

Newman – Historian or Apologist?

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Writing to the editor of the *English Historical Review* shortly after Cardinal Newman's death in 1890 Lord Acton queried: "Was not Newman worthy of an historian's niche?"¹ And in his private notes we find Acton striving to formulate a magisterial judgment on Newman's contribution to historical thinking. One such attempt reads: "He helped to make History essential to men who reasoned and thought by logic to determine truth. He raised it to a higher level and degree of authority. That is his leg[acy] to men."² From Lord Acton, the most austere of nineteenth century historical critics, this verdict is, perhaps, unexpected. I venture that many of us think of Newman as a superb religious writer or the author of a classical work on education, but hardly as one who made any major contribution to the development of historical thought. The grounds for Acton's verdict merit exploring.

When one surveys Newman's published works one finds a considerable corpus of historical writings. As many as eleven volumes (or twelve if an historical novel is included) might be classified as basically historical. Though a fairly broad range of topics appear in his historical essays, e.g. *Benedictine Schools*, *Medieval Oxford*, *Lectures on The History of the Turks*, the major portion of his historical writings treat on the history of the first three centuries of the Christian Church. Critics of the stature of Dollinger in Germany and Duchesne in France considered he was the best living authority on the history of the early Church.³

Newman's formative years as a scholar coincide with a remarkably fruitful period in the development of European historical writing. He was twenty-three when Ranke published his first work in 1824. The same year saw Macaulay burst upon the English literary scene. Three years later Hallam completed his *Constitutional history*. Newman was engaged in his own first major historical investigation – *The History of the Arians* – in 1831, the year Niebuhr, the father of modern historiography, prematurely died. The same year Michelet

¹ Acton to Creighton, 27 October 1890, Cambridge University Library, Add. Mss. 6871.

² CUL Add. Mss. 4987, 11.

³ Wilfrid Ward, *The Life of John Henry Cardinal Newman* (London, 1913), i.p. 444; L.M.O. Duchesne, *Les témoins antenicéens du dogme de In Trinité*, *Revue des sciences ecclésiastiques*, 1882, T. XLI, p. 49.

published his *Introduction to Universal History*. The previous year had seen the appearance of Carlyle's first historical work and Lingard's final volume in his *History of England*. Each in his own way might claim dedication to Ranke's dictum that the task of the historian was simply "to show how it really was."⁴ History was slowly emerging as an autonomous science.

Newman's continued interest in history was closely related to his undergraduate training in the Classics. The Classics led him to Gibbon. "Oh who is worthy to succeed our Gibbon,"⁵ he exuberantly exclaimed to an undergraduate friend during a summer spent in reading the Greek historians and re-reading Gibbon. Years later he would write, "perhaps the only English writer who has any claim to be considered an ecclesiastical historian, is the unbeliever Gibbon."⁶

Newman's continued interest in history was closely related to his development within the Church of England, or to give it its official title, "The United Church of England and Ireland." He carried to Oxford an Evangelical background with slight sympathy for the high Church tradition. Under the influence of his new associates, particularly Hurrell Froude and John Keeble, he grew into a strong champion of the High Church, especially in so far as it respected ancient doctrines and forms. Confronted with a social situation which saw the familiar close link between Tory State and Tory Church gravely threatened by the growth of liberal reforms, Newman and his friends came to believe that the only secure base for a revitalized Church was in apostolic rather than parliamentary guarantees. True religion, they believed, could no longer expect anything from a State rapidly drifting towards liberalism and unbelief "How long, O Lord, How long Shall Caesar do us wrong. . ." rhetorically demanded Newman;⁷ to be seconded by Hurrell Froude's provocative, "let us give up a *National* Church and have a *real* one."⁸ The roots of the "real Church," accordingly, were to be sought not in the midst of the sterile politico-religious controversies of the sixteenth century but in the first Centuries of the Christian era. Scripture and the writings of the early Christian scholars should replace religious and not-so religious politicians as guides in things spiritual.

In turning to the early Church Fathers the new Oxford reformers were doing nothing essentially new. There had been a strong tradition of patristic

⁴ See E. H. Carr, *What is History?* (London, 1961), p. 3.

