Selected Writings of Lord Acton

VOLUME I

ESSAYS IN THE HISTORY OF LIBERTY
Titles in the Selected Writings of Lord Acton series:

Volume I: Essays in the History of Liberty
Volume II: Essays in the Study and Writing of History
Volume III: Essays in Religion, Politics, and Morality
Selected Writings of Lord Acton

VOLUME I

ESSAYS IN THE HISTORY OF LIBERTY

by
John Emerich Edward Dalberg-Acton
First Baron Acton

edited by J. Rufus Fears

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Biographical Note

LORD ACTON (1834–1902). Historian and political thinker, John Emerich Edward Dalberg-Acton was one of the most significant figures in the intellectual and political life of Victorian England. A Roman Catholic, he was educated in Munich under the Catholic church historian Ignaz von Döllinger. From 1858 until 1871, through his personality, editorial activities, articles, and reviews, he assumed a major role in the Liberal Catholic movement. Although he was briefly a member of Parliament, his main political influence was exercised as an admirer, friend, and confidant of the Liberal Prime Minister William Gladstone. As Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge from 1895 to 1902, Acton was instrumental in transforming the writing of history in England from a form of belles lettres into a rigorously scientific discipline based on the model of German scholarship.

While emphasizing complete objectivity in the pursuit of historical truth, Acton was deeply concerned with the need for moral judgment in history and with the meaning of history. This meaning he found in the concept of human freedom. For Acton, “the idea of liberty is the unity, the only unity of the history of the world, and the one principle of a philosophy of history.” Although his planned History of Liberty never came to fruition, the lectures, essays, and reviews that he did write are more than sufficient to establish him as a thinker of supreme importance in the intellectual heritage of classical Liberalism. It is an importance of more than historical interest. His powerfully original analysis of the nature of individual and political freedom and of the forces that foster and threaten that freedom speak to the most profound concerns of the late twentieth century.

This three-volume edition of Lord Acton’s Selected Writings presents a full compendium of what is most important and most enduring in his thought. Each of these volumes is self-contained, with its own
Biographical Note

front matter and index. Volume I collects Acton’s published writings on the history of liberty. Volume II brings together published lectures, articles, and reviews relating to the study and writing of history. Volume III presents a wide range of material to illustrate Acton’s views on historical and contemporary issues in religion, politics, and morality.
Foreword

John Emerich Edward Dalberg-Acton was born in Naples on January 10, 1834. Upon the death of his father, Sir Ferdinand Richard, in 1837, he succeeded him as eighth baronet and heir to the family estate at Aldenham in Shropshire. In 1869, on the recommendation of the Liberal Prime Minister, William Ewart Gladstone, he was elevated to the peerage as Baron Acton of Aldenham.

After studies at the University of Munich (1850–1857), Acton returned to England and assumed a prominent role as a spokesman for Liberal Catholicism. A devout Catholic and a committed political Liberal, he believed that it is the true character and mission of the Church to foster principles of liberty, political self-government, and unfettered scientific research. The cause of justice, the

1 Of Acton biographies, Gertrude Himmelfarb, Lord Acton: A Study in Conscience and Politics (Chicago, 1952) remains much the best. Himmelfarb made extensive use of Acton’s papers and research notes which passed to Cambridge University Library in 1903. David Mathew, Lord Acton and his Times (London, 1968) is of more service for background material on personalities and events of the age in which Acton lived than it is as a guide to his life and thought. Robert Schuettinger, Lord Acton: Historian of Liberty (LaSalle, Illinois, 1976) is a sympathetic account, which makes use of recent scholarship on Acton. John Kenyon, The History Men: The Historical Profession in England since the Renaissance (London, 1983) pp. 125–143, offers a more recent treatment, one that is critical of Acton and that is flawed by Kenyon’s obvious lack of firsthand familiarity with the Acton papers.

Since Himmelfarb wrote there has been significant accretion to our knowledge of Acton through the publication of his correspondence with Ignaz von Döllinger and with Richard Simpson. Moreover, the Acton papers at Cambridge with which Himmelfarb worked contained primarily his research notes. In 1973 the University Library also acquired the great bulk of Acton’s correspondence and his private papers. Accordingly there is need for a biography of Acton which would make full use of this new material.

