Ten Books That Shaped the British Empire

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Ten Books That Shaped the British Empire: Creating an Imperial Commons.

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In December 1848, in the wake of the European revolutions of that year, the first two volumes of Thomas Babington Macaulay’s *The History of England from the Accession of James II* were published to rapturous applause and unprecedented sales. The sales of the next three volumes surpassed all expectations. By the turn of the century, it is estimated, probably a million copies of Macaulay’s works were circulating the globe. The Great Historian, as he came to be known, was already a significant public figure in Britain, celebrated for his parliamentary oratory; his literary and historical essays on great English writers, statesmen, and empire builders; and his ballads, the *Lays of Ancient Rome*. But it was the history of England that he planned that he trusted to secure his lasting reputation, and in 1839 he set about the task of writing it. The tension for him between a life as a statesman and one as a literary man was never resolved, but the influence of Homer, he came to believe, was much longer lasting than that of Napoleon. Men’s lives and imaginations were more shaped by the words they read or heard than by the deeds of conquerors. He was a man with a profound sense of the power of the book; indeed he believed that books had saved his life in the wake of traumatic events in his emotional life.¹ It was safer, he believed, to live with
the dead than the living. He set his sights on his capacity to inspire readers over centuries to come, and for twenty years he devoted himself to his project. He hoped that he had written a master narrative and was convinced (correctly as it transpired) that his History would outlast those of his rivals. He was not disappointed: the History brought him immense celebrity, gave him imperial and global recognition, and made him a rich man. It has been reprinted multiple times, translated into innumerable languages, and remains in print. It is an iconic account of the nation.

He made the decision to work on the history while in India, serving as the lay member of the Governor General’s Council, a very powerful position and one he used to promote the anglicization of India. The history he intended to write was a history of England, but it would stand as a universal history, for England was in his mind the modern nation, a nation that had progressed, was civilized, and could act as a beacon providing the model other nations could follow. Writing from India, he was able to reflect on “home” from the outside, to gain a new perspective, a much clearer recognition of the difference as he understood it between India and England, and the process whereby England had become what it was. England deserved its own history—one that would stand beside those of Greece and Rome, for “our liberty is . . . essentially English,” something different. England’s story, as he told it, was of a transformation from barbarism to civilization. At the beginning of the twelfth century England’s condition had been “more miserable than the state in which the most degraded nations of the East now are.” But “in the course of seven centuries the wretched and degraded race have become the greatest and most highly civilised people that ever the world saw, have spread their dominion over every quarter of the globe, have scattered the seeds of mighty empires and republics,” have exercised maritime power, have developed the science of healing, have excelled in mechanical arts, manufacture, and literature, and have become “the acknowledged leaders of the human race” on questions of political improvement. The history of England was “the history of this great change in the moral, intellectual, and physical state of the inhabitants of our own island.” This was a story to be proud of, a story of progress.

The opening of the first volume made clear that this was to be an epic. The historian placed himself in the center of the frame, his authoritative voice telling his readers the history of “our country.” At the center of his story was the Glorious Revolution of 1688, the revolution that terminated the long struggle between the monarchy and their parliaments, and secured
“the rights of the people” and the title of the reigning dynasty. “Under that settlement, the authority of law and the security of property were found to be compatible with a liberty of discussion and of individual action never before known.” It was from this “auspicious union of order and freedom” that unparalleled prosperity sprang, and “our country, from a state of ignominious vassalage, rapidly rose to the place of umpire among European powers.” Her “opulence and her martial glory” grew alongside the wonders of the Bank of England, a “gigantic commerce” and maritime power. Scotland was united to England, the American colonies “became far mightier and wealthier” than the Spanish, an empire as grand as that of Alexander was established in Asia. But the duty of the historian was to record disasters and “great national crimes” as well as triumphs. Expansion brought abuses, “evils from which poor and rude societies are free.” In North America “imprudence and obstinacy . . . broke the ties to the parent state.” Ireland was “cursed by the domination of race over race and of religion over religion.” It “remained indeed a member of the empire, but a withered and distorted member, adding no strength to the body politic, and reproachfully pointed at by all who feared or envied the greatness of England.” Yet, he maintained, “unless I greatly deceive myself, the general effect of this chequered narrative will be to excite thankfulness in all religious minds, and hope in the breasts, of all patriots. For the history of our country during the last hundred and sixty years is eminently the history of physical, of moral, and of intellectual improvement.” He aimed to tell of battles and sieges, of parliaments and kings, but also “the history of the people,” of art and religion, of manners and customs. He would place before the English of the nineteenth century a true picture of the life of their ancestors and make them proud of those ancestors—for those who had no pride in the past would leave no lasting legacies themselves. Constitutional government for the people, the rule of law, individual freedom, security of property, prosperity and imperial power, these were the key elements of Macaulay’s triumphalist account. He initially intended that his chronological scope should reach to 1832, his own times. In fact the five volumes ended in 1701, offering an account of the late seventeenth century, the formative time, in his understanding, for the making of the modern nation. And although the work was entitled History of England, it was in fact the history of Britain and Ireland—all subsumed in Macaulay’s mind into one hegemonic category, England.