⁵ *Letters and Correspondence of J. H. Newman* (London, 1890), i. p. 41.

⁶ *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (London, 1897 ed.), p. 8.

⁷ R. D. Middleton, *Newman at Oxford* (London, 1950), p. 70.

⁸ Christopher Dawson, *The Spirit of the Oxford Movement* (London, 1945), p. 67.

learning within the Church of England since the early decades of the seventeenth century. But in the eighteenth the Church Fathers along with the non-juring clergy were out of favour. They were judged unsafe by Hanoverian clerics. By the beginning of the nineteenth century most English churchmen were profoundly ignorant of early Church writings.

Newman had been introduced to the writings of Ambrose, Augustine and others of the Fathers at the age of fifteen when he came upon the historical writings of the eighteenth century divine, Thomas Milner (1744-1797).⁹ By 1830 he had become immersed in a study of the early Church. He was approached to contribute a section on the Church Councils to a projected Ecclesiastical History. He was hesitant on the grounds that sound history was not consistent with the demands of booksellers, “who must sacrifice everything to regularity of publication and trimness of appearance.”¹⁰ “An Ecclesiastical History. . .,” he advised, “whether long or short, ought to be derived from the original sources, and not to be compiled from the standard authorities.”¹¹ He eventually agreed to work on what was destined to be an uncompleted project. He immediately set to work on the Council of Nicea. What finally emerged was his first major historical work, *The Arians of the Fourth Century*. The *Arians* involved Newman in his first deep plunge into historical research. All available sources were consulted and Newman began collecting what was eventually to grow into an extensive library on the early Christian era.

From 1832 to 1842 Newman strove with passionate energy to bring the Church of the Fathers alive in England. This was really the thrust of the Oxford Movement under his inspiration. History would save the Church from disintegration at the hands of the liberals. Concurrently with his campaign in the *Tracts for the Times* he contributed a series of articles on *The Church of the Fathers* to the *British Magazine*. Together with Dr. Edward Pusey he launched a *Library of the Fathers*. This substantial work of forty-eight volumes was not to be completed until 1885. Newman personally edited and annotated three volumes and wrote four prefaces.

In 1837 Newman produced what he hoped might be a definitive blueprint for the true Church. His work was published under the awesome title of *Lectures on the Prophetic Office of the Church viewed Relatively to Romanism and Popular Protestantism* (later mercifully shortened to *Via Media*, Vol. I). Appealing to antiquity Newman eloquently argued that the path of truth was a *via media* lying between the Reformers and the Romanists. A study of history, he believed, would support his claim:

⁹ J. H. Newman, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (London, 1897 ed.), p. 26.

¹⁰ *Letters and Correspondence*, i. p. 235.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

History is a record of facts: and “ facts” according to the proverb, “ are stubborn things.” Ingenious men may misrepresent them, or suppress them for a while: but in the end they will be duly ascertained and appreciated.¹²

A careful study of the voluminous writings from the early centuries, Newman maintained, would indicate the path the Church of England should follow to reform itself.

Never did an ecclesiastic place a heavier burden upon history – a burden, at least in Newman’s hands, history was not able to bear. From the first he was aware that his *via media* “ viewed as an integral system” never had existence “ except on paper.”¹³ But when he set to work to make the *via media* concrete and substantive in order that it might live and present a real alternative to Rome or Protestantism, he found that few leading churchmen supported him. But worse still, the very historical evidences he adduced to establish his position were used by Roman critics to argue that his *via media* was simply a modern variation of an early heresy.

Painfully, reluctantly, between 1841 and 1845, Newman abandoned his *via media* and reached the fearful decision that to be true to the Fathers he must join Rome. There appeared to be, however, insuperable difficulties. The Church of Rome in his own day was, on the face of it, clearly not one with the Church of the Fathers. How then explain the apparent differences in creed and ritual? This was not a new question, but there had been important advances in historical criticism since the days when a Bossuet could provocatively challenge Protestants to show where there had been “ the least variation in the dogmata of the Catholic Church from her first origin down to us.”¹⁴

Newman again decided he would appeal to history. He would seek to test an hypothesis that had occupied his mind since at least 1843: the evident increase and variations in the Christian creed and ritual were perhaps due to a normal process of development, a process which is attendant upon any philosophy or polity “ which takes possession of the intellect and heart and has any wide or extended dominion.” For, from the nature of the human mind, “ time is necessary for the full comprehension and perfection of great ideas.. ”¹⁵ Newman worked out his theory in his most original historical work, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*. It was a brilliant performance and years later prompted Acton’s judgment that it did more than

¹² *The Via Media of the Anglican Church* (London, 1877 ed.), i. p. 38.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

¹⁴ Owen Chadwick, *From Bossuet to Newman* (Cambridge, 1957), p. 20.

