

LORD MACAULAY ON REPUBLICAN INSTITUTIONS

His Criticism of Democracy in Letters to H. S. Randall

A well-known passage in *Progress and Poverty* by Henry George (Book X, Chap. IV) refers as follows to a letter written by Lord Macaulay to H. S. Randall, the biographer of Thomas Jefferson:—

"Though we may not speak it openly, the general faith in republican institutions is, where they have reached their fullest development, narrowing and weakening. It is no longer that confident belief in republicanism as the source of national blessings that it once was. Thoughtful men are beginning to see its dangers, without seeing how to escape them; are beginning to accept the view of Macaulay and distrust that of Jefferson."

In his recently issued book *The Road to Better Business*, Mr Emil Jorgenson of Chicago prints an extract from this letter and its contents so revealed were of such profound interest that it prompted an inquiry from an American correspondent asking us if the complete text was available. We made research into the matter, and are now able to publish the letter in full, with the three letters that followed it.

The letters were discovered in the Appendix to the first edition of *The Life and Letters of Lord Macaulay*, 1876. They are deleted in all other editions; nor is there any mention of them in the latest excellent two-volume edition of the work (Oxford University Press) just published, with a Preface by Professor G. M. Trevelyan, grand-nephew of Lord Macaulay.

In Macaulay's day and generation the demand for an extension of the franchise was: the means to material, intellectual and moral advance and formed the battleground of all political strife. There was little or no thought of any economic obstacle to overcome. It had yet to be made plain that whatever the politics a country might be, the unequal distribution of wealth, the persistence of poverty and the recurring periods of industrial depression spring from the denial of access to natural opportunities.

Lord Macaulay's Letters

(Written from Kensington, London, on the Dates named)

I—18th January, 1857.

I beg you to accept my thanks for your letter enclosing the autograph of Washington, which reached me three weeks ago, and for the *History of the State of New York*, which I received the day before yesterday.

I shall look forward with curiosity to the appearance of your *Life of Jefferson*. I cannot say that he is one of my heroes; but it is very probable that you may convince me that I have formed an erroneous estimate of his character.

I am a little surprised to learn from you that Americans generally consider him as a foil to Washington, as the Ahirman of the Republic contending against the Ormuzd. There can, I apprehend, be no doubt that your institutions have during the whole of the nineteenth century been constantly becoming more Jeffersonian and less Washingtonian. It is surely strange that while this process has been going on, Washington should have been exalted into a god, and Jefferson degraded into a demon.

If there were any chance of my living to write the history of your Revolution, I should eagerly and gratefully accept your kind offer of assistance. But now I look to the accession of the house of Hanover as my extreme goal.

II—23rd May, 1857.

The four volumes of the *Colonial History of New York* reached me safely. I assure you that I shall value them highly. They contain much to interest an English as well as an American reader. Pray accept my thanks, and convey them to the regent of the university.

You are surprised to learn that I have not a high opinion of Jefferson, and I am surprised at your surprise. I am certain that I never wrote a line, and that I never, in Parliament, in conversation, or even the hustings—a place where it is the fashion to count the populace—uttered a

word indicating an opinion that the supreme authority in a State ought to be entrusted to the majority of citizens told by the head, in other words, to the poorest and most ignorant part of society. I have long been convinced that institutions purely democratic must, sooner or later, destroy liberty or civilization, or both. In Europe, where the population is dense, the effect of such institutions would be almost instantaneous. What happened lately in France is an example. In 1848 a pure democracy was established there. During a short time there was reason to expect a general spoliation, a national bankruptcy, a new partition of the soil, a maximum of prices, a ruinous load of taxation laid on the rich for the purpose of supporting the poor in idleness. Such a system would, in twenty years, have made France as poor and barbarous as the France of the Carolingians.

Happily, the danger was averted, and now there is a despotism, a silent tribune, an enslaved press. Liberty is gone, but civilization has been saved. I have not the smallest doubt that if we had a purely democratic government here the effect would be the same. Either the poor would plunder the rich, and civilization would perish, or order and prosperity would be saved by a strong military government, and liberty would perish.