How was the History received, not just in Britain but across the empire? This essay can only give some small indications, for it was a book with truly
On publication the enthusiasm for the History in Britain matched the excitement over Scott’s Waverley decades previously, and the books sold on the scale of Dickens. It was consumed by readers of every class, both men and women, and Macaulay received innumerable letters of thanks from all levels of society. “My dear Macaulay” wrote Lord Jeffrey, erstwhile editor of the Edinburgh Review, a man who had fostered him as a young author, “the mother that bore you, had she been yet alive, could scarcely have felt prouder or happier than I do at this outburst of your graver fame.” Maria Edgeworth, by this time an elderly literary lady, named it “immortal” and was especially thrilled that she was mentioned and Scott was not. Mr. Brontë read it in the Haworth vicarage and greatly enjoyed it. Harriet Martineau was much less complimentary, regarding it as a romantic fantasy. A number of intellectuals criticized its complacency and homespun philosophy. Farmers turned to it in the long winter evenings; public schoolboys bewailed the difficulties in getting hold of the volumes. An officer committed to prison for a fortnight for knocking down a policeman had his French novels taken away from him but was allowed to keep his Bible and Macaulay’s History: a clear indication as to how it was viewed by the authorities.

The History was perfect for reading aloud, with its strong narrative, its simple language that made use of the vernacular, its great melodramatic set-pieces, its vivid word pictures, its romance of the powerful combined with its many doses of Victorian common sense. It educated and entertained (making few critical demands) while civilizing its readers, offering them identities as proud subjects of the greatest nation on earth. Macaulay read much of it to his sister Hannah and her family as he completed chapters and was ready to try them out. Much to his annoyance, his brother-in-law, Charles Trevelyan, often fell asleep, but Hannah and her daughter were always full of praise, convincing him that his history, as he hoped, would displace the novels of fashionable young ladies on their drawing-room tables. Jane Maria Richmond’s brother borrowed it from the library, as Charlotte Macdonald records (chapter 2, this volume), and it was read aloud in her family circle. She described it as “quite a Young Ladies’ history in ease and cleanness; it leaves nothing for the poor female intellect to do; all the ideas are made smooth and easy of comprehension.” In later years Millicent Fawcett, a leading feminist, remembered her older sister, Elizabeth Garrett, gathering her siblings around her on a Sunday evening and telling them stories from Macaulay. Virginia Woolf recorded in May 1897 that she had just
finished the fifth and last volume of “my beloved Macaulay.” Woolf might have felt less enthusiastic about him if she had known how hostile he was to “bluestockings”—a breed he regarded as hateful. Women, in Macaulay’s view, were suited to being the educated companions of men, but their ambitions should reach no higher. He reproduced entirely conventional Victorian views of gender relations in the *History*, seeing family as the bedrock of social order, men as actors in the world, and woman’s place as being in the home.

Those wanting to educate or improve their employees or congregations seized on it. A gentleman in Lancashire invited his poorer neighbors to come to his house every evening after their work was finished, and he read the *History* aloud to them from beginning to end. Macaulay himself particularly prized a letter that he received from a Unitarian minister offering thanks from a group of working people who had been attending the schoolhouse regularly on Wednesday evenings to hear the *History* and who appreciated the fact that workingmen could understand it. His longtime servant William Williams requested a copy of the *History* when he was pensioned off; this was the book he could enjoy by his fireside at his retirement home, Macaulay Villa. Access was not confined to those able to buy the books, for circulating libraries bought multiple copies. Cheap editions were not produced immediately—indeed, the publisher, William Longman, did not want his profits to be reduced in this way. As the *British Journal* noted in 1852:

> The number of readers in this country is rapidly extending . . . we hope the day is not far distant when the original works of our highest minds—the fictions of Bulwer and the histories of Macaulay—will be published in shilling volumes and penny parts, and the poorest reader in the kingdom have thus an opportunity of sharing in a luxury now reserved only for the rich, or the comparatively rich. It is when a book is new that it is most keenly relished, and as the mind of the nation is continually moving onwards, one class of the community should not be left, in intellectual taste, a generation behind another.

