

Historians and the Church of England

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So often, intellectual history is about inheritances. Historians study what is passed down from one age to the next. This has often led to the problem that we tend to focus on what is more familiar, engaging, or at least recognisable, and leads us to ask: why study that which has not left an inheritance? Whilst there has been considerable study in recent years of 19th-century English historians, the overwhelming focus has been on what this leads to; whether the development of the modern English historical profession in Peter Slee's *Learning and a Liberal Education* (1986); Reba Soffer's study of the effect of (mainly Conservative) teaching on a generation of British statesmen and civil servants *Discipline and Power* (1994); or John Burrow's seminal study of *Whig historians, A Liberal Descent* (1981).⁽¹⁾

James Kirby's impressively learned *Historians and the Church of England* makes up for the significant inattention to religion which for many years characterized the study of 19th-century historiography. Kirby's starting point is so obvious that it has been largely overlooked: that most 19th-century historians were deeply committed members of the Church of England, many holding Holy Orders. At a time when it was practically impossible to become a fellow in Oxford or Cambridge or to teach at a university without becoming ordained, this was often presumed to be done primarily as a means of guaranteeing a relatively easy job and thus the freedom to devote themselves fully to historical research. As Kirby rightly suggests, at a time when there were few potential readers of the weighty multiple-volume historical tomes that Victorian scholars produced almost reflexively, and few well-paid teaching posts, the church provided the only plausible alternative for educated individuals without private means. However, this is not to suggest that these 'academic parsons' did not take their pastoral roles as seriously as only Victorian historians could.

In contrast to much of Europe during the 19th century, professionalization and secularisation did not go hand in hand. For almost all 19th-century historians, the study of history was primarily a means of knowing Christ in the world, providing a bulwark against atheism. As the place of natural religion in academic circles came to be increasingly challenged in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, history became an important means of understanding the unfolding of God's plan in the world. Mandell Creighton, Bishop of London and the first Dixie Professor of Ecclesiastical History at Oxford, bluntly declared: 'history should take the place of miracles' (p. 3). History, particularly under Bishop Stubbs' tenure at Oxford, where he founded the School

of Modern History in 1872, was positioned as far more church-friendly than either philosophy or classics, both under the spell of great Victorian agnostics, John Stuart Mill and Walter Pater, a view emphatically endorsed by Gladstone, who used his powers of appointment to promote a number of historians, or in the case of J. R. Seeley a religiously sound layman quite without qualifications or experience, to professorships.

Put so starkly, this might appear to be merely a continuation of the overly-close and intellectually deadening relationship between the church and the ancient universities which had existed for centuries, through which the latter had excluded heterodox believers such as Hobbes, Hume or Smith at the expense of becoming intellectual backwaters. This ignores the fact that the historical profession as we know it today was largely founded by these 19th-century figures, who established many of the journals and academic networks and established many of the key historiographical questions which modern historians continue to use today. The ease with which Christianity and modern scientific scholarship were reconciled is just one of a number of striking claims made in this work of accomplished and exhaustive scholarship which demonstrates that the foundations of the historical profession were deeply rooted in religious faith. Kirby argues that throughout the 19th century England continued to possess a 'learned church' which contained many of the country's greatest minds, long after this had ceased to be the case in continental Europe. New civic institutions such as Manchester and King's College London were quickly colonised by Anglican academics. They naturally placed modern history as a central part of their curriculums, employing luminaries such as F. D. Maurice, S. R. Gardiner, and T. F. Tout.

Kirby begins with the lingering effects of the Oxford Movement, which split an entire generation of educated young men right down the middle, and whose fractures within the Anglican Church provide the categories around which the book is structured. Kirby divides the historical profession into two main categories: 'High Church', a synonym for Tractarian and Anglo-Catholicism and 'Broad Church' (the rest). This provides a useful, albeit occasionally a little too capacious, conceptual tool for focusing a wide variety of theological viewpoints down into two main camps of historiography. High Church historians lamented the Dissolution of the Monasteries and the general dispossession of the church and saw medieval society as an ideal form of governance. By contrast, Broad Church historians tended to stress the gradual evolution and coming-together of Church and State, a viewpoint often indistinct from that which has famously come to be called 'Whiggish'. This intellectual sifting of the sheep from the goats has some fairly obvious methodological pitfalls. Whilst J. R. Seeley, for instance, came to reject the evangelical religious views of his father (an Anglican denomination which Kirby admits is largely absent because Evangelicals seemed unconcerned by modern history), his passage both to history and to the Broad Church of his later years was long and far from straightforward, encompassing both a flirtation with pantheism and a long engagement with Comtean positivism. Whilst Broad Church Anglicanism was, certainly by the end of the century, notoriously accommodating, one does wonder at which point it becomes a catch-all term for a variety of historians influenced alternately by modern Liberal, Conservative, Socialist, or Idealist currents of thought, by which time religion was no longer the animating intellectual drive for most historians.

