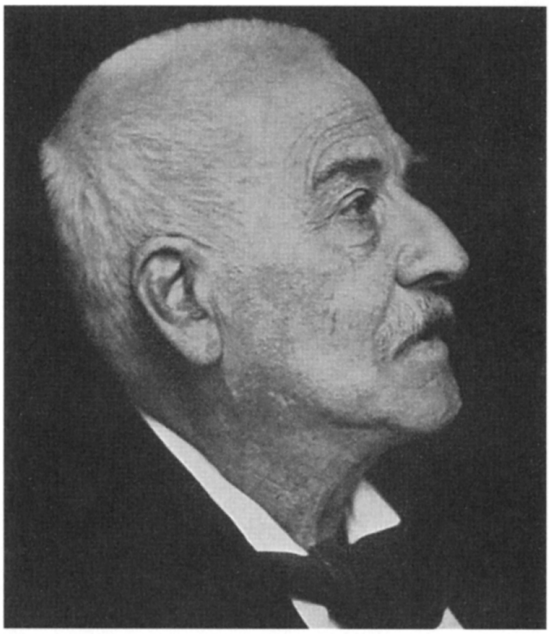
THE LETTERS OF JACOB BURCKHARDT



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Selected, edited, and translated by

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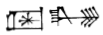

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FOR GABRIEL

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FOREWORD TO THE LIBERTY FUND EDITION

IN THE OPENING YEARS of the twenty-first century, why should anyone bother to read the letters of an art history professor from the late 1800s? Whatever answer one gives, the reason has something to do with the qualities of Jacob Burckhardt's mind and its capacity to illumine some of the best and most beautiful things in Western civilization. To the contemporary reader, Burckhardt speaks as convincingly about the value of beauty, contemplation, and freedom as he did to his increasingly harried age. In many ways, we need his voice today even more urgently than we did a century ago.

The core of Burckhardt's life was his love of beauty. Indeed, one of his signal contributions to the tradition of freedom in Western civilization, and to conservative thought, was the line he drew between beauty and freedom. Like another great contemporary conservative, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Burckhardt recognized that man's love of, and impulse toward, beauty is a powerful force that ultimately leads man to affirm the worth of his spirit, his individuality, and the existential necessity of freedom. The strongest roots of freedom, and of human liberty, are spiritual.

Burckhardt's life spanned the nineteenth century (1818–1897). After a careful study of the entire corpus of Burckhardt's extensive correspondence, Professor Alexander Dru published in 1955 this selection covering his life from the age of twenty until a few months before his death. The

selected letters give the reader a comprehensive view of Burckhardt's life, the evolution of his thinking, and his chief concerns. Reading these letters, one is impressed by the remarkable continuities in Burckhardt's outlook and the consistent themes that undergird this outlook.

He was deeply conservative by nature. Even in his youth, when along with his friends he was captivated by the strong currents of romanticism and idealism, he never succumbed to democratic liberalism or the modern belief in progress. While studying for the ministry he ceased to be an orthodox Christian, but to the end of his life he retained an appreciation for the Christian message of original sin, combined with utter contempt for liberal theologians who kept teaching at seminaries and leading congregations long after they had stopped believing. Burckhardt was proud to be, as he put it, "an honest heretic." His main quarrel with the churches throughout his lifetime was that they, along with everyone else, had succumbed to the optimistic illusions of the nineteenth century.

But Burckhardt's conservatism was neither ideological nor extreme. He despised extremes of every kind. When he was asked to become the editor of the local conservative newspaper, he accepted the job, in his own words, "mainly in order to exterminate by slow degrees the odious sympathy that exists among the ruling clique here for absolutism of every kind (e.g., the Russian) and on the other hand to come out against our raucous Swiss Radicals, which last I find precisely as repellent as the former." In keeping with his dislike of abstractions and ideologies, he wrote to a friend that he wanted to get away from "the 'ists' and 'isms' of every kind."