Soon enough there were selections and popular editions on the market in response to this demand.

The *History* was also a great success both on the Continent and in the United States. An English-language edition was published in a paperback series in Germany, and by 1856 there were six translations into German in
progress. Editions appeared in all the major European languages and were enthusiastically consumed across the Continent. Messrs. Harper of New York were astonished by the success; the History had taken the country by storm. The absence of copyright protection meant that twenty thousand copies of the unauthorized edition were sold alongside forty thousand of the authorized edition, all in the first year. This demonstrated for Macaulay that his critics who claimed he was too preoccupied with “mere local and temporary feelings” had been proven wrong. “I wrote with a remote past and a remote future constantly in my mind,” he recorded in his journal. His History could have universal application—for who did not want to live in a prosperous and self-governing nation?

Macaulay’s success lay in his creation of a myth of the birth, infancy, adolescence, and maturity of a great nation. While continental Europe was suffering the trauma of revolution, England had remained secure. The nineteenth century was a time of social, economic, and political transformation. In his view the historian’s work in such unsettling times was to represent the nation as coherent and stable, a safe place to be. What made England so special, he argued, was its capacity to reform in time—to avoid the bloody revolutions that had disturbed the continent. The revolution that was the “least violent,” that of 1688, had been the most beneficial. A union had been made between Crown and Parliament that meant that “this was our last revolution.” There was no need among “wise and patriotic Englishmen” for resistance to established government, for “the means of effecting every improvement which the constitution requires may be found within the constitution itself.” “All around us,” he continued, “the world is convulsed by the agonies of great nations.” Governments have been overthrown, capital cities of western Europe “have streamed with blood,” “the antipathy of class to class, the antipathy of race to race have broken loose from the control of divine and human laws.” Industry had been paralyzed, trade had been suspended, fear and anxiety had stalked millions, dangerous doctrines that “would make the fairest provinces of France and Germany as savage as Congo or Patagonia” had been abroad, “Europe has been threatened with subjugation by barbarians.” Meanwhile, “in our fair island the regular course of government has never been for a day interrupted. The few bad men who longed for license and plunder have not had the courage to confront for one moment the strength of a loyal nation, rallied in firm array around a parental throne. . . . It is because we had a preserving revolution in the seventeenth century that we have not had a destroying revolution in the
nineteenth century. Despotic kings had been defeated, Parliament had come to represent “the people,” order had been established, fanatics had been expelled, moderation had triumphed, property was secure, men could rest peacefully in their homes, which were their castles.

Macaulay’s political intervention was intended to erase dissent and minimize class, gender, and ethnic conflict. He was born in 1800; his childhood was shadowed by the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars. Growing up in a conservative evangelical household, he learned to fear revolution and despise what was construed as “mob politics.” In 1831–1832, when revolution seemed a serious possibility, his speeches in the House of Commons arguing for parliamentary reform and the political incorporation of middle-class men were widely interpreted as having made a significant impact. In 1848 he was a member of the Whig cabinet at a time when once again there were real fears of violent disruption both in Britain and in Ireland. Poverty and unemployment were rife, Chartist claims for universal male suffrage were winning widespread support, and the example of Paris was inspiring. There was panic in London in April 1848, when the Chartist petition was due to be presented to Parliament after a monster meeting at Kennington Common and the city was barricaded with the army at the ready. In the event 150,000 met peaceably, the Chartist leaders declared their peaceful intentions and asked the crowd to disperse, heavy rain contributing to the collapse of Chartist hopes. The danger of revolution seemed to be over. A year later Macaulay recorded in his journal: “remembered this day last year. The great turning point—the triumph of order over anarchy.”

His History was his most potent contribution to the political settlement inaugurated in 1832. A new sense of the nation had to be crafted, one appropriate to a modern urban world, one that could deal with a greatly expanded electorate. He was fully committed to the Whig project of governing for the people, winning consent to the rule of the propertied. As trustees of the nation, the governing class would deliver peace and prosperity. “The people” now had to be redefined as responsible men of property, citizens of the nation. Women, workers, Catholics, Jews, the Scots and the Irish, all those partially or totally excluded from the full benefits of citizenship, must know that they belonged to the nation, could claim an identification with it, could be English. Subjects of empire could learn that over time they, too, could enjoy these liberties.