This certainly seems to be the case for J. R. Green who, after being tempted by High Church Anglo-Catholicism at Oxford, became 'idle and irreligious' (p. 29) for a period before returning to a generally Broad Church inclination, all without losing his deep appreciation for the Middle Ages. A similar case can be made for the other great historian of the period, William Stubbs, whose conservative and High Church commitments do not prevent him from being considered a classic Whig historian. Whilst it would be churlish to demand that Kirby stare individually into the soul of every individual historian (and his frequent and illuminating recourse to private papers demonstrates some willingness to do this), the book can read, at times, as if High Church and Broad Church were fixed, doctrinally-established categories rather than broad camps containing a large range of attitudes towards faith, doctrine, church government, scripture, liturgy and at least a dozen other contentious issues. One is reminded by John Clive's warnings against dividing Victorian England into 'an enormous playing field, with a series of teams in distinctively coloured jerseys engaged in fierce yet expertly refereed combats – Christians vs Doubters, Liberals vs Conservatives, Extroverts vs Introverts, Optimists vs Pessimists'.[\(2\)](#)

Nonetheless, this heuristic division is mainly useful, particularly when applied to the great historical questions which animated Victorian historiography, from debates over the emergence of the primitive democracy which was said to have grown out of the Anglo-Saxon Witangemot, and whether Christianity was responsible for the unification of the Anglo-Saxon heptarchy, to tentative philosophies (or theologies) of history. The relationship between the state and a national church was essential to understanding the true nature of the unfolding Divine Plan for the British people. Whilst Kirby tends not to focus on external political events of the day, the interventions of historians in public life, such as Seeley's influential views on empire or Freeman's views on the 'Bulgarian atrocities', or even Ashley and Cunningham's defence of Tariff Reform, all gain from this added religious perspective.

With both sides agreeing definitively that religion shaped national character, the question of which was the true church remained. If, as many Broad Churchmen such as Green and Seeley believed, England was historically alter obis, or outside Rome, then the Norman Conquest was an ecclesiastical as well as political dispossession, subjugating England to both the Norman Monarchy as well as to the Pope. In this case, the Reformation was, in fact, a return to the pre-conquest vernacular church. High Churchmen on the other hand maintained that the Henrician Reformation was an overturning of a balanced and genuinely popular natural order, in which, as Stubb claimed, the Pope's authority was regularly challenged by the clergy, which gave undue power to the monarchy. The central chapters of the book each present a major focus of Victorian historiography (from the growth of the English nation to the constitution and the relation between the crown and the people, and ultimately the guiding hand of providence) through this lens, with many surprising insights.

One such is the emergence of social and economic history. Historians such as J. E. Thorold Rogers, William Cunningham, and latterly R. H. Tawney, set out to prove that the Reformation unleashed the forces of economic individualism, which led in turn to the enclosures and the industrial revolution. Rather than resorting to the lapsarian claims of Newman or Pugin, or even Carlyle and Coleridge, these historians set out to prove that following the dissolution of the monasteries wages had fallen and prices rose. As Kirby stresses, historians such as Rogers, based in parish churches or cathedral chapters, were naturally the first to look at the long, unbroken parish and ecclesiastical records from dissolution to enclosure which would form the basis of a wholly new kind of record-based history to demonstrate the decline in wages after the Reformation, which was eagerly taken up by Karl Marx. Whilst subsequent interpretations of the economic and social effects of the Reformation shifted somewhat, taking a longer, more nuanced view of changes in mentalities and styles of property ownership – rather than a focus on pure dispossession – the High Church condemnation of the Reformation lay behind all subsequent accounts of the agricultural and industrial revolutions, as Kirby's examination of the liberal Anglican Arnold Toynbee, who popularised the term 'Industrial Revolution', demonstrates. As Kirby has recently argued in the *English Historical Review*, R. H. Tawney's *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (1926) was, in fact, a return to themes which had been pursued by Anglo-Catholic historians since the first volume of Rogers' *A History of Agriculture and Prices in England* 60 years previously.⁽³⁾ It is surprising that a book on religious attitudes to usury given as part of a series of religious lectures, and dedicated to Bishop Gore should have been viewed as a primarily secular text for so long.

