

WHIG INTERPRETATION OF HISTORY.¹ Originally readings of the past, primarily of England, that laud development of the constitution and of the concept (and institutions) of liberty; now applied as a derogative term for anachronistic or presentist views of the past. One should distinguish between the Whig partisan view of the English constitution and the Whig view of history which dominated British historiography in the Victorian era. And the term Whig interpretation has been applied to both the latter and to all types of present-minded history.

First WIH

What was the first WIH? The Whig vision of history derived from the common-law claim of continuity of the ancient constitution. As J.G.A. Pocock has shown, the developing historical method found in works by Sir Robert Brady and Sir Robert Filmer questioned this claim of continuity.² That is, new work, essentially Tory history, attacked the foundations of the view that the ancient constitution was unchanging. Whiggish ancient constitutionalism was defended by William Petyt (1680) and by Edward Cooke's *Argumentum anti-Normannicum, or, An argument proving, from ancient histories and records, that William, Duke of Normandy, made no absolute conquest of England by the sword* (1682); only to be attacked again by Brady's *A full and clear answer to a book, written by William Petit Esq* (1681) and his *An introduction to the old English history* (1684).

Soon after the Glorious Revolution James Tyrrell provided a clear Whig narrative in his *Bibliotheca politica* (1692); *A Brief enquiry into the ancient constitution and government of England* (1695); and *The general history of England, as well ecclesiastical as civil* (1696[/?]). Tyrrell demonstrates that the Saxons were a free people who, even after their Conquest, set over themselves a Prince by "free consent." Even "the laws and customs of Normandy," thought Tyrrell, "came from the English laws and nation, either not long before or after Edward the Confessor's time."³

Using one of the most thorough and most recent examinations of ancient constitutionalism, Janelle Greenberg's *The Radical Face of the Ancient Constitution*, we can identify four planks of an English WIH at the time of the Glorious Revolution:

- (1) kingship was elective and the coronation oath served as a compact;
- (2) Parliament, especially the Commons, pre-dated the Conquest;
- (3) kingship was forfeited if the king did not defend the kingdom, property, or provide justice; and
- (4) past violations of the ancient constitution had been resisted and the result was numerous Magna Cartas.

Thus, Tyrrell referred to "the Magna Chartas of Hen. I, K. Stephen, K. Hen. II, K. John, and K. Hen. the III."⁴ Even after an all-too-obvious second Conquest forced post-1688 Whigs to grapple with change, in 1695, Sir William Temple's *Introduction to the History of England* continued to stress the continuity of our name, our Saxon language, and "our form of government, our laws and institutions, which have been...so obstinately defended by our ancestors."⁵ Since Greenberg's delineation of ancient constitutionalism eschews examination of Church history, we might graft onto it the definition of the WIH used by Colin Kidd:

- [1] pride in the special role in history of the English church;
- [2] belief in an "ancient constitution" in the distant past and the subsequent unbroken continuity of limited monarchy, parliament and the rule of the common law throughout England's history; and
- [3] the consequent belief in a providential missionary role for the English in world history whether as exporters of protestantism or parliamentary democracy.⁶

The Whig interpretation took shape around 1700. Tyrrell's narrative only reached the reign of Richard II. The appendix on "whether the Commons of England had ever any other Representatives in Parliament ...before the 49th of Henry the Third?" argued for an unchanging ancient constitution--that the Commons was part of an unchanging ancient constitution, even before 1265.⁷ Laurence Echard, John Oldmixon, and Paul de Rapin-Thoyras (among others) wrote the first *extended* Whig narratives in partial justification of the Revolution of 1688-89. Oldmixon's very present-minded reading of the past focused on the antiquity of England's constitution and how to protect the foundations of liberty against the assaults of power and priestcraft. Rapin-Thoyras, a French Huguenot, tried to show to foreigners how the maintenance of an old, free constitution descended from Northern Germany (an argument that could please the ruling Hanoverians) explained the rapid rise of England in European politics since 1688. Despite an uncritical defense of a largely mythical ancient constitution (and depreciation of any past time

