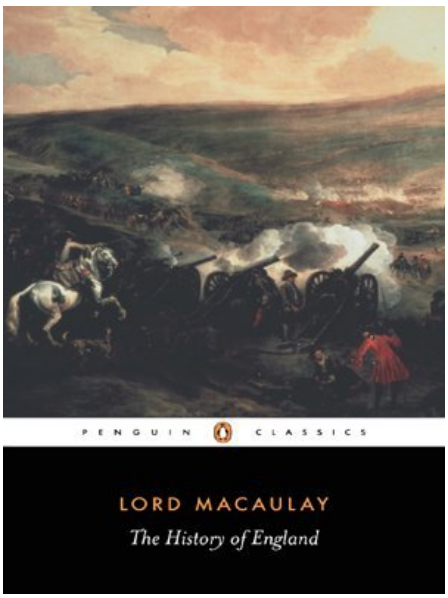

The History of England

Thomas Babington Macaulay , Hugh Trevor-Roper (Abridged by)

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Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800-1859) won instantaneous and outstanding success in prose poetry, in politics and oratory. His *History*, translated throughout Europe and achieving sales in America second only to the Bible, immediately became the canon of historical orthodoxy, replacing previous histories so completely that it is now difficult to see past its long and apparently effortless triumph.

The History of England Details

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From Reader Review The History of England for online ebook

Aidan says

I find it ironic that he argues that historians should be impartial and he is anything but, making his work read out more like a political commentary. An English patriot (you can definitely say too strong of one in his writings), who knows the history so well that his collection glosses over many things as he is more inclined to insert his opinions on the events first before anything. He's still a great read I finally came to accomplish finishing, but only did I have to educate myself in English history first. I'd advise only the advanced/intermediate English historians to read his works, which is probably why so few people in current-days have.

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notgettingenough says

When he was two and a half, having given Sam some (proper) sultanas to eat, he said afterwards 'Thank you, they were absolutely delicious'. At the time I was much surprised at the vocab of this very young person, as well as the clarity with which he spoke.

But I realise now that Sam is cut from the same cloth as Thomas Macaulay who from the age of three "talked, as the maid said, `quite printed words', which produced an effect that appeared formal, and often, no doubt, exceedingly droll." The famous story exemplifying this took place when he was three or four. A servant dropped hot liquid on him and after the fuss of cleaning him up, upon asked if he was okay, he replied `Thank you madam, the agony is abated'. https://www.ourcivilisation.com/smart...

Surely such a boy, a compulsive reader with a phenomenal memory must have created a great work of its type.

Twenty years ago my father offered me a lovely old set of Macaulay's History of England and was much surprised when, in my ignorance, I turned it down. In the years since my father has died, for some reason this is a scene that pops up regularly into my head. How could I have been so, so, so ???? Uggggh.

Anyway, I hope one day to remedy this state of affairs.

Hannah says

There's nobody like Macaulay. When you disagree with him, he's maddening, but when you agree with him--and for me, that's most of the time--he's awesome.
Take particular note of the section where he discusses Restoration comedy. His commentary still applies to any trashy so-called, " comedy" that protects rather than attacks human vices. Awesome stuff.
He's a bit fonder of William III than I am, but pretty much has it figured out on the Puritans and Charles I, and he's great with Marlborough.
Don't be afraid of this long collection of heavy Victorian books. The style is easy to read--if you know how to read--and the content very entertaining. It's kind of like watching Bill 'O' Reilly on TV to see Macaulay state his opinions on various issues. Very fun.

Andrew says

Trying to fill in gaps in the tudors . 1588, to the glorious revolution, etc. good, but so spotty as to maybe not be useful.

Michael Wheatley says

A great read. Macaulay writes the history of the Glorious Revolution in an engaging manner. I learned a great deal about the protestant/Church of England/Catholic tension in England as well as the Whigs and Tories.

It's an epic story of the removal of James II and the installation of William and Mary. Followed by James's attempts to regain what he lost.

The book touches on events in the history of England, Scotland, Ireland, France, the Netherlands, Spain, America (there's a mention of Joseph Smith), and even Panama.

Sharon Barrow Wilfong says

Fascinating overview of the historical events and time lines of the United Kingdom.

Roy Lotz says

> *A traveler must be freed from all apprehension of being murdered or starved before he can be charmed by the bold outlines and rich tints of the hills.*

Sir Thomas James Babington Macaulay, Baron of Rothley—more commonly known as Lord Macaulay—is yet another of those creatures of former ages who could fill volume after volume with excellent prose, seemingly without effort. He wrote reams: this work itself, in the original, runs to five volumes. And everything he wrote—from poems to essays, from speeches to history—was both instantly successful in his day and still remains a model of force and clarity. The power of his style is why Macaulay is most frequently cited nowadays. He is the only English historian (except perhaps David Hume) whose writing can be mentioned in the same breath as Edward Gibbon; indeed the two of them are grouped together as models of elegance, in much the same way as were Demosthenes and Cicero.