¹⁵ *Development*, pp. 29-30.

any other book of its time “to make his countrymen think historically, and watch the process as well as the result.”¹⁶ Thirteen years before Darwin’s monumental work Newman introduced an evolutionary concept into theology. (That Newman’s mind was moving along evolutionary lines analogous to Darwin’s is interestingly suggested by an incident that occurred in 1857, the year before Darwin’s theory on the origin of species was published. Newman asked Professor W. K. Sullivan, a scientist at the new University in Dublin, whether there might not be an analogy between the development of doctrine and the evolution of species. To this brilliant question Sullivan could only respond that he had not any knowledge of the matter.)¹⁷

Newman’s *Essay on Development* provoked mixed reactions. Many critics, both within the Church he left and the Church he joined, were perplexed and confused by the strange arguments which seemed to undermine completely the tradition of an unchanging Christian doctrine, and appeared to make the historian master of the theologian. Giacomo Mazio, a leading Jesuit theologian in Rome, expressed what was to become a not uncommon opinion in Catholic circles when he remarked of Newman’s *Essay*, “I do not know how it is, but so it is, that all these startling things, Mr. Newman brings them round at the end to a good conclusion.”¹⁸ Another reigning Roman theologian, Giovanni Perrone, did his best to persuade Newman (who had gone to Rome in 1846) to abandon his theory and embrace a more traditional and static theology; but as Professor Owen Chadwick has written in his penetrating study on the *Idea of Doctrinal Development*, “Perrone had not convinced him because Newman was an historian and Perrone was not. Perrone had no notion of the difficulties created for the older form of the doctrine of tradition by modern historical research.”¹⁹

Whether Newman successfully resolved the theological problem he set out to investigate is very questionable but his observations on the process of historical change in general are among the richest found in any work of the nineteenth century.

Throughout the 1850's Newman was mainly occupied in an heroic attempt to create a Catholic University in Dublin. His lectures on *The Scope and Nature of University Education* delivered in Dublin in 1853 were later (1873) to appear as the major portion of his classic, *The Idea of a University*. Another more historical work written in 1854 is not so well known: *The Rise and Progress of Universities*.²⁰ Hurriedly executed, with no original research,

¹⁶ CUL Add. Mss. 4987, 60.

¹⁷ The incident is recorded by Acton, CUL Add. Mss. 4990, 256.

¹⁸ Chadwick, *From Bossuet to Newman*, p. 183.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Historical Sketches*, iii (1913 ed.), pp. 1-251.

the series of essays contained in this work possibly merits Rashdall's dismissal as, "charming bits of writing [which] have no great value as history."²¹ Rashdall, writing in the late 1880's, could afford to be cavalier in his reference to the earlier work since he himself had available the fruits of Denifle's monumental researches into the history of universities.

Newman's troubled years attempting to found a new Oxford in Dublin came to an end in 1858. He was immediately involved by Acton in his own endeavours to develop the *Rambler* into a high quality critical journal. Acton, twenty-four years of age, brimming with enthusiasm, wished to bring to English Catholics, and to any others who were prepared to learn, some of the good things he had acquired in his German academic apprenticeship. He had gone to Munich in 1850 armed with Macaulay but returned in 1857 convinced that only German historical scholarship was fully worthy of respect. Still, he held Newman's talents in high regard and anticipated gaining his support in his future work.