This mythic story of the birth and triumph of the nation became the common sense, as Macaulay’s critics recognized only too well. His account
provided the benchmark against which others had to argue. It was a refer-
ence point within popular culture—a text people knew about even if they
had not read it. In the much-quoted chapter 3, Macaulay aimed to dem-
onstrate how life had improved immeasurably for all classes over the pe-
riod between 1685 and the 1840s, how the nation had enjoyed “a change
to which the history of the old world furnishes no parallel.” And it was the
“lower orders” who had benefitted most, not just in material terms, the bet-
ter wages and standard of living, but also from the “mollifying influence of
civilisation on national character.” In future times, he concluded, people
might look back on the Victorian age as the time when “England was truly
merry England, when all classes were bound together by brotherly sympa-
thy, when the rich did not grind the faces of the poor, and when the poor
did not envy the splendour of the rich.”

Such assertions were hard for Chartists to take as they struggled with
the bleak realities of unemployment, underemployment, poverty, and
want. Yet their challenges were confined to his claims about the working
classes, not to his broader narrative or to his writerly skills: he was regularly
referred to as “the brilliant historian.” For Ernest Jones, a radical Chartist,
“he was unequalled . . . as an historian of the past,” as he put it in a lecture
in 1850 at the Mechanics Institute in Chancery Lane. Yet only months be-
fore, in an address to a meeting at Leicester titled “Bread and Freedom,”
had taken issue with Macaulay’s assumptions as to the ways conditions
were improving for the laboring poor, pointing to the increases in rent and
the decreases in wages at the same time that this population was increasing
and food production was declining. “The labourer had been progressing,”
Jones concluded, but it was “to starvation.” Similarly, Lloyd Jones, also on
the radical wing of the Chartist movement, attacked Macaulay for his mis-
statements concerning the conditions of the working classes in his recently
published History and regretted that “in a time of such boasted civilisa-
tion as the present, the working men of England were so degraded, so op-
pressed.” Yet in 1867 Lloyd Jones, together with J. M. Ludlow, published
his widely read book Progress of the Working Classes, with its account of the
improvements in conditions. The narrative of progress of which Macaulay
was an arch protagonist took a deep hold. Karl Marx was one of those who
was not vulnerable to it: he denounced Macaulay as that “Scotch sycophant
and fine talker,” “a systematic falsifier of history,” defrauding the populace
“in the interests of the Whigs and the bourgeoisie.” “What eyes, and espe-
cially what ears he must have” to see only progress where there was daily
retrogression. But all this went to demonstrate how Macaulay provided a paradigm against which critics had to rail and which few had the capacity to unseat. The book provoked some, delighted others, but it reigned undisputed as the history of England.

In a period “after the achievement of mass literacy but before radio and television working-class culture was saturated by the spirit of mutual education” and Macaulay’s writing had great appeal. His works often featured on lists of books read by autodidacts, from Welsh miners to print workers and early Labour MPs. Some cited the new forms of self-expression it gave them, others the wider conception of history as an all-embracing world process. The drama and the accessibility of Macaulay’s writing were much appreciated, and the criticisms of professional historians, which focused on the absence of adequate archival research and referencing and the work’s populist appeal, cut little ice. Kathleen Woodward, a young factory worker, read the History twice through at her machine. “I derived great pleasure from these histories,” she recorded, “which, as I grew up, I heard slighted, maligned. The colour and movement of Macaulay, the onward swing from Parliament to Parliament and from King to King daily transported me; nor was my pleasure spoiled by any awareness of his prejudices or inaccuracies.” For the “national commons” the History could be a resource, something that educated, but enjoyably.

Macaulay’s father was born in the Highlands, but like so many of his generation migrated south. The son regarded himself as an Englishman and told a story in his History of how the Scots and English had become one people, mirroring his own experience of assimilation. Aspects of his account were vigorously disputed by some critics, but once again it was particular details that were challenged rather than the narrative of progress. John Paget particularly objected to Macaulay’s dramatic version of the Massacre of Glencoe and found his “vituperative . . . spiteful . . . and grotesque” picture of the barbarism of the Highlands deeply offensive, only explicable in the context of an attack on his ancestors. “No quarrel is so bitter as a family quarrel,” he wrote, “when a man takes to abusing his father or his mother he does it with infinitely greater gusto than a mere stranger.” But his was a lone voice, and Edinburgh voters twice elected Macaulay as their MP despite strong disapproval from some Presbyterians of his tolerance toward Catholics.