in which liberty and freedom did not exist), Tyrrell, Oldmixon, and Rapin-Thoryas did import archival sources into broad national narratives (though the contemporary antiquarian enterprise remained a separate development). This Whig interpretation dominated English history through the early eighteenth century and, through the international influence of Rapin-Thoryas as well as anglophilia among Enlightenment *philosophes*, influenced continental historiography as well. Even the Tory Henry, viscount Bolingbroke appropriated Whig ancient constitutionalism in a "country" attack on Sir Robert Walpole's Whig oligarchy.

Later WIH

The Whig interpretation changed noticeably from the vulgar Whiggism of revolutionary era historians, through the sceptical Whiggism of David Hume (though similar sentiments permeate Echarde's narratives), to the scientific Whiggism of Thomas Babington Macaulay and his kin. The Whig interpretation often developed in conscious opposition to what were seen as Tory histories: Brady on feudalism, the earl of Clarendon on the Civil War and Restoration. (Oldmixon crammed lengthy point-by-point rebuttals of Clarendon and Echarde into his narrative.) But Hume remained the Whigs' main adversary for nearly a century, when he successfully posed his narrative history of England (1754-61) in explicit opposition to Rapin-Thoyras. Whigs attacked Hume not for arguing that Charles I had a better case than Parliament, but that he had a case at all. But Hume's history had its own Whiggism. Its heroes were not prominent consensual English politicians, but progress itself. What unites the various strands of Whiggism is the belief in history as development, rather than the Renaissance or classical theory of decline.

From 1848 to 1861 Macaulay restated the original Whig thesis in opposition to Hume. Macaulay stressed primitive early German institutions and Germanic liberty, and a quick but incomplete feudalization. Any medieval experiment with "counsel," in the Whig interpretation, was simply a revival of ancient liberty. Thus, Macaulay thought the Glorious Revolution "a vindication of ancient rights," and it took its place in line with 1066, 1215, and 1628. Macaulay attacked Hume, but his scientific Whiggism also modified the hero worship of the earlier Whigs (though he still praises the Trimmer Lord Halifax, and Lord Chancellor Somers) by praising the recent development of English specialization, manners, and wealth. Both Hume and Macaulay willingly explained change in terms of long-range social processes. Macaulay defines historical progress as material progress brought about by political action. In the 1860s, William Stubbs and Edward Augustus Freeman extended the gradualist thesis of constitutional progress back to medieval England.

If the Whig interpretation flourished in the early Victorian era, Macaulay's brand of patriotic narrative--of heroic commonsense liberal development--was in retreat by the 1880s. Historicism, archival research, source-criticism, and professionalization discredited narrative set pieces such as Anglo-Saxon democracy or baronial liberalism under King John.

The Critique

The climax of historicism and the attack on anachronistic and ideological readings of the past occurred after World War I. Between 1928 and 1931, H.A.L. Fisher, Lewis Namier, and Butterfield wrote and lectured against the Whig interpretation. The most influential critique was a thin volume by Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History*, which censured the teleological focus on victorious Protestants and Whigs. But Butterfield not only decried those historians with a specific attitude to the British constitution, he also censured the subordination of the past to the present: those historians who stress only past features and institutions that are still important in the present. This latter point too can be divided between those distortions of the past which derive from unavoidable selection and analysis (in this sense, the above history of the Whig interpretation is unavoidably Whiggish), and the present- or future-minded reading of the past with regard to its use in present arguments and without regard to changing context of meaning.

Though Butterfield mentioned only Lord Acton, he appears to have been taking aim at Trevelyan as well. Yet, while Butterfield criticized Whig progressivism in 1931, he would come to laud Whig traditionalism in *The Englishman and His History* in 1944 (a paradox explicable by recalling the various strands of Whiggism).