Catholic faith, and the Church's own self-interest would be secured, Acton believed, by the triumph of these principles. In the service of these ideas, Acton became co-editor and owner of two short-lived but extremely well-done periodicals, the Rambler and the *Home and Foreign Review*. To these he contributed numerous essays, book reviews, and articles on current events. After the demise of the *Home and Foreign Review* in 1864, Acton wrote essays and reviews for the *Chronicle* (1867–1868) and the *North British Review* (1869–1871).[^3] His contributions to these four periodicals included not only essays on contemporary issues in Catholicism but also historical studies and probing political analyses of current ideas and events like nationalism, liberalism on the Continent, and the American Civil War. All tended, however, to one central theme: individual liberty and the means by which it might be secured. To this journalistic activity was added a brief period in Parliament as a Liberal M.P. from 1859 until 1865.[^4]

For Acton the idea of Papal Infallibility was an affront to every canon of historical truth and political Liberalism. He believed that all hope of the Church's becoming a force for progress and liberty would be destroyed by the proclamation of a dogma which established the Pope as infallible arbiter of the religious and moral conscience of mankind. He assumed the most direct and active role in leading efforts to prevent the promulgation of Papal Infallibility at the Vatican Council in 1869–1870.[^5] His failure and the effective demise of the

[^3]: The history of these periodicals is discussed briefly in this volume, below pp. xxii–xxv. More detailed discussion may be found in Altholz and in MacDougall (above n. 2) as well as in the following two dissertations: Eugene Clark, *Catholic Liberalism and Ultramontanism* (Diss. University of Notre Dame, 1965) and Guy Ryan, *The Acton Circle, 1864–1871: The 'Chronicle' and the 'North British Review'* (Diss. University of Notre Dame, 1969).


Liberal Catholic movement brought this stage of his life to an end. He remained within the Church; but he ceased to play any role in Catholic intellectual matters or to write regularly for publication. Instead he pursued his historical studies in private, living a rich and full social and family life in England, on the Riviera, and at his villa on Tegernsee in Bavaria. He enjoyed a close intellectual and political relationship with Gladstone, and his influence with the Prime Minister was seen in such matters as Gladstone’s support for the South in the American Civil War and Irish Home Rule. As Lord-in-Waiting, he became a favorite of Queen Victoria, while his learning, moral integrity, and social graces made him a figure of enormous presence in the intellectual and literary world of Victorian England.

After 1870 his literary activities were limited to occasional pieces. His 1877 lectures on “The History of Freedom in Antiquity” and “The History of Freedom in Christianity” served as the genesis of the idea for an extensive and wide-ranging History of Liberty. It was work that never progressed beyond the stage of research and planning; but the enormous amount of material that Acton collected in the course of this and other researches remains as a testimony to the range and depth of his historical learning and thought. Acton was one of the founders of the English Historical Review in 1886. To that journal he contributed two lengthy articles and eight review articles between 1886 and 1895. On the basis of such solid historical contributions and on his deserved reputation as “the most learned Englishman now alive,” Acton was appointed as Regius Professor at Cambridge in 1895. His personality, his lectures, and his role as organizer and first editor of the Cambridge Modern History exercised a direct and beneficial role on the study of history in England. After his death on June 19, 1902, his library of 70,000 volumes, together with research notes collected throughout a lifetime devoted to historical studies, passed to Cambridge University Library. His students, Figgis and Laurence, published his Cambridge Lectures on the French Revolution and Lectures on Modern History along with two volumes of his collected essays and a volume of his

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6 Acton’s relations with Gladstone are discussed from different perspectives and with different emphases by William Ward White, Acton and Gladstone: Their Friendship and Mutual Influence (Diss. Catholic University of America, 1973) and by Owen Chadwick, Acton and Gladstone, The Creighton Lecture in History 1975 (London, 1976).

7 The quote about Acton’s learning is from Mandell Creighton, first editor of the English Historical Review; Louise Creighton, Life and Letters of Mandell Creighton (London, 1913) I p. 275.
correspondence. He was succeeded in the title by his son Richard
Maximilian Dalberg-Acton, 2nd baron Acton.

The facts of Acton’s life can be told in brief compass. They give us
little idea of the complex of dimensions which made him one of the
most imposing and elusive of Victorian intellectuals.

There was first of all the aristocratic dimension. Acton was descended
from a long line of Shropshire baronets. Roman Catholics, they had
in recent generations sought their careers on the Continent. Acton’s
grandfather, Sir John Acton, had risen to the post of Prime Minister
of the Bourbon king of Naples, Ferdinand IV. Acton’s father, Sir
Ferdinand Richard, married Marie Pelline de Dalberg, daughter and
heiress of the Duc de Dalberg. She thus belonged to the most
distinguished of German noble families. When Acton’s father died, she
remarried into the powerful political and social world of the English
Whig aristocracy. Her second husband and Acton’s stepfather was
Earl Granville, Liberal Leader of the House of Lords. Earl Granville
was Gladstone’s closest political associate and served in three of his
cabinets. Acton’s own wife bore a distinguished pedigree, Bavarian as
well as Italian.