His conservatism often slipped into pessimism, and Burckhardt is often described, even by many of his admirers, as one of the great "pessimists" in the modern Western tradition. This characterization must be applied to him with care, but it is not far off the mark. It is true that he enjoyed life, especially the pleasures of aesthetic contemplation. He loved few things more than his long walks in the woods and mountains of Switzerland and Germany; his recurring pilgrimages through Italy, where he relished exploring the ancient architectural and artistic glories; and a

hearty meal followed by a good wine and his favorite cigar. Although he never married, he was fond of his nephews and nieces and their children, and he believed that, in spite of the crisis that was about to shake European civilization, the younger generations would survive and manage to build a new order.

But in discussing politics Burckhardt was unabashedly pessimistic and unwilling to give modernity or modern liberalism credit for anything good. He was viscerally opposed to mass suffrage, modern public education, women in scholarship, and public health insurance, and he thought little about alternatives for dealing with the massive social problems developing in the second half of the nineteenth century. As he advanced in years, Burckhardt became more alarmed at the catastrophe he foresaw looming in the not-too-distant future. Unlike the pro-Enlightenment Edward Gibbon, who argued that the collapse of the Roman Empire coincided with "the triumph of barbarism and religion," Burckhardt thought that the decline of European civilization would be accompanied by the triumph of barbarism, commerce, and science.

While Burckhardt's distrust of modern liberalism may have gone too far, his general pessimism about the future of Western civilization and the consequences of modern mass society were not unwarranted. He believed that the combination of mass politics, the growth of democracy and egalitarianism, the collapse of the authority of the Church and the aristocracy, and the domination of modern life by the demands of economics, science, and technology would produce in the course of time a brutal and barbaric tyranny with a horrifying grip on political power. And indeed, only four short decades separated Burckhardt's life from the construction of Auschwitz, Bergen-Belsen, and Dachau in the heart of civilized Europe.

As annoying as Burckhardt's persistent critique of egalitarianism, liberal democracy, and industrial progress is bound to be for many readers, his legacy is squarely in the tradition of ordered liberty and aristocratic liberalism we associate with the names of Edmund Burke, Alexis de Tocqueville, José Ortega y Gasset, and Wilhelm Roepke. He distrusted

the masses as inherently intolerant of individual greatness and hostile to culture. He noted that the most significant historical developments at the end of the eighteenth century were the advent of mass politics and the belief that every man's opinion was of equal worth. The long-term results of this would be the destruction of every vestige of traditional authority, the cheapening of culture, the enthronement of mediocrity at all levels of public life, and the eventual rise of *"terribles simplificateurs":* the ruthless demagogues who would ride the waves of mass politics and culture to set up a tyranny armed with all the instruments provided by large-scale industrial capitalism, science, and technology.

Burckhardt also distrusted large institutions of every sort as inherently dehumanizing and hostile to individual freedom. Any institution, religious or secular, that became large and powerful enough fell, sooner or later, into the grip of what he called one of the ghastliest *idées fixes* in history: the desire for unity and conformity. Burckhardt loved small cities, small republics, and loose private associations as nurturing of pluralism and liberty. His love of pluralism was driven by his aesthetic recognition of the intrinsic beauty and wonder of diversity, and the belief that freedom could thrive more easily in the soil of diversity and decentralization than in uniformity.

Burckhardt was shocked by the ravages wrought on the created order by industrialization, modern technology, and economic progress. He believed that Western civilization since the seventeenth century had become dominated by acquisitiveness, and that this acquisitiveness was the force behind the appalling despoliation of Europe's forests, rivers, and ancient towns. The new cities, with their large, impersonal size, industrial squalor, and high cost of living, were the antithesis of a humane way of life. To the last, he retained a longing for a vanishing world in which beauty would dominate the natural as well as the man-made landscape.