Whig spotting continues among modern historians. Hexter's focus on "the making of modern freedom," which continues in the mold of Lord Acton, and Hugh Trevor-Roper's penchant for the history of toleration are certainly within the Whig mold, though it is more difficult to prove that they fall into the

Whig fallacy of presentism and inevitability. The term has been used to attack, on the one hand, emphasis on evolutionary or teleological inevitability, whether because of anachronism or an ideological penchant for the new and the emerging. On the other hand, it has been used to label that focus on developing liberal institutions, particularly British constitutional institutions, which at times reifies social and political groupings. Indeed, Whiggism has been seen in the elevation of personal battles to conflicts of principles and ideas. But, as this survey indicates, Whig historians have always focused on heroic individuals, thus emphasizing contingency as much as inevitability or institutions. Whig historians have been criticized for projecting back onto the past their own ideas of what is real and important. But so too have Marxist and social historians and, except where falsifiable, it is not clear how this could be avoided absolutely.

TEXTS

Echard, Laurence. *The History of England from the first Entrance of Julius Caesar and the Romans*. 3 vols. London: 1707-1718.

[Kennett, White]. *A Complete History of England*. Vol. 3. London: 1706.

[Oldmixon, John]. *The Critical History of England, Ecclesiastical and Civil*. London: 1724.

_____. *The History of England during the Reign of the Royal House of Stuart*. London: 1730.

Rapin-Thoyras, Paul de. *Histoire d'Angleterre*. 13 vols. The Hague: 1724-36. Translated as *The History of England as well Ecclesiastical as Civil*. 15 vols. N. Tindal, trans. and ed. London: 1725-1731.

Tyrrell, James. *The General History of England, Both Ecclesiastical and Civil; From the Earliest Accounts of Time, To the Reign of His Present Majesty, King William III*. 3 vols. in 5. London: 1696 (1697?)-1704.

FURTHER READING

Butterfield, H. *The Englishman and his History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1944.

_____. *The Whig Interpretation of History*. London: G. Bell and Sons, 1931.

Pocock, J.G.A. "The varieties of Whiggism from Exclusion to Reform: A history of ideology and discourse." In *Virtue, Commerce, and History: Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985, pp. 215-310.

Notes

1. Based on Newton E. Key, "Whig interpretation of history," in *A Global Encyclopedia of Historical Writing*, ed. D.R. Woolf (New York, 1998): 941-2; and "A Tory (Toraidhe) Interpretation of History?: The Use of History in Sermons from the Celtic and Colonial Fringe, 1660-1720" (American Historical Association Conference, Chicago, Jan. 2003).

2. The relation between the Glorious Revolution and the Whig Interpretation of History was laid out extensively in J.G.A. Pocock's conclusion to *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law*, "1688 in the History of Historiography" in 1957 (new ed., 1987).

3. Tyrrell, *Bibliotheca Politica*, 753, quoted in Greenberg, *The Radical Face of the Ancient Constitution: St. Edward's "Laws" in Early Modern Political Thought* (Cambridge, 2001), 33-4. Julia Rudolph has recently suggested that Tyrrell was well aware of Brady's validation of "the feudal interpretation of history," and struggled with the problem of anachronism. Julia Rudolph, *Revolution by Degrees: James Tyrrell and Whig Political Thought in the Late Seventeenth Century* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, 2002), esp. 72-3.

4. Tyrrell, *Bibliotheca Politica*, 362-3, quoted in Greenberg, 285.

5. Temple, 308-17, quoted in Greenberg, 294-5.

6. Colin Kidd, *Subverting Scotland's Past: Scottish whig historians and the creation of an Anglo-British identity, 1689-c. 1830* (Cambridge, 1993), 6.

7. Tyrrell, relying upon Philip Hunton's *Treatise of Monarchy* (1643, reprinted 1680), followed the roots of this "ancient Gothic constitution" back to Germany through Hotman's *Francogallia*.