You may think that your country enjoys an exemption from these evils. I will frankly own to you that I am of a very different opinion. Your fate I believe to be certain, though it is deferred by a physical cause. As long as you have a boundless extent of fertile and unoccupied land, your labouring population will be far more at ease than the labouring population of the Old World, and while that is the case, the Jefferson politics may continue to exist without causing any fatal calamity. But the time will come when New England will be as thickly peopled as old England. Wages will be as low and will fluctuate as much with you as with us. You will have your Manchesters and Birminghams, and in those Manchesters and Birminghams hundreds of thousands of artisans will assuredly be sometimes out of work. Then your institutions will be fairly brought to the test. Distress everywhere makes the labourer mutinous and discontented and inclines him to listen with eagerness to agitators who tell him that it is a monstrous iniquity that one man should have a million while another cannot get a full meal. In bad years there is plenty of grumbling here, and sometimes a little rioting. But it matters little. For here the sufferers are not the rulers. The supreme power is in the hands of a class, numerous indeed, but select; of an educated class; of a class which is, and knows itself to be, deeply interested in the security of property and the maintenance of order.

Accordingly, the malcontents are firmly yet gently restrained. The bad time is got over without robbing the wealthy to relieve the indigent. The springs of national prosperity soon begin to flow again: work is plentiful, wages rise, and all is tranquillity and cheerfulness. I have seen England pass three or four times through such critical seasons as I have described. Through such seasons the United States will have to pass in the course of the next century if not of this.

How will you pass through them? I heartily wish you a good deliverance. But my reason and my wishes are at war, and I cannot help foreboding the worst. It is quite plain that your government will never be able to restrain a distressed and discontented majority. For with you the majority is the Government and has the rich, who are always a minority, absolutely at its mercy. The day will come when in the State of New York a multitude of people, none of whom has had more than half a breakfast, or expects to have more than half a dinner, will choose a Legislature.

Is it possible to doubt what sort of a Legislature will be chosen? On one side is a statesman preaching patience, respect for vested rights, strict observance of public faith. On the other is a demagogue ranting about the tyranny of capitalists and usurers, and asking why anybody should

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be permitted to drink champagne and to ride in a carriage, while thousands of honest folks are in want of necessities. Which of the two candidates is likely to be preferred by a working-man who hears his children cry for more bread?

I seriously apprehend that you will, in some such season of adversity as I have described, do things which will prevent prosperity from returning; that you will act like people who should in a year of scarcity devour all the seed-corn, and thus make the next a year not of scarcity, but of absolute famine. There will be, I fear, spoliation. The spoliation will increase the distress. The distress will produce fresh spoliation. There is nothing to stop you. Your Constitution is all sail and no anchor.

As I said before, when a society has entered on this downward progress, either civilization or liberty must perish. Either some Caesar or Napoleon will seize the reins of government with a strong hand, or your Republic will be as fearfully plundered and laid waste by barbarians in the twentieth century as the Roman Empire was in the fifth; with this difference, that the Huns and Vandals will have been engendered within your own country by your own institutions.

Thinking thus, of course, I cannot reckon Jefferson among the benefactors of the mankind. I readily admit that his intentions were good, and his abilities considerable. Odious stories have been circulated about his private life; but I do not know on what evidence those stories rest, and I think it probable that they are false, or monstrously exaggerated. I have no doubt that I shall derive both pleasure and information from your account of him.

III—9th October, 1858.

I beg you to accept my thanks for your volumes, which have just reached me, and which, as far as I can judge from the first hasty inspection, will prove both interesting and instructive.

Your book was preceded by a letter, for which I have also to thank you. In that letter you expressed, without the smallest discourtesy, a very decided dissent from some opinions which I have long held firmly, but which I should never have obtruded on you except at your own earnest request, and which I have no wish to defend against your objections.

If you can derive any comfort as to the future destinies of your country from your conviction that a benevolent Creator will never suffer more human beings to be born than can live in plenty, it is a comfort of which I should be sorry to deprive you. By the same process of reasoning one may arrive at many very agreeable conclusions, such as that there is no cholera, no malaria, no yellow fever, no negro slavery, in the world. Unfortunately for me, perhaps, I learned from Lord Bacon a method of investigating truth diametrically opposite to that which you appear to follow.