The account Macaulay gave of Ireland raised many more problems. It was impossible for him to secure “the sister kingdom” firmly into his

Macaulay, The History of England • 79
narrative of an integrated nation. Since the Act of Union it had been neither fully metropolitan nor colonial, ruled differently from England on account of its unruly Catholic population yet part of the United Kingdom, with elected representatives at Westminster. Throughout Macaulay’s political life Ireland represented a major problem for the British government. He was a firm supporter of Catholic emancipation, for Catholics had to be brought into the nation. Yet emancipation had solved nothing, and the 1830s and 1840s witnessed severe unrest, demands for repeal of the Union, and the horrors of the Famine, culminating in the abortive uprising of Young Ireland in 1848. Macaulay was firmly of the opinion that the only future for Ireland lay in a closer union with England; the tragedy of the Irish was that they had not become English. His hostility toward Catholics and Catholicism, despite his commitment to their political emancipation, was all too evident in the *History*. The book met with a sharp critical response from the *Irish Quarterly Review*, which judged it “a political romance . . . false in its facts, uncandid in its criticisms, illogical in its reasoning, and unjust in its conclusion.” At the same time his racialized depictions of the “aboriginal” Irish belied his universalist principles. He had grown up both with evangelical notions of a universal human family hierarchized according to level of development and with assumptions about imperial responsibility for those unable to govern themselves. These remained guiding principles, albeit in a secular form. He believed that the human family was descended from common stock, but racial hierarchies were in the order of things. Cultural differences could in theory be overcome, but delineating those differences opened up the scale of the heights to be climbed for those rescued from or still locked in barbarism. The liberal reforming vision of both nation and empire espoused by Macaulay rested on a contradiction: a formal and legalistic universalism was underpinned by an acceptance of inequality, whether of race, ethnicity, class, or gender, as the necessary foundation for any stable society. His narrative of Irish barbarism in need of civilization by the English could not pass unchallenged and was a particular provocation for Young Ireland, a romantic nationalist movement.

Charles Gavan Duffy, a passionate advocate of Young Ireland, left his native country in 1856 for Australia, disillusioned of any hopes for a better future, and spent his last years in France, writing a history both of himself and of Ireland, taking issue with English historians. Carlyle and Macaulay loomed large for him. Irish nationalism, like all anticolonial nationalisms, was forged in relation to British imperial power. As David Lloyd argues,
“the power of nationalism lies in its countering of an imperial model of identity, for which the colonised people represent a primitive stage in a universal history of civilisation whose apex is the colonising power, with another, formally similar model that seeks to forge an oppositional identity from within.”21 Duffy’s imperial antagonists set the terms that he had to counter. Recovering a national history was a key project for Young Ireland; centuries of oppression had to be recast into a narrative of national survival with origins, heroes, and continuities. Duffy greatly admired Macaulay’s literary skills and sought his approval for his ballads, an approval that was withheld. The narrative Duffy attempted to construct was of a nation with a long-established history, its national spirit forged by Christianity in the fifth century, beset by foreign invaders, and subjugated by colonizers whose self-interests were always paramount. Across the British Empire, he maintained, “the dependent state only existed for the benefit of the paramount state.”22 The vaunted “British liberties,” so dear to Macaulay, had a different meaning for the Irish. England had suspended “the laws of public morality” in the case of Ireland. “To trouble a foreign invader in England was meritorious” for Macaulay: when it came to the Irish, however, their resistance to foreign domination was seen as the “turbulence and discontent native to the Celtic race.” Duffy hoped to puncture Macaulay, the “liberal rhetorician” who in both his political practice and his history writing was quite prepared to appeal to brute force when it came to the Irish. Nations had the right to determine their own futures, Duffy insisted: “but the mass of the English people have never been able to recognise any equity which countervails their interests, or alarms their pride. And this blind doltish obstinacy, Mr. Macaulay clothed in the vesture of rhetoric and eloquence.”23 Duffy’s history, however, failed to unseat Macaulay’s hegemony.