Such birth and family connections assured Acton a life of privilege
and ease. He moved in the most rarefied strata of Continental and
English society. In later years he did indeed feel financial pressure but
never severe enough to force him into literary activity as a means for
earning money. This made him as distinct from the ordinary Victorian
man of letters as it does from the modern academic historian. Things
came to Acton. He never earned an academic degree. He was rewarded
with honorary degrees from Munich, Oxford, and Cambridge. He did
not work his way up the academic ladder. His first and only post was
one of the two most distinguished Professorships in History in the
United Kingdom.

Acton, however, was not an aristocratic dilettante. He was a scientific
historian with a professional training far beyond anything available to
his contemporaries in England.\(^8\) Probably because he was a Roman
Catholic, the young Acton was denied admission by colleges at both
Oxford and Cambridge. He was sent instead to the University of
Munich, where he studied under the Catholic Church historian and
divine, Ignaz von Döllinger. Among the dimensions of Acton’s life,

\(^8\) \text{Acton as a historian is the subject of Volume II of Acton, \textit{Selected Writings}.}
none is more important than the influence of Ignaz von Döllinger. Döllinger assumed the role of father to the sixteen-year-old English baronet. Acton lived in Döllinger’s house and accompanied him on trips to libraries, archives, and scholars throughout Europe. Nineteenth-century Germany was in the forefront of historical studies, and Döllinger was among the foremost of German historians. From Döllinger, Acton learned to view history as science, not as literature. The historian had only one duty: to pursue the truth through the collection and objective evaluation of all possible source material. Acton would ultimately go beyond Döllinger in his appreciation for the importance of archival material and his understanding that the historian must work as much as possible from the original documents themselves. It is quite fair to say that the Acton who held the Regius Professorship at Cambridge was counted among the most distinguished historians of his age. He was a master of the methodological advances of the nineteenth century, while his insistence on the importance of intellectual history looked forward to seminal developments in the historiography of the first half of the twentieth century.

From Döllinger, Acton also learned to think historically—to view history as a tool for understanding the present. Following the example of Döllinger, Acton found in history a vehicle for reconciling the two principles that guided his entire life: Liberalism and Roman Catholicism.

Acton was a Liberal in the classic sense of the word. He believed that “Liberty is not a means to a higher political end. It is itself the highest political end. It is not for the sake of a good public administration that [liberty] is required, but for security in pursuit of the highest objects of civil society, and of private life.”9 He believed that beyond the limits necessary for its own well-being the state should intervene only to the degree of promoting influences which worked to secure and foster the liberty of the individual.

To the puzzlement of Anglican admirers in England, Acton saw no contradiction between his devotion to liberty and his beliefs as a Roman Catholic. In youth, in middle years, in old age, his faith in the doctrines of Catholicism remained absolute. He believed that the revelation of Christianity was the most important event in the history of liberty, dignifying beyond all measure the worth of the individual

9 P. 22 below.
and promising a gift of freedom beyond anything the Greek or Roman possessed. He also looked upon the Church with its institutions as a potential force of great magnitude in the service of liberty. The Church alone possessed an organization capable of withstanding the modern state and its absolutist tendencies. By acting as a check and balance upon the powers of the state, the Church could provide an immense security for individual freedom. It was because he did believe this that Acton felt so betrayed by the outcome of the Vatican Council and the proclamation of absolutism as Church dogma.

For Acton, Papal Infallibility, like all acts of absolutism, was more than inexpedient. It was wrong. It was immoral. It was the moral dimension of Acton’s thought that unified all his ideas on liberty, history, and religion. In fact, Acton equated both liberty and religion with morality. Freedom gave man the opportunity to make the right moral choices. True religion should refine his conscience and intellect to a degree which would ensure that the right moral choices would be made. “By liberty I mean the assurance that every man shall be protected in doing what he believes his duty against the influence of authority and majorities, custom and opinion. The state is competent to assign duties and draw the line between good and evil only in its immediate sphere. Beyond the limits necessary for its well-being, it can only give indirect help to fight the battle of life by promoting the influences which prevail against temptation—religion, education, and the distribution of wealth.”