Unfortunately, conditions within the Roman Catholic Church in the late 1850's were not such as to hold much promise for an intellectual movement of any sort. By this time Pius IX, who had innocently begun his Pontificate believing himself to be a liberal, had become convinced that liberalism in any form was a wicked ungodly thing to be resisted wherever it emerged. Pio Nono, as the suffering servant lamenting the evils of the age, set the tone for official Catholicism everywhere. If final proof were needed of the diabolical inspiration of modern movements – be they political or intellectual – it came with the spoliation of the Papal States in 1859 and 1860. In official Catholic circles not to be strongly in favour of the Temporal Power was to stand convicted of irreligion, and to advocate freedom of enquiry was to perpetuate one of the most iniquitous errors of the age. Acton had his work cut for him.

Early in 1859 hierarchical displeasure forced the resignation of Richard Simpson, the very able editor of the *Rambler*. Newman was pressured into accepting the editorship. What promised to be a challenging and productive undertaking ended in near disaster. Newman's bishop was dissatisfied with the critical tone of his first number; and in the second and last number under his editorship the roof fell in on him. In this issue appeared an article entitled, *On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine*.²² It was prompted by an earlier dispute over the layman's role in education. Calling upon his knowledge of the early Church Newman indicated that the laity, at least in the early Church, had a serious role to play. Citing the progress of the Arian heresy he made the point that it was the ordinary faithful who then preserved

²¹ Hastings Rashdall, *The Universities of Europe in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1936), p. 2.

²² *Rambler*, July, 1859 (edited with an introduction by John Coulson London, 1961).

orthodox tradition while the bishops often tolerated Arianism.

At a time when the role of the laity in the minds of many bishops was mainly to pay and to pray it is not unexpected that the article was not well received. Bishop Brown of Newport, supported by a fire-eating theologian, Dr. Gillow, interpreted the article as a serious attack on the doctrinal authority of the hierarchy and delated it to Rome as heretical. Rome responded by withholding response; it dallied while Newman stewed. Although Roman authorities took no public action on the charge they kept the question alive until 1867 when it was permitted to die.²³

His *Rambler* experience sank deep into Newman's soul. Not surprisingly we find him in 1864 reacting negatively to a suggestion that a new historical review should be begun. "Nothing would be better than an historical review, but who would bear it? Unless one doctored all one's facts, one would be thought a bad Catholic."²⁴

During the troubled days preceding and following Vatican Council I Newman strove to avoid any formal involvement in current controversies. He returned, almost as an escape, to his former work on the early Church. In 1870 he completed an essay he had begun in 1828 on *The Text of the Epistle of St. Ignatius*. In 1872 he published an essay entitled *Causes of the Rise and Successes of Arianism*, and in 1873 one on *The Trials of Theodoret*. Finally in 1881, at the age of eighty, he brought out a new edition of the Select Treatises of St. Athanasius.

If the historian is one who undertakes his study as an autonomous enterprise directed towards "a rational reconstruction of the past" – to borrow G. R. Elton's phrase²⁵ – it is difficult to escape the conclusion that Newman was not an historian at all. He never appears to have worked on the principle that the study of history provided its own end. He was not content to write on the past "simply to show how it really was." "If" he argued in 1837, "the voluminous remains of [the early Christian] period ... will not afford a standard of Catholic doctrines there seems little profit to be gained from antiquity at all."²⁶ In his first serious historical exploration he moved from a consideration of the Church Councils to a particular study of the Arians because he sensed the Church of the fourth century could provide him with a base for the real work he was called upon to accomplish: the salvation of the Church of England. All his arduous studies during the 1830's had the same object in view. He used history, he never served it. His *Essay on Development* was undertaken to help him resolve a personal religious

²³ *Consulting the Faithful* (Coulson ed.), p. 42.

²⁴ Ward, *Newman*, i. pp. 571.72.

²⁵ G. R. Elton, *The Practice of History* (London, 1967), p. 49.