Brilliant stylists they both were; but quite different in their brilliance. Gibbon is stately, while Macaulay is luminescent. To borrow a phrase from Tocqueville, Gibbon tried to see history from God’s point of view: as a pure spectator, a neutral observer, emotionally unmoved but intellectually engaged. Macaulay imitated the more dramatic styles of Thucydides and Tacitus, narrating history as an enormous spectacle with heroes and villains. Here he is describing the fate of the Scottish colony of Caledonia during the failed Darien scheme:

> The alacrity which is the effect of hope, the strength which is the effect of union, were alike wanting to the little community. From the councilors down to the humblest settlers all was despondency and discontent. The stock of provisions was scanty. The stewards embezzled a great part of it. The rations were small; and soon there was a cry that they were unfairly distributed. Factions were formed. Plots were laid. One ringleader of the malcontents was hanged.

Macaulay's punchy, declarative sentences have an overwhelming effect when piled atop one another in cumulative description. Indeed, Macaulay never simply *describes*: he *dramatizes*. He pays at least as much attention to the emotional effect of his words as their literal accuracy. Granted, Macaulay is seldom as quotable or as graceful as Gibbon; but he is leaps and bounds more exciting to read.

This difference in style, as often happens, mirrors a difference in attitude. Gibbon had his fair share of prejudices, but he was not partisan. Macaulay is partisanship incarnate. He is largely responsible for popularizing what is commonly called Whig History. This is the thesis that sees English history as "the history of physical, of moral, and of intellectual improvement" caused by political reform. This thesis became historical orthodoxy for a time, until, like all orthodoxies, it bred a heresy that became the new orthodoxy.

Nowadays the idea that history is a grand progress from barbarism to civilization will strike many as terribly simplistic, mostly wrong, and nauseatingly complacent. After two world wars and the atom bomb, we are apt to view any suggestions of progress with skepticism. Nevertheless, to condemn Macaulay's perspective for being old-fashioned would be to forget, what Hugh Trevor-Roper reminds us in the introduction, that the "severest critics themselves are generally unaware of the extent to which they depend on the achievement of their victim."

The terms 'Whig' and 'Tory' appear with great frequency both within the book and in discussions of Macaulay; and yet these political positions can be bewildering for a non-British reader. This is in keeping with the general Britishness of this book. Macaulay's history is a national history; it is a book written for Brits. For any British reader, I suspect this book will excite some strong emotions, positive or negative. For me it appealed mainly to my anthropological curiosity.

In fairness, Macaulay's conception of Great Britain is wide enough to include Scotland and Ireland. And although this book is full of shocking insults against the Scots and the Irish (as a prophet of progress, Macaulay sees Scotland and Ireland during this time as hopelessly backward), Macaulay's history was nevertheless important—or so says Hugh Trevor-Roper in the introduction—for treating those two realms as of integral importance to British history.

As Trevor-Roper also points out, Macaulay's partisanship expresses itself most damagingly in his dealings with individuals. Macaulay is not an acute psychologist. He occasionally breaks off the narrative to engage in a lengthy description of some figure—such as his unforgettable portrait of George Jeffreys—but these descriptions are inevitably either philippics or eulogies. There are no memorable *personalities* in these pages; only flat heroes and villains. This tendency to choose good guys and bad guys often led Macaulay into errors or even chicanery. He deliberately misrepresents the evidence to blacken William Penn's name, while going so far as to assert that "extirpate" is commonly understood to mean "disarm" rather than "eliminate" in order to clear William III of the Glencoe Massacre.

Purists may have some misgivings about reading this abridgement. For me, I see abridgements like this as an ideal place to begin reading: it gives you a decent overview of the whole work, and allows you to decide if you'd like to commit to five volumes. Trevor-Roper did an excellent job with this edition, giving a satisfying overview of the narrative arc, providing the necessary connections between the missing parts, as well as

enlivening the experience with his own cutting commentary. As a writer, Trevor-Roper is fully within the Macaulay school: sharp, direct, and unmerciful. The book is full of footnotes pointing out where Macaulay is erring or being underhanded. The introduction, too, is unsparing: “[Macaulay’s] descriptions of art, architecture, music are of a frigid, conventional pomposity if they are not positively absurd.”

To my surprise, I found this period of time to be relevant to contemporary American politics. James II—a bumbling, petty, egotistical monarch in league with a foreign ruler—couldn't help but remind me of Trump's Russia affair. The way that James would fill government posts with cronies, or would try to circumvent long-held traditions by browbeating his subjects in personal interviews, was eerily similar to what James Comey describes in his statement. Macaulay's sections on the National Debt and the partisan squabbles between Tories and Whigs were also astoundingly applicable. This is curious, if not exactly meaningful.