Acton did not believe that morality could be separated from politics or public life. The statesman who orders an assassination for reasons of patriotism is no less a murderer than the highwayman who murders for gold. It is the duty of the historian, Acton believed, to judge them both in the same terms. Acton insisted that history had a moral purpose; and after the historian has impartially collected the evidence, he must pass judgment on the events and personalities he has described. He agreed with Edmund Burke that “the principles of true politics are those of morality enlarged”; and he exhorted historians “to suffer no man and no cause to escape the undying penalty which history has the power to inflict upon wrong.”

\[10\] Pf. 3–4 below.

\[11\] The reference to Burke and the quotation are from Acton’s Inaugural Lecture at Cambridge, *The Study of History* (London, 1895) pp. 63, 73. The lecture is reprinted in Volume II of Acton, *Selected Writings*. 
This same moral intensity was reflected in Acton’s own life. He is one of those rare individuals whose stature is increased by the study of his private papers. Intensive study of the research notes and materials collected over a lifetime and of his letters to family and friends give us a portrait of Acton, his intellect and character beyond anything contained in his published writings. It was an intellect and character best observed through the eyes of those who knew him personally. Cambridge dons and Catholic bishops felt and responded to the personal magnetism and moral integrity of a man who possessed “all the virtues and no faults.”12 Gladstone trusted him “more entirely than any other man,” while John Morley called him “one of the most remarkable men of our time.”13 Intellectuals and those who walked the corridors of power admired the learning and generosity of a man who could be consulted like an encyclopedia and who would give away the substance of a book in a half-hour conversation.

Yet those who most admired him also felt the sense of failed purpose which led Acton, in a note to himself, to say that his life had been wasted.14 It is a sense of failed mission and of waste that we feel in the eyes of the man who gazes out at us from the portrait in the frontispiece of this volume.

As a young man, he had sought to devote his scholarship to the service of the Catholic Church. His goal had been to educate Catholics to understand that “in politics as in science the Church need not seek her own ends. She will obtain them if she encourages the pursuit of the ends of science, which are truth, and of the state, which are liberty.”15 The Vatican Council put an end to that mission. His projected History of Liberty was stillborn when he realized that even his mentor and closest intellectual associate, Dollinger, could not understand, much less sympathize, with his concept of moral judgment in history. His admirers were politely mystified by his ideas on morality and on the moral duties of a historian, as Acton presented them in his essay on George Eliot and in his review of Mandell Creighton’s History

12 The quote is from Oscar Browning, Memories of Later Years (London, 1923) p 15.
13 Gladstone’s view is contained in a letter which Acton wrote to his daughter Mary Elizabeth Anne (Mamy), Add. Mss. 8127, Box 22. Morley’s assessment is found in his Recollections (New York, 1917) 1 pp. 229–235. Herbert Paul’s introduction to Letters of Lord Acton to Mary Gladstone (New York, 1904) pp. 9–31 provides vivid testimony to Acton’s impact upon those who knew him personally.
15 Acton-Simpson II p. 195.
of the Papacy during the Period of the Reformation. The feeling that no one really understood his ideas played a significant role in Acton's unwillingness to begin to write his History of Liberty. As he explained to one of his warmest admirers, Mary Gladstone, the Prime Minister's daughter: “I have neither disciple nor sympathiser [and] that is no encouragement to production and confidence.”

Students of Acton have made much—too much, we might say—of his failure to write more for publication. The fact is that in his published essays, lectures, and reviews, in his correspondence, and in his unpublished notes, Acton left an intellectual legacy of seminal importance. Drawing upon that legacy in the 1930s and 1940s, scholars like Gertrude Himmelfarb in this country, Herbert Butterfield in England, and Ulrich Noack in Germany discovered an Acton who spoke with prophetic power to a generation witnessing the material and moral ruin of Europe and the triumph of state absolutism in the guise of fascist and communist regimes. Through these writings Acton remains our contemporary. He speaks to us with a compelling immediacy. His insights into the nature of man and politics, into the meaning of human liberty, and into those forces which foster and which threaten human freedom ring more profoundly true than when he penned them more than a century ago. His message is one of supreme importance to every thoughtful citizen of a democratic society. It is the purpose of this collection to enable Acton to speak again in his own words to our generation.

16 Paul p. 287.

J. Rufus Fears
June, 1984
The Essays in This Volume

Liberty was the lodestone of Lord Acton’s life, as a scholar and as a man. Everything that he wrote touched ultimately on his belief “that the development of liberty is the soul of history, . . . that liberty occupies the final summit, that it profits by all the good that is in the world, and suffers by all the evil, that it pervades strife and inspires endeavor, that it is almost, if not altogether, the sign, and the prize, and the motive in the onward and upward advance of the race for which Christ was crucified.”¹ The material collected here reflects three central concerns in Acton’s vision of liberty: the history of freedom; the particular contribution made by England and America to the course of human liberty; and the gains and losses accruing to the cause of liberty through contemporary political developments in Europe.