²⁶ *Lectures on the Prophetic Office of the Church* (1837 ed.), pp. 48-49.

predicament. It was “an hypothesis to account for a difficulty.”²⁷ His writings on education were dictated by the need of convincing Irishmen that a Catholic University was a good thing. The determining criteria of how history should be written were never ones drawn from within history itself, e.g., available evidence. The overriding consideration was always the cause that was to be served. The cause was the thing, and if needs be that on occasion history be manipulated a bit, so be it. Thus in 1842 in a projected Lives of the English Saints he instructed James Anthony Froude, who undertook to contribute to the series, “Rationalize when the evidence is weak, and that will give credibility when you can show the evidence is strong.”²⁸ The principle of rationalization in the face of dubious evidence was pushed to the breaking point in his work on *The Miracles of Ecclesiastical History* written in 1842-43. This work recently prompted the hard judgment of the usually sympathetic Professor Chadwick, that at its lowest it presented “a jumble of twisted dialectic about historical evidence, which is not too strong to describe as repellent ...”²⁹

Newman was a literary artist with a moral mission; the facts gleaned from a study of the past were there to serve a moral cause, else why bother with them. History should reveal conclusions leading to present action. Why, he once asked, should one read such writers as Fichte, Schelling and Hegel for oneself, “for notoriously they have come to no conclusion.”³⁰ Thus he never learned German and his history suffered accordingly. In 1861 in a protracted disagreement with Acton he tried to explain why he took exception to Richard Simpson’s severe criticisms of Pius V in his dealings with England. While saints, he argued, were not exempt from criticism, “a Catholic should treat them in a devout and loving manner.”³¹ He could not understand why Acton saw in this position a threat to the autonomy of history. Again in 1867 his complaint against an historical article mistakenly attributing an incident involving fanatical intolerance to Pius V, was not that it might present false history, but rather, “will not Protestants take it up? What can they say which will tell more agst. us?”³² For the sake of religion Newman’s saints always

²⁷ *Development*, p. 30.

²⁸ G.P. Gooch, *History and Historian in the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1952), p. 310.

²⁹ Owen Chadwick, *The Mind of the Oxford Movement* (London, 1960), p. 42.

³⁰ Terence Kenny, *The Political Thought of John Henry Newman* (London, 1957), p. 33.

³¹ CUL Add. Mss. 4987, 294; Ward, *Newman*, i. pp. 527-34.

³² H.A. MacDougall, *The Acton-Newman Relations* (New York, 1962), pp. 103-04.

had to appear a bit larger than life. His writings on the early Church Fathers suffered from the same defect. Newman did not fail to indicate their weaknesses but he always felt constrained to justify them. The reader had to be won over to their cause. For Newman, life was warfare against dark forces, and there were always dragons to be slain; history was a useful weapon if handled skilfully.

On a less obvious level his extraordinary literary talents tended to weaken his objectivity. The historian intent on observing reality at times gave way to the creative artist. For example, can the historian striving to reconstruct the past accurately afford the type of literary luxury one comes upon in Newman's haunting characterizations of Basil, Chrysostom, Gregory and Athanasius:

[Basil] was a calm, mild, grave, autumnal day; St. John Chrysostom was a day in spring-time bright and rainy and glittering through its rain, Gregory was the full summer, with a long spell of pleasant stillness, its monotony relieved by thunder and lightning. And St. Athanasius figures to us the stern persecuting winter, with its wild winds, its dreary wastes, its sleep of the great mother, and the bright stars shining overhead.³³

In such a passage one feels that imagery rather than evidence has got control of the narrative. Here, as in so many other examples that might be cited, Newman is the urbane magician set on casting a spell on the reader. But is it not the historian's business to disenchant rather than to charm?

In 1864 blunt, bluff Charles Kingsley attempted to explain Newman to the world. In Kingsley's mind it was all a question of simple honesty: Newman was a Roman cleric and truth for its own sake had never been a virtue for the Roman clergy. Kingsley approached controversy with Newman as a great bull making his first charge against a skilled matador, and the outcome was as predictable – he was totally, utterly outmanoeuvred and overwhelmed. Ironically Kingsley had a case, for events going on even as he was writing supported him, but he did not have the wit to establish it. In his vulgar attack on Newman's honesty he showed how little he understood Newman's approach to truth. Newman saw significant reality only as underlying a world of appearance which was the only world Kingsley knew and perhaps the only world the historian should dare to deal with. Newman strove to get behind, under, into the secret of things; he was never much concerned about the simple obvious outside of things. His Neoplatonism, derived in part from the Romantic Movement with roots extending back to the anti-nominalism of the Reformation period, and in part from his readings in Bishop Butler and the Alexandrian Church Fathers, led him to seek reality as though it lay behind a veil concealed from view. The visible world was