A lifelong bachelor who was inherently shy with women, Burckhardt considered himself "a secular monk." He loved and praised the contemplative life at a time when modern society was becoming inhospitable to it. One of his quarrels with modernity was that its emerging mass society,

and its acquisitive economic system focused on efficiency and speed, was crowding out opportunities for solitude and contemplation. He drew a sharp distinction between rational philosophy or "speculation," connected with thinking about abstract ideas, and contemplation, deriving from love of and wonder at the beauty and complexity of human beings and their deeds. He saw himself as a contemplative historian rather than a philosophical one. At the age of twenty-four, he confided to a friend,

> You must long ago have recognized the one-sided bent of my nature towards contemplation. My whole life long I have never yet thought philosophically, and never had any thought at all that was not connected with something external. I can do nothing unless I start out from contemplation. . . . What I build up historically is not the result of criticism and Speculation, but on the contrary, of imagination, which fills up the lacunae of contemplation.

Unlike many of his colleagues, Burckhardt did not see himself as mainly a technician. In his view, the historian needed to master the technical fundamentals of historical research and to be a specialist about at least one particular field. But he also enjoyed taking a more comprehensive view of things even at the risk of being accused of "amateurishness." As he was to admonish his students in the lectures that were later published as *Reflections on History,* "[a man] should be an amateur at as many points as possible. . . . Otherwise he will remain ignorant in any field lying outside his own specialty and perhaps, as a man, a barbarian." Many of these letters reflect that comprehensiveness, and they reveal a capacious mind that, in spite of the prejudices of time and place (Burckhardt never traveled outside Western Europe), was capable of immensely thoughtful insights about times and places far removed from his own. Ultimately, all of these insights flowed from his love of freedom and beauty and his deeply humanistic appreciation for the mystery of human greatness and the worth of individuals.

Although he founded the discipline of art history, and his *Civilization*

of the Renaissance is still considered a most perceptive work, Burckhardt is hardly popular with today's art historians and their deconstructionist colleagues. He believed that not all art was equal, that great art was capable of expressing universally valid truths, and that art and beauty were companions. Rather than simply pouring out his or her feelings, the artist could aim "to transform all suffering, all excitement into sheer beauty," even if one devoted "all one's strength to doing so." Ultimately, the artist's greatest impulse was love. As he advised a young friend, "Stick to the old idealist line; only a scene that has somehow or other been loved by an artist can, in the long run, win other people's affection."

In the course of these letters, as Burckhardt's life moves along, the reader follows him in his successive peregrinations to the Italy he loved so profoundly, tracing thereby the growth of the malaise affecting European civilization. In the course of half a century the towns grew in wealth and size, the roads became busier, many beautiful old buildings were demolished to make room for newer ones, and the socialists became more numerous and radical. It hardly seemed an improvement, but as Burckhardt noted, most Europeans—capitalists and socialists alike—were eager to sacrifice the intangible cultural and aesthetic goods of the older civilization for the sake of "sleep-through trains." In the midst of these tumultuous changes in society, Burckhardt searched for an anchor, "an Archimedean point" of existential detachment and serenity, and he found it in the cultural and artistic treasures of the past. He was unsure how many of these would survive the cataclysmic wars and upheavals he saw coming soon, but he thought that enough might be left to inspire the human spirit to build anew.

So, how is one to think of Jacob Burckhardt and read his letters today? In spite of the calamities of world war, revolution, and every other upheaval that Burckhardt feared coming to pass in the first half of the twentieth century, at the opening of the successive century the West has experienced another of its periodic bouts of runaway optimism. The fall of communism, globalization, the information revolution, and unparalleled advances in scientific and genetic research all promise to bring about a

radically new era of uninterrupted peace and prosperity. In the midst of our heightened expectations we will want to consider two questions posed by Burckhardt throughout these letters. First, can man ever find permanent rest and equilibrium in history? And, second, how are two of the fundamental qualities of a humane existence, beauty and freedom, to be preserved in the midst of mass democracy, egalitarianism, and the worship of economic growth? However we grapple with these two questions, Burckhardt's writings will help to keep them constantly before us lest we forget their vital importance.