Despite the fact that the colonies of white settlement had no place in the History, for they were unknown territories in the seventeenth century, Macaulay was widely read in Australia and New Zealand, offering an identity for white colonists that was enthusiastically endorsed. As Alexis Weedon demonstrates, the export of books to the empire rose steadily from the early nineteenth century as communications speeded up and white settlements expanded, particularly in the Antipodes, Canada, and Southern Africa.24 Macaulay’s writing had a powerful appeal for this “imperial commons.” The New Zealand press in the nineteenth century abounded with advertisements for the History, acclaiming it as “first class.” It figured as a school prize, in presidential addresses, even in discussions over land
tenure and the importance of freehold. In Australia it took a deep hold. By the end of the 1840s the settlers were keen to expunge the association with convictism, after their struggles over transportation and despotic military rule. They “took as their ideal a British derived ideal of liberty and a belief in universal human progress.”25 Aboriginal people were never imagined as part of this settlement, and Macaulay’s total silence on the claims of “natives” suited them well. Macaulay drew on Whig thinking on empire, which had been shaped by the traumas associated with the American Revolution. A negotiated settlement should have been possible, for the colonists were Englishmen. Utilizing the language of family, “young colonies,” as they were constructed, had to mature; then there were only two possibilities—full incorporation or separation. When it came to colonies of white settlement, the model of empire with which Macaulay worked was clear. During his years in politics, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada all claimed forms of responsible government and this, to his mind, was entirely appropriate. They could not be incorporated. They were far from the metropole, and their significant populations were Anglo-Saxon, Englishmen, valuing their liberties. As in the case of the United States, over time separation had to occur. This was a conclusion that chimed well with the hopes of settlers in Australia.

The History was widely available in New South Wales and beyond very soon after publication, with multiple advertisements in the press. As early as 1850 “A working man” wrote to the Launceston Examiner complaining that there were no copies available in the Mechanics Institute and that this must be remedied since it would “raise the public taste . . . enlighten . . . and inform.”26 By the later 1850s grateful pupils were presenting their teachers with copies of the History, and it was becoming a standard school prize. By the 1870s a traveler in Australia reported that “the three books he found on every squatter’s shelf . . . were Shakespeare, the Bible and Macaulay’s Esssays.”27 Political leaders and newspaper editors identified enthusiastically with a Whig vision of history. “If we wished to look for a ‘Model’ it is to the Constitution of England we should look modified so as to suit the wants and requirements of the present age” proclaimed the People’s Advocate. England “enjoyed a larger store of personal liberty and rational freedom than is perhaps enjoyed by any other country in the world, not excepting even America.”28 Regarding themselves as freed from aristocratic privilege and the other backward features of England, the colonists of New South Wales could achieve a more egalitarian body politic.
The most prominent leader in New South Wales in the 1850s was Henry Parkes, a Birmingham Chartist who had left England hoping for a better future in 1839. Parkes was the son of a Warwickshire tenant farmer who had lost his livelihood in the economic crisis of 1825. Henry, aged ten, migrated with his family to Birmingham, a major industrial center for the metal industries. The youngest of six siblings, he had to contribute to the family’s survival, first working in a brick pit and then apprenticed to an ivory turner, one of the skills associated with the town’s so-called toy trade in buttons and jewelry. Life was hard for the family, and Henry’s fond childhood memories were concentrated on his mother, who succored him with stories of that quintessential white imperial man Robinson Crusoe. The years 1831–1832 were tempestuous in Birmingham, with its Political Union, uniting middle-class and working-class men and setting the pace with its demands for parliamentary reform. Henry Parkes was an excited spectator of the turbulent political events; he “was a man of 1832,” wrote his biographer, Allan Martin, formed in the cauldron of reform.29 He began to write poetry and prose, joined the Mechanics Institute, and later recollected that the great orators whom he had heard in Birmingham had been his teachers. He was gripped by the words of Daniel O’Connell, known as “The Liberator,” who had led the struggle for Catholic emancipation, a struggle that was successfully concluded in 1829, providing a model for the Birmingham Political Union. Parkes attended the meeting of a quarter of a million people held in Birmingham in an effort to pressure the House of Lords to accept the Reform Bill. Many of these reformers were also engaged in the struggle against slavery, believing that slavery and freedom could not be reconciled in a land of liberty.