Section I, “The History of Liberty,” brings together the two lectures that Acton delivered in Bridgnorth, England in 1877 along with his review of Sir Erskine May’s Democracy in Europe, published in 1878. These two lectures should be regarded as more than a truncated outline of a far larger History of Liberty, which Acton never wrote. Indeed, Acton’s original plan for a history of liberty intended nothing more than the publication of the two lectures supplemented by footnotes. Certainly, in their power, originality, and sustained vision, “The History of Freedom in Antiquity” and “The History of Freedom in Christianity” are rightly regarded as the best introduction to Acton’s thought.

Section II, “The Anglo-American Tradition of Liberty,” reflects Acton’s continuing concern with the circumstances which led to the development of very particular notions and forms of liberty in England and with the transferal and subsequent fate of that liberty in the new world. These were concerns which engaged Acton throughout his entire adult life. He began his student days in Munich “primed to the

¹ Acton, History of Freedom p. 596.
brim with Whig politics,” and it was at the feet of his teacher Döllinger that he imbibed his deep admiration for Edmund Burke. Acton’s intended History of England from 1509–1702 never came to fruition; but in reviews and in his Cambridge University Lectures on Modern History, delivered in 1899–1901, Acton produced both a series of comments and a sustained narrative to illuminate the course of English history and the contemporary state of Great Britain.

Acton ended his course of lectures on modern history with the American Revolution and the birth of a constitution and a principle of federalism which had produced “a community more powerful, more prosperous, more intelligent, and more free than any which the world has seen.” Acton’s concern with the American experience and its meaning for the history of liberty began at least as early as 1853, when the nineteen-year-old accompanied his relative, Lord Ellesmere, Chief British Commissioner, to the New York Industrial Exhibition of 1853. Acton’s diary, partially covering the two-month stay in America, conveys impressions which remained with him throughout his life.

His early publications include a penetrating study of the origins of the Civil War in America, an essay which won the admiration of Gladstone and which contributed to his support of the Southern cause. Acton’s contributions to the Rambler and the Home and Foreign Review include a series of reports on the progress of the war in America. Republished here for the first time, they introduce us to more than Acton’s skill as a journalist. Acton’s reports on the American Civil War detail his belief that “the one ruling element in the American war, which reduces all others to comparative insignificance, is the defence of the rights of self-government against the theory that there is a supreme, irresistible, and irresponsible power. Fidelity to the spirit of our own institutions ought to decide the part Englishmen take in such a controversy.” Out of this conviction, Acton later wrote to Robert E. Lee: “I saw in States Rights the only avail ing check upon the absolutism of the sovereign will, and secession filled me with hope, not as the destruction but as the redemption of Democracy. . . . Therefore I deemed that you were fighting the battles of our liberty, our progress, and our civilization; and I mourn for the stake which

was lost at Richmond more deeply than I rejoice over that which was saved at Waterloo.”

Acton’s interest in America did not conclude with his lecture on “The Civil War in America: Its Place in History,” delivered in 1866. In 1889, he reviewed at some length James Bryce’s The American Commonwealth, while his Lectures on the French Revolution, given at Cambridge in 1895–1899, contain a most sensitive appreciation of the influence of America on France. Nor did the passage of time alter his understanding of where justice lay in the great struggle between Union and Confederation, between the doctrine of absolute democracy and that of states’ rights. Writing in 1881 of Gladstone’s policy of moderation and peace towards the Boers in South Africa, Acton could say, “I declare that I rejoice in this inward victory with heartier joy and a purer pride than I have been able to feel at any public event since I broke my heart over the surrender of Lee.” As late as 1895, Acton still spoke of his “Rebel sympathies.”

Acton’s papers and notes, preserved in the Cambridge University Library, attest to the scope of his reading and the profundity of his thought on America. More, even, than the unwritten history of liberty, we might regret the fact that Acton never wrote a book on America. It would have rivaled Tocqueville in perception as it would have surpassed him in historical knowledge and thought.

For Acton, the victory of the North represented the triumph of centralization and governmental absolutism over principles of federalism, self-government, and liberty under the law. It was a development which he saw paralleled in the contemporary history of Europe. For Acton, the idea of nationalism provided a supreme intellectual prop for the growth of state absolutism. “Nationality is founded on the perpetual supremacy of the collective will, of which the unity of the nation is the necessary condition, to which every other influence must defer, and against which no obligation enjoys authority, and all resistance is tyrannical.” No less inimical to true liberty were continental liberals like Cavour: “Like most of the continental Liberals,