ALBERTO R. COLL
NAVAL WAR COLLEGE, 2000

PREFACE

IN MAKING THIS SELECTION and translation I have been fortunate in being able to rely on the first volume of the new and complete edition of the letters which Dr. Max Burckhardt, assisted by the printing of Benno Schwabe & Co., has made a delight to read and a comfort to depend upon. For the remaining years I have used the original editions of the letters, except in cases where they are virtually unobtainable under present conditions—many of the letters were published in periodicals—and here I have again been fortunate in having before me Dr. Fritz Kaphahn's excellent selection published by the Kröner Verlag. Dr. Kaphahn's volume embraces very many more letters than I have been able to include, and I have rarely found it possible to depart from his choice except of course where new material has come to light in the interval, or when certain letters seemed of special interest to the English-reading public. Dr. Kaphahn's edition must have introduced so many readers to Burckhardt that it is a pleasure for one at least to be able to acknowledge so agreeable a debt.

But in making the selection and preparing the Introduction my principal support and guide has been Professor Werner Kaegi's *Jacob Burckhardt: eine Biographie,* vols. i and ii, published by Benno Schwabe in Basle. I have made such continual use of the invaluable quotations and the judicious interpretations and in particular of the complete picture of the background of Burckhardt's life which is to be found nowhere else either

so complete or so finely drawn, that I had to abandon giving references and must content myself with stressing the extent of my debt. Of course, the emphasis in the Introduction is mine; but allowing for its incompleteness I think I may say that it is in general agreement with Professor Kaegi's authoritative work.

The selection of the letters has been made in order to show Burckhardt the man as his friends knew him, the "Arch-dilettante" with all his interests, foibles and enthusiasms. It does scant justice to his professional side, and only aims to reveal the personality which gives his work as an historian and as an art historian its value and its charm. More than this could hardly have been achieved in so short a compass, nor would a more scholarly approach have served much purpose until the works to which his letters often add a useful gloss or explanation have been translated.

The notes have been kept to a minimum. An asterisk after the name of the recipients of the letters refers to the brief biographical notes on pages 251–53.

The illustrations, equally, I owe to the kind offices of Professor Kaegi, who made it possible for me to use some of the unpublished sketches made by Burckhardt in Rome in 1848 and procured all the photographs for me. And in conclusion, to cut short my gratitude, I should like to recall the repeated hospitality which I have enjoyed at the Münsterplatz in Basle.

It only remains for me to say that in spite of straying far beyond the bounds set for it, the Introduction is not complete in any one respect. Whole aspects of Burckhardt's activities, such as the history of art, have simply been omitted. My wish is to provide enough information about his life and a sufficiently sharp outline of his point of view to enable the reader to enjoy the letters as letters—not simply as an interesting source, but as the letters of a figure already known in a generally familiar period. Except where the letters seemed to require it, I have said little about Burckhardt's personality, believing that the letters speak convincingly for

themselves, at any rate if they can be read and enjoyed without too many obstacles and hindrances.

And finally, I have to thank the translator and publishers (Messrs. Allen & Unwin, London, and Pantheon Books Inc., New York) of the *Reflections on History* for permission to quote at some length from the English version of Burckhardt's most important work.

INTRODUCTION

BURCKHARDT'S *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* was published in 1860 and translated into English in 1878. Thirty years after its first appearance Lord Acton described it in a well-meant phrase as "the most instructive of all books on the Renaissance." Since then Burckhardt has continued in a state of suspended animation, imprisoned in his one successful, though by no means representative, book.

In 1943 the *Weltgeschichtliche Betrachtungen* (Reflections on History) appeared in an excellent translation, to be followed in the next few years by *The Age of Constantine the Great* and *Recollections of Rubens.* These translations cannot be said to have modified the accepted estimate of Burckhardt's importance substantially, though they may be the forerunners of a new interest in his work and personality. It is not after all impossible that Burckhardt's reputation should undergo the same metamorphosis in English-speaking countries which overtook him posthumously in his own and in Germany.