The Reform Act that was passed in 1832, however, was a deep disappointment to Parkes and his friends: only the propertied had been enfranchised, and working-class men whose property lay in their labor were excluded. In 1837 the Birmingham Political Union was reestablished, soon to become the Chartist movement and committed to universal male suffrage. Parkes was an enthusiastic supporter, but Birmingham was suffering from a trade recession and together with his wife, Clarinda, he moved to London, looking for work. Life was no easier there, and in 1839 they emigrated to New South Wales, hoping that the colony would provide a better future for “unhappy Englishmen.”30 As his daughter Annie later wrote, Australia, “to their untutored minds, must indeed have appeared a veritable land of convicts and blackfellows, but still ‘the land of promise’ where they might prosper.
as they could not at home.” Henry initially got work on a farm, then as a customs officer, before being able to set up in business as an ivory and bone turner. The legacy of 1832 and of Birmingham radicalism stayed with him and shaped the distinctive politics he espoused from the late 1840s. He opposed convictism and cheap foreign labor and at the same time was deeply critical of the pastoral elite. Employers wanted cheap labor from abroad; they were accustomed “to having the convicts toil for nothing” and did not want to pay for “a free man. Hence they would fain have the poor coolie from India, bound to them for a number of years—a slave in everything but in name.” Parkes wanted a free and prosperous society for the colony’s working men as well as the middle classes. “Blackfellows” were erased from the picture: the Australian myth was one of a pristine land to be taken.

In 1850, when Australia was granted limited self-government, Parkes was a moving figure in the foundation of Empire, a new weekly, which committed itself in its first issue to “colonial radicalism—our own creed.” “Every man,” the paper announced, “should stand erect, as a free-man should,” knowing “that the glorious sun over his head, and the fruitful soil beneath his feet, were made for him.” Parkes edited Empire for seven years and during that time entered politics as a colonial nationalist. Australia would build on the traditions of the Old Country but would be more democratic. His powerful sense of history and of the traditions of the free-born Englishman informed his politics: he denounced the proposal made by a conservative politician, Charles Wentworth, that a hereditary upper house should be established on the model of the British, citing Macaulay’s denunciation of an earlier Wentworth, a renegade parliamentarian who had taken the side of the king, an indication of how “the Great Historian” provided a widely recognized point of reference.

The History was on sale, in a variety of editions, in the bookshop of William Piddington, the largest radical bookseller in Sydney and a keen supporter of Parkes. Parkes followed Macaulay in seeing 1688 as the establishment of rule by “popular prescription” and in constructing the English as an imperial race, a race with the capacity to settle in new parts of the globe and carry their civilization with them, to remain just as English as the English. “He was as much an Englishman as any man present,” he told his audience in Birmingham when he returned there in 1861. “The people in Australia were as thoroughly English as the people of the mother-country; they had forfeited nothing by going a distance of 14,000 miles. Shakespeare and Milton belonged as much to them as to the people of England; they
possessed by right of inheritance an equal share in the grand traditions, the old military renown, the splendour of scientific recovery, and the wealth of literature, which had made England the great civilising power of the world."\textsuperscript{36} His heroes were Milton, Oliver Cromwell, Hampden, all subjects of Macaulay’s \textit{Essays}: this was the Protestant lineage. And it was this inheritance that Macaulay was convinced it was the work of empire to transmit: the time for military conquest was over, he told himself and his readers, ignoring the continued military campaigns across the empire; now was the time to anglicize the globe. As he famously put it, the greatest gift Britain could bestow was “the empire of our arts and morals, our literature and our laws.”\textsuperscript{37} Making the empire English was Macaulay’s dream; this was to be a benevolent empire, an empire of freedom. Yet Parkes’s variety of radicalism and his espousal of universal suffrage would have received short shrift from “the great historian.” Macaulay’s writing could be articulated to dreams he would not share. Indeed, it became a resource for others, an aspect of the “imperial commons.”