Hopefully one day I will have the time and inclination to read the unabridged version of this masterpiece. Until then, I can say that Macaulay’s reputation is well deserved: as a stylist, and as a partisan.

Bryan Alkire says

Politics and law written well, wars covered tediously

Andrea Zuvich says

Ah, Macaulay...4/5 because although it is very interesting and useful, it is so heavily biased!

Bryan says

This (at least the abridged one-volume edition I read) is not a history of England, only a history of James II and William III over a period of a few decades from the 1680s to early 1700s, written in the 1850s. It has an anti-Tory, anti-anybody-who-isn't-Church-of-England political perspective and the editor in a lot of places put in footnotes which essentially say "Everything Macaulay just wrote there is factually bullshit" in a polite way, which I think is pretty amusing. Beautifully written though.

Richard Epstein says

This is one of the 4 greatest histories; but do not read it in an abridged version. Find a used bookstore (or go online) and splurge on the whole thing. I suspect sets are a glut on the market, and you can get one for pennies. Read it. Not only will you be edified and entertained, the effect on your prose will be salutary.

Toby says

He is monumentally biased and helpfully skates over the worst aspects of William III's reign (Glencoe? Nuffing to do with me, guv!) but he writes with a verve and certainty that is rarely seen in history writing

today - and probably rightly so!

Alan says

Really, Restoration History. For decades in my sophomore survey of English Lit classes I aloudread TBM's account of the Monmouth landing in Rye, his attempt to replace his Catholic uncle, James II, who interviewed his condemned nephew before the botched beheading in the Tower by one Ketch--whose name became a byword for Botched jobbers. To begin, I asked if they knew baseball usage, Kill the Ump? The executee Duke of Monmouth gave Ketch six 1685 guineas with the fervent request, "Do not hack me as you did my Lord Russell. I have heard you struck him three or four times." But here's Macaulay: "The first blow inflicted only a slight wound. The Duke struggled, rose from the block, and looked reproachfully at the executioner. The head sank down once more. The stroke was repeated again and again; but still the neck was not severed, and the body continued to move. Yells of rage and horror rose from the crowd. Ketch flung down the axe with a curse, "I cannot do it," he said, "My heart fails me." "Take up the axe, man, " cried the sheriff. "Fling him over the rails," roared the mob….wrought up to such an ecstasy of rage that the executioner was in danger of being torn to pieces, and was conveyed away under strong guard." KILL the UMP indeed.
I am afraid I have softened it for delicate readers. If you read Ch 5 you will find Monmouth flat refusing to admit sin to the bishops on the scaffold, neither in his open revolt, nor in his adulterous relation with Lady Henrietta Wentworth (Penguin 106-112). For additional class delight I continued the ch next class, on the Bloody Assize in Dorset. Four different years I lived in Weymouth or Whitchurch for a month, and would visit Judge Jeffreys' court in Dorchester, not far from Thomas Hardy sites, including the house where his wife died and his lovely birthplace.
My other usual reading in Restoration classes was Clarendon's account of James II's introducing his new wife, Catherine of Braganza (she and her attendants all dressed in black) to his mistress, three days after landing from Portugal. Very amusing, especially to my students in a city 2/3 Portuguese.
No wonder so many of my students continued as history majors. Probably I failed to tell them Clarendon and Macaulay were of course Literature, as is only the best history. Grant's autobiography.
Henry Adams's history, and The Education of; Machiavelli's Discorsi (on Livy); Livy, Caesar…etc.

Douglas Baskett says

This book has many faults, among them the author's shallow knowledge of some topics and his overt nationalism, but, perhaps most important, its greatest fault comes from the author's tendentious perspective to see all historical events as leading inexorably to the grandeur that was the England of his day. The prose is pleasantly stylistic and sometimes lively, but, as history, it is best read as an object lesson in the perils of the lack of objectivity. It should not be read as a trustworthy or authoritative source.

Rozzer says

I majored in Early Modern European History. Not only majored, but never in college took any unrequired course other than history. History automatically stuck in my mind and memory. Which produced a perfect score on the history GRE in 1967. I constantly read history before college, during college, and after college. I am and always have been a big, big fan of 19th Century narrative history. The kind of history that by the force and elegance of its writing picks you up and sweeps you along with the narrative. And Macaulay was, as proven in these works, the absolute master of 19th Century narrative history.

If you yourself are set up to receive 19th Century English prose (many are not), then prepare to be entranced. Macaulay fully believed that the history of Britain from 1680 to 1700 accounted for all of the huge progress and imperial resilience of Britain and the British Empire as of his date in the mid-1800's. And he may well have been right. My own particular interest is in the first Industrial Revolution, and of course that isn't covered by Macaulay's dates. But his work provides an excellent background for the economic calm of the early 18th Century that was a necessary precursor of the Industrial Revolution. And even if you just love luscious English prose, give yourself a treat and read Macaulay. (By the way, it's free on the Net at Gutenberg, and that's the unabridged version.)