At first sight so very complete a change seems improbable: Burckhardt appears to belong among the historians Acton once summed up as "living quietly in a small way, with a dim political background." His career was uneventful and conventional and he deliberately warded off success. His *Cicerone* and the *Renaissance,* after a slow start, went into several editions; his reputation as an historian of art won him more than one offer to teach in German universities, but he would never give a single lecture outside Basle. In 1874, on Ranke's retirement, he was invited to

succeed his master in the Chair which Ranke had made the most distinguished appointment in the academic world in Germany. He was in no two minds about refusing: "In Basle," he said, "I can say what I like." The salary was then slightly lowered, and the post accepted by Treitschke.

Although Burckhardt's lectures in the University—where he was plagued by the presence of visiting scholars—and his lectures for the general public were regarded as his outstanding achievement, he would never allow them to be published on the grounds that they would look "like carpets the wrong side up." But in the end he agreed that his nephew, Jacob Oeri, might edit them after his death. Oeri published Burckhardt's longest work, the *Griechische Kulturgeschichte,* in three volumes (1902 ff.) and the *Reflections on History* in 1906.

Burckhardt's letters began appearing in the following decade, though the most interesting collections—in particular those to von Preen—were not published until 1924. A collected edition of his works, the *Gesamtausgabe,* edited by Wölfflin, Emil Dürr and others, was issued between 1929 and 1934. This was followed by a cheap edition of his principal works and the selection of his letters prepared by Dr. Kaphahn.

Burckhardt's work was slow to mature, slow to appear and slow to be understood. The final stage in the process of his inclusion in the canon of German thought and literature was brought about by circumstances. In the light of the Nazi revolution, when his books first became easily obtainable, the element in his work which had formerly been overlooked suddenly assumed profound significance. The "practical and therefore the political element" which Acton—knowing only the *Renaissance*—regarded as the weakest, stood out as his greatest claim to be heard. The prophecies which his earliest editors felt it tactful to leave aside or gloss over were fulfilled by events and followed by catastrophes, and Burckhardt came to be regarded as one of the great representatives and guardians of the European tradition, not only because he foretold the nature of the threat that endangered its continuity, but because the terms in which he did so seemed strikingly relevant and not without hope for the future.

The key to this sudden vogue for his lectures and letters and the continued interest in his personality and thought is his faith in man and tradition, never falsified or bolstered up by any form of optimism—in his eyes the most disintegrating compound of thought and feeling produced by the thinkers of the eighteenth century. In this he has much in common with Lord Acton, whose reputation was heightened and consolidated for the same reasons and under similar auspices. In everything else, in temperament, outlook and gifts, they differed widely, but they were both liberal in Acton's sense of the word, and with the collapse of "liberalism" their views seemed to offer a new point of departure.

Burckhardt's letters are anything but an extension of his lectures—as Acton's often are. They lead back to the source and reveal another dimension of Burckhardt, and in doing so even some of the thoughts which Nietzsche, not altogether without reason, complained that he concealed. They do so indirectly, simply through the form and style and finish of the letters—in a sense his most finished work. For he seems to have adopted the form almost deliberately in later life, writing to one correspondent about the European situation and to another about art and architecture, rather as Horace Walpole selected his correspondents. Unfortunately he destroyed all the letters that came into his hands, and certainly never dreamed of appearing in the *cortège* of Madame de Sévigné—the subject of his last public lecture. Even after he had "given up all thought of literary success" and had published his last short volume of poetry, he admits he could not put down his pen, and so went on to express himself and his thoughts in the form that suited him best. With his attention always focused on the outside world, on men and things, art, politics and morals—he was temperamentally averse from philosophical speculation and introspection—he was at his happiest and best in his letters, in a form which lies half-way, as it were, between a Journal and the formal historical work circumstances prevented his writing.

The letters fall roughly into two groups: those which were written during his youth and the period of uncertainty before his return to Basle; and the letters in which he had fully come into his own. "Originality," he