³³ *Historical Sketches*, ii (1913 ed.), pp. 237-238.

sacramentally connected with the invisible world of spirit which gave meaning to things. The work of the spirit, providence, was never obvious, and was always somewhat mysterious. Providence, he once observed, “works beneath a veil, and what is visible in its course does but shadow out at most, and obscures and disguises what is invisible.”³⁴ And in the final analysis it was only the work of providence, God’s work, that was significant. The visible world was at best a dark world “full of lamentations, and mourning and woe,³⁵ and to expect much from it was as monstrous and insane, as he once fiercely put it, “as to desire to feed on ashes, or to be chained to a corpse... what could the world do for me however hard it tried.”³⁶ Newman’s Calvinistic inheritance had left its permanent deposit.

In Newman’s mind there was really nothing new to be expected from history until the weary world ran its course and God gathered in his saints. At best if one waited one was sure to see the same come round again. “[The] Church has ever seemed dying,” he wrote to a friend in 1877, “and has been especially bad (to appearance) every 300 years.”³⁷ And, in his *Lectures on The History of the Turks*, his curious cyclical view of history is again strikingly evident:

A huge conglomeration of destructive elements hangs over us, and from time to time rushes down with an awful irresistible momentum. Barbarism is ever impending over the civilized world. Never since history began, has there been so long a cessation of this law of human society, as in the period in which we live.³⁸

Thus to attempt to abstract from history any theory of progress was a vain venture, the idea of development notwithstanding. Development in essence was a Divine gift guaranteeing only true doctrinal progress and nothing more. Outside of the doctrinal field periodic disintegration was the rule. “The country seems to me to be in a dream,” he wrote in 1832, “being drugged with his fallacious notion of its superiority to other countries and times”,³⁹ and thirty years later we find him dismissing terms such as “progress” and “recent civilisation” as “the newspaper cant of the day.”⁴⁰

His light regard for the significance of chronology in historical narrative

³⁴ *Essays Critical and Historical* (1919 ed.), ii, p. 190.

³⁵ *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (1897 ed.), p. 241.

³⁶ *Sermons on Subjects of the Day* (1869 ed.), p. 103; *Meditations and Devotions* (1953 ed.), p. 304.

³⁷ MacDougall, *The Acton-Newman Relations*, p. 172. 38

³⁸ *Historical Sketches*, i. p. 12.

³⁹ A. D. Culler, *The Imperial Intellect* (New Haven, 1955), p. 81.

⁴⁰ MacDougall, *The Acton-Newman Relations*, p. 169.

is related to his other-worldly approach to history. The profound commentator on development could move from the fifth to the seventeenth to the nineteenth century with a blithe indifference to the intervening periods. For Newman it was as though all Christian history were contemporary history. With the coming of Christ history was complete. Now there remained but to await as patiently as one could the final fulfillment.

Still, Newman's innate talents, his restless probing mind, his instinctual awareness of trends, kept pushing him beyond his self-imposed intellectual boundaries. No other writer of his generation so well represents a world in transition. A man of compelling genius, he strove to make an ancient creed credible to a restless age torn between belief and unbelief. At once the most critical and credulous of nineteenth century thinkers, he must be classified as a Christian apologist rather than a critical historian. Yet, his contribution to historical thinking was not insignificant. More than any other scholar he prompted Christians to take a new look at their past, with consequences of a magnitude we are only now appreciating. His failings as an historian, like his talents, were monumental. Yet in spite of shortcomings it is maintainable that his contribution to a deeper understanding of human society exceeded that of a dozen immaculate historians. Nonetheless, the flaws remain, and they seriously detract from the value of his work.

Late in life, in belated recognition of his service to the Church of his adoption, he was named a Cardinal. The wry question was put to him by a friend; what would he do if he were named Pope? He replied that he would appoint and organize commissions, especially on biblical criticism and the history of the early Church.⁴¹ Had he managed that, who knows, perhaps the *English Historical Review* would have noted his passing.

⁴¹ Ward, *Newman*, ii. p. 477.