I am perfectly aware of the immense progress which your country has made and is making, in population and wealth. I know that the labourer with you has large wages, abundant food, and the means of giving some education to his children. But I see no reason for attributing these things to the policy of Jefferson. I see no reason to believe that your progress would have been less rapid, that your labouring people would have been worse fed, or clothed, or taught, if your government had been conducted on the principles of Washington and Hamilton. Nay, you will, I am sure, acknowledge that the progress which you are now making is only a continuation of the progress which you have been making ever since the middle of the seventeenth century, and that the blessings which you now enjoy were enjoyed by your forefathers, who were loyal subjects of the Kings of England.

The contrast between the labourer of New York and the labourer of Europe is not stronger now than it was when New York was governed by noblemen and gentlemen commissioned under the English great seal. And there are at this moment dependencies of the English crown in which all the phenomena which you attribute to purely democratic institutions may be seen in the highest perfection.

The colony of Victoria, in Australia, was planted only twenty years ago. The population is now, I suppose, near

a million. The revenue is enormous, near five millions sterling, and raised without any murmuring. The wages of labour are higher than they are even with you. Immense sums are expended on education. And this is a province governed by the delegate of an hereditary sovereign.

It therefore seems to me quite clear that the facts which you cite to prove the excellence of purely democratic institutions ought to be ascribed not to those institutions, but to causes which operated in America long before your Declaration of Independence, and which are still operating in many parts of the British Empire.

You will perceive, therefore, that I do not propose, as you thought, to sacrifice the interests of the present generation to those of remote generations. It would, indeed, be absurd in a nation to part with institutions to which it is indebted for immense present prosperity from an apprehension that, after a lapse of a century, those institutions may be found to produce mischief.

But I do not admit that the prosperity which your country enjoys arises from those parts of your polity which may be called, in an especial manner, Jeffersonian. Those parts of your polity already produce bad effects, and will, unless I am greatly mistaken, produce fatal effects if they shall last till North America has two hundred inhabitants to the square mile.

IV—8th January, 1859.

I owe you many thanks for the amusement and information which I have derived from your *Life of Jefferson*, and I am much more inclined to pay that debt than to trouble you with criticism and controversy. In truth, the work of criticism and controversy would be interminable.

I did not know, till I read your book, that the odious imputations which have often been thrown on Jefferson's private character originated with that vile fellow Callender. In the absence of evidence, I supposed them, as I told you, to be either wholly false or grossly exaggerated, and I certainly shall not be more disposed to believe them because they rest on Callender's authority.

I again beg you to accept my thanks for your pleasure and much instruction.

In one of his essays Lord Macaulay says that a man who lived in a past age may not be criticized by the canons of present-day morality. There is truth in this contention, and it must hold the great author himself absolved from any serious criticism of his peculiar ideas that democratic institutions, as such, must sooner or later destroy liberty or civilization, or both.

In the third Randall letter printed above Macaulay gives the true answer to the high expectations of America's independence and progress, and time has fully justified him. In this Colonial illustration he clearly refutes Randall's claim that the prosperity of the United States was due to their freer political institutions. His opinion that "after a lapse of a century these institutions would be found to produce mischief" is merely the proof that he could not see that the high wages of labour in both America and the Colonies was due to the freer land system and that wages would fall in both countries as land monopoly tightened its grip on population and industry.

To quote Henry George again, *Progress and Poverty*, Book X, Chap. IV:—

"Where there is anything like an equal distribution of wealth—that is to say, where there is general patriotism, virtue, and intelligence—the more democratic the government the better it will be; but where there is gross inequality in the distribution of wealth, the more democratic the government the worse it will be; for, while rotten democracy may not in itself be worse than rotten autocracy, its effects upon national character will be worse. To give the suffrage to tramps, to paupers, to men to whom the chance to labour is a boon, to men who must beg, or steal, or starve, is to invoke destruction. To put political power in the hands of men embittered and degraded by poverty is to tie firebrands to foxes and turn them loose amid the standing corn; it is to put out the eyes of a Samson and to twine his arms around the pillars of national life."