Macaulay was the son of a prominent abolitionist and was opposed to slavery, which he believed stood as the antithesis of English liberty. England’s early modern empire consisted of Ireland and the colonies of the Caribbean and North America. Yet in the \textit{History} only Ireland was deemed worthy of inclusion. Macaulay ignored the acquisition of the Atlantic empire and its central importance to trade and war. The empire was assumed, a backdrop to the nation, a necessary part of England’s expanding naval and commercial power. Its peoples—the savage Indians of the New World, the enslaved Africans of the Caribbean—marked the outer peripheries, the absent presences of the \textit{History}. Their central place in the story of the transformation from barbarism to civilization remained untold. In Macaulay’s mind there was nothing significant to be said about the Caribbean, those colonies were not yet History, they had not entered the modern world. Slavery had been abolished in 1833, and by the mid-1840s the “great experiment,” as it was constructed, as to whether Africans would work as free labor was not going well in the eyes of many Britons. (It was in this context that Brontë wrote \textit{Jane Eyre}, published the year before the \textit{History}.) The Caribbean islands no longer dominated sugar production and were increasingly irrelevant to global economics and politics. There was no story of progress there. Africa and the Caribbean were banished to the uttermost margins of his volumes. Their peoples and politics were irrelevant to his history, as was the huge flow of wealth from Caribbean slavery and Atlantic trade. Despite the
development of the Royal Africa Company under Charles II and James II, there was no discussion of the slave trade or plantation slavery, though they were central to England’s wealth and power. But slavery was a system Macaulay preferred to forget. It was abolition and imperial benevolence that should be memorialized, not the country’s investment in the plantations. Slavery was a denial of human freedom and as such should be opposed, but freed slaves were not “like us.” His opposition to slavery never extended to any sympathy for Africans or indigenous peoples, and he had no time for canting abolitionists or humanitarians. There was no contradiction for him between opposing slavery and having a commitment to empire.

In the period of colonial liberalism in New South Wales, Britishness—for Englishness was not a sufficiently inclusive category, given Scots, Irish, and Welsh emigration—was not defined in exclusively racial terms. By the 1870s, however, Parkes and others had moved to a more racially based notion of nation. His earlier opposition to cheap labor on the grounds of exploitation had shifted to an opposition on the basis of race, as he argued for the exclusion of the Chinese. Now the key influences were the conservatives Carlyle and Froude, rather than the Whiggish Macaulay. “The crimson thread of kinship,” as Parkes famously put it, “runs through us all. We know that we represent a race . . . for the purposes of settling new colonies, which never had its equal on the face of the earth.”38 His populist nationalism was increasingly associated with the notion of a white man’s country: “Britishness, once evoking a set of liberties . . . came to be overlaid by faith in the singular race patriotism of its bearers . . . to become modern was to become white.”39 The association of whiteness with citizenship and power was an inference that could be drawn from Macaulay but was never explicitly made. Offices should be open regardless of race or creed, he maintained. Theoretically he held open the possibility of “brown Englishmen”: in practice, liberalism operated multiple exclusions. Indians, for example, were never quite ready in Macaulay’s judgment to assume positions of authority within the Indian Civil Service. It was this paradoxical character of liberalism that meant it could be articulated to both anticolonial and feminist claims, and that such claims could be endlessly deferred.

Macaulay’s history was of the making of the multiethnic white nation named England, an example of the route to modernity, laying out a path that others could follow. Colonial rule was imagined as the only route to modernity for “others.” Representative government was for Britain and colonies of white settlement; India should be ruled despotically in order

86 • CATHERINE HALL
to deliver liberties. Macaulay’s assumption was that England’s route was the route: it was, in theory, universally applicable. It was this universalism that C. L. R. James was to undermine in *The Black Jacobins*, his majestic account of the connections between the Haitian and the French revolutions and the centrality of black agency to Atlantic history. Macaulay’s paradigm of the rise and triumph of the white West was broken, yet the power of that paradigm has remained and resurfaced only too effectively among conservative historians in recent times. The work of deconstruction is never done.

**NOTES**

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1. For a longer account of Macaulay, his family, and his work, see Catherine Hall, *Macaulay and Son: Architects of Imperial Britain* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012).


5. On the reception of the *History* see Theodore Koditschek, *Liberalism, Imperialism and the Historical Imagination: Nineteenth-Century Visions of a Greater Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 143–148. Leslie Howsam is currently engaged in a project investigating the reception of Macaulay across the British Empire, with a particular focus on Canada, New Zealand, and British India, that will significantly increase our understanding of the ways Macaulay traveled and was translated. There is a particularly complex story to be investigated in India, where Macaulay’s legacy is still highly contested. His enthusiasm for the use of the English language as the medium of instruction in government-funded schools for the elite as a way of anglicizing India has been strongly criticized by anticolonial and nationalist writers.


7. Cited in Charlotte Macdonald, chapter 2, this volume.


35. Thanks to Paul Pickering for this information. *People’s Advocate*, 12 August 1854.


40. See Aaron Kamugisha, chapter 9, this volume.

41. For a powerful counternarrative see Pankaj Mishra, *From the Ruins of Empire: The Revolt against the West and the Remaking of Asia* (London: Allen Lane, 2012).