking round for a seat in the House of Commons during the previous four years, and despite his own confession that he could not wholeheartedly support either of the dominant British parties approaches had been made to several constituencies. The Borough of Carlow for its part was equally on the look out for a liberal candidate and only came to terms with the representatives of Sir John Acton after other starters had been found wanting — usually in a financial sense. Sir John was nominated without a programme, issued no election address and was elected sight unseen, defeating the sitting member, a prominent local landlord but a conservative, in the process. A month later the new member paid his one and only visit to the constituency which had honoured him with its confidence and addressed his principal supporters at a victory banquet without committing himself to a detailed party programme.

If men truly value lightly what has been obtained with ease Acton certainly put a low value on his representation of the burgesses of Carlow. In a further paper 14 I have analysed carefully his contributions to the work of the House of Commons and his activities on behalf of his electors during his parliamentary career 1859-1865, and if his election was undeserved even his principal Carlow supporter, the Rev. James Maher P.P. was aware of the fact by the time the next election day arrived. When one considers the riots and destruction which marked the original contest, the blood which flowed in the aftermath, and the passions which were aroused Acton remained strangely impervious to it all, and for all the thanks the people of Carlow obtained they might as well have elected a stranger from Stockholm as the local paper put it.

(13). James J. Auchmuty — *ACTON'S ELECTION AS AN IRISH MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT*, *E.H.R.* Sept. 1946 pp. 394-405.

(14). James J. Auchmuty — *ACTON IN THE HOUSE OF COMMONS*. *Bulletin of the Faculty of Arts, Alexandria University*. Vol. V. 1949 pp. 31-46.

In six years Acton asked two questions and answered one, made no speeches, was a very unsatisfactory attender at debates, even in those few but important division lists which are recorded his name only appears in 27 out of 48, that is on just over half the major occasions; and what is more serious he made no effort to keep in contact with his constituency. Not only did he never visit it, he practically never subscribed to local charities and he was most inhospitable, at any rate by Irish standards, to any Carlow callers in London. Worse still in political matters in which his constituents were interested he was not reliable and he sat so much on the fence that in at least one case he voted on opposite sides in successive divisions and then absented himself from the key vote. Even in the private work of the House he was a failure. Appointed to three parliamentary committees at none was he a more than adequate attender and in none does he appear to have exercised a really effective influence.

Religiously also he was a disappointment to Irish Roman Catholics. Catholic emancipation though carried by the Tories had been traditionally a Whig measure; yet these same Whigs were the clamorous heirs of the Glorious Revolution and the establishers of the protestant succession. At all times minority groups had been attracted to their banner but the conscientious Roman Catholic, at a time when religious questions still aroused persistent excitement, had grave difficulties in giving full allegiance to either party. It was the Whigs under Lord John Russell who had been responsible for the Ecclesiastical Titles Bill of 1850, denying to Roman Catholic prelates territorial titles; but the conservative opposition were in Ireland allied with the extreme Orange and protestant interest. Acton's representation of Carlow came at the time of the Franco-Austrian war when Pius IX was establishing himself at the principal and forceful enemy of Italian unity and nationality, and when an Irish Brigade went out to defend the Papal city against the democratic national will of the Italian people. Acton had no love for the temporal power of the papacy. Announced to speak in Dublin in its support he failed to turn up; expected to criticize in parliament known government sympathy with Italian unity he remained silent. When Burke differed from the electors of Bristol he broadcast his defence to the world; when the time came for re-election he faced

the voters with courage; proudly stated his case, defended his actions and laid himself at their mercy. The Carlow people assailed Acton not on points of principle but as stepson of the Lord President of the Council, Earl Granville, as seduced by the gladdened Acton not on points of principle but as stepson of the Lord John Russell. A brave man would have spoken out; a cunning politician would have befogged the issue. Acton did neither — he ran away! When the dissolution of parliament came in 1865 he uttered no word of thanks to his constituents, made no last minute promise of amendment and repentance; he left them as if he had never known them, as if they had no reciprocal duties one to the other. It is true that he fought another constituency, his own family town of Bridgnorth, but only at a late date, and then, after election, he had the mortification of being suspected for bribery on the part one of his supporters though «without knowledge or consent of the said Sir John R.D. Acton or his agents». His admitted expenses at his election amounted to more than those of both of his opponents combined but unfortunately it has not been possible to trace the expenses of the Carlow election. In 1869 he was raised to the peerage on the recommendation of his friend Gladstone and thereafter had no further opportunity of experiencing the expensive luxury of election or defeat.

If in parliament Acton had felt himself out of touch with his constituents we reiterate that there was no reason why he could not have established a position of his own representing perhaps his co-religionists of the Roman Catholic faith, or an international point of view the result of his cosmopolitan background. During his years in the House as editor or contributor to the **RAMBLER** and the **HOME AND FOREIGN REVIEW** he wrote some 475 pages of articles and 77 pages of current events, the latter entirely and the former to a considerable extent concerned with the subject of foreign affairs. 15 Yet in the House of Commons he never intervened in a Foreign Affairs debate and the interests of his co-religionists he left in the hands of Lord E. Howard and Sir George Bowyer, while those of the

(15) *F.E. Lally — AS LORD ACTON SAYS, Newport U.S.A. 1942, p. 59*

burghesses of Carlow were taken care of by the county gentlemen who also supported those local charities, regattas, sports meetings and the like which Acton refused to patronize.

It is not our claim that members equally good as Acton could not be found. His Carlow predecessor, Abingdon, had never addressed the House of Commons but he had had frequent touch with his constituents. What we do assert is that his standard of performance was a long way below the average. He entered the House with every opportunity for high achievement through his step father in close touch with the local gentry, by religion member of a group that consisted of the local society, with personal and metal gifts of the highest order; he seems to have lacked some inner compulsion to carry out his duties in co-operation with his fellow citizens. Mentally he always felt himself out of touch with his age: but in his age his morality was timeless. His lack of responsibility to his constituents, or to his co-religionists, or to the nation as a whole betokens some missing strand in his own character. He was ashamed of the methods of his election the moment he was elected; he might have resigned; if he felt himself unsuited to the daily contacts of the House of Commons he might have sought some honourable means of escape; but words of counsel, advice, honour, achieve responsibility, and experience no reciprocal obligations.

Every time one examines Acton's career one is reminded of the activities of any human being his own personal fatherland must be kept in mind. We know that in some respects he was a hard worker and as well, as a reviewer, a hanging judge. There were situations in which he wished for the quietude of the garden and heat of the day. He was ambitious of political success then and later, but he refused the hard work set before him; he was desirous of composing a great work but he feared the criticism which he ignored in political life. It is our conviction that any discussion of Acton's political morality must be firmly grounded in the examination of his own political experience.

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