The reason that *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* has been read as such is because by this time the historical profession had become increasingly secular. Kirby is a little reticent to explain precisely why this happened, instead maintaining that by the 1920s Anglican historians ceased to dominate the historical profession. Whilst a majority of Oxbridge graduates had taken orders as late as the 1840s, by 1900 the figure had reduced to a fifth, though Kirby ascribes this to expanding admissions more than to a collapse in recruitment. Other possible reasons given included the growth of the professions and the civil service; the increasing specialisation of the historical profession, which led to the formation of the avowedly-secular Institute for Historical Research and the growth of a new form of acolyte in the PhD student; the stagnation of clerical stipends following the late 19th-century agricultural depression; and the final abandonment in 1882 of the requirement for fellows at Oxford and Cambridge to be ordained. For whatever reason, the

generation born between 1870 and 1900 no longer took Holy Orders. The notable historians of that generation, from Charles Oman to G. D. H. Cole and from Lewis Namier to G. M. Trevelyan, were all nominal agnostics, for whom devotion took the form of editing journals and state papers collections, or sitting on committees.

The reason for the secularization of the historical profession remains oblique. Breaking with a number of earlier studies of intellectual secularization in the late 19th century, Kirby maintains that there was no crisis of faith within the historical profession, rather a ‘melancholy, long, withdrawing, roar’ as Matthew Arnold put it, despite warnings about atheistic historians from Leslie Stephen to J. M. Robertson or Henry Buckle, whose *History of Civilisation in England* (1857) Stubbs declared to herald ‘evil days’ (p. 189). This interpretation of history, which saw materialistic progress and not God as the motor of history, had relatively little success within the historical profession whose overall manner remained largely unchanged. In 1935, H. A. L. Fisher famously abandoned hope in any order or reason to history, divine or otherwise, declaring ‘Men wiser and more learned than I have discerned in history a plot, a rhythm, a predetermined pattern. These harmonies are concealed from me. I can see only one emergency following upon another as wave follows upon wave’.⁽⁴⁾ Nonetheless he continued in the ways of historical scholarship set out by his God-fearing predecessors.

By 1920, the ‘learned church’ had diminished, leaving intact the historical profession as we understand it today with little trace of the historical and theological debates which animated it. The attempts to reconnect with a deontological view of history which emerged in the aftermath of the Second World War, in the Methodist Herbert Butterfield’s *Christianity and History* or the later volumes of Arnold Toynbee’s *A Study of History* had little to do with the dry, austere, and rarely-read scholarship of the Victorians. Yet what Kirby argues is most surprising about his subject is that the Anglican view of history should have persisted long after the period of the 1830s and 1840s, covered by Duncan Forbes’ *Liberal Anglican Idea of History* (1950), into the era of Lytton Strachey and Oswald Spengler. Whilst students are no longer condemned to read the great multi-volume tomes of Stubbs’ *Constitutional History of England* or Freeman’s *History of the Norman Conquest of England*, they continue to work within the paradigms of historical scholarship established by them. James Kirby’s book is a rewarding, diligent, and empathetic excursion into a lost world of Victorian intellectual history, which does much to reanimate these historiographical questions and to explain the commitment of historians to their vocation. In an era when scholars increasingly wonder why they should continue to produce lengthy monographs which are seldom read, and then primarily by like-minded experts in their field, the sense of a resolute and unshakeable faith in a calling is both refreshing and even reassuring.

Notes

1. Peter Slee, *Learning and a Liberal Education* (Manchester, 1986); Reba Soffer, *Discipline and Power: The University, History, and the Making of an English Elite, 1870–1930* (Redwood City, CA, 1994); John Burrow, *A Liberal Descent - Victorian Historians and the English Past* (Cambridge, 1981).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. John Clive, ‘More or less eminent Victorians: some trends in recent Victorian biography’, *Victorian Studies*, 2 (1958–9), p. 24.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. James Kirby ‘R. H. Tawney and Christian social teaching: “Religion and the Rise of Capitalism” Reconsidered’, *English Historical Review*, 131 (2016).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. H. L. Fisher, *History of Europe* (London, 1935), vol. I, p. vii.[Back to \(14\)](#)

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[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/198085>