

*“Power tends to corrupt”:*  
Thomas Carlyle, Lord Acton, and  
the Legacy of Frederick the Great

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SEEN THROUGH THE INDISPENSABLE BUT SLIGHTLY BLURRED lens of biographical generalization, Thomas Carlyle and John Emerich Edward Dalberg, Lord Acton (1834–1902), present a study in contrasts with few overlapping features. Their respective modern images could not be more dissimilar. On one hand, there is Carlyle, the intractable Puritanic apologist of despotic “heroes” and drill-sergeants; the champion of Luther, Cromwell, and Frederick the Great; and in his own era of Bismarck and Governor Eyre. On the other, there is Acton, the cosmopolitan English liberal, the tenacious Roman Catholic opponent of absolutist Ultramontanism, and the confidant and adviser of Gladstone. Personally and temperamentally, they also convey very different impressions. Whereas Carlyle spoke in unstoppable jeremiads, bristling with Swiftian satire and humor, Acton’s language was spare, elliptical, elegant, and enigmatic.

Herbert Paul recalled that to “draw Acton out, to make him declare himself upon some doubtful or delicate point, was a hopeless task. His face at once assumed the expression of the Sphinx” (*Letters* xiv). When he met Carlyle for the first and only time at a dinner given by their mutual friend Richard Monckton Milnes (1809–85) in the Spring of 1865, Acton was unimpressed. To his future wife Marie Arco he described Carlyle, “who is one of the most original and celebrated English writers, and who first introduced into England those German

studies to which I am so devoted. He was clever, but grotesque, and often absurd. He has just written a long life of Frederic the Great, about whom his judgment is very different from mine” (qtd. in Hill 163).

In spite of their differences, the two historians were bound together by Carlylean “Organic Filaments” (*Sartor Resartus* 180) that informed their deep spiritual apprehension of the past. Acton recognized that Carlyle was a paradoxical thinker, but he was loathe to acknowledge the extent to which he himself was influenced by the Scotman’s baffling view of history, which was a highly idiosyncratic mixture of liberal and illiberal ideas. Both men grasped that religion, or “religiosity” (*Heroes* 42) as Carlyle preferred to call it, operated in contradictory ways in the study of the past. They both knew it could blind historians to the complexity of truth—although Acton believed that Carlyle was guilty of “the euthanasia of metaphysic” (“German Schools of History” [1886], *HE* 386)—but they also recognized that “religiosity” could help historians to resist conclusions that relied upon theoretical or ideological appeal instead of evidence.

In his essay “On History” (1830) Carlyle had memorably warned his rivals against subordinating the barely legible “Prophetic Manuscript” of the past to philosophical formulas: “Better were it that mere earthly Historians should lower such pretensions, more suitable for Omniscience than for human science; and aiming only at some picture of the things acted . . . leave the inscrutable purport of them an acknowledged secret.” What Carlyle called “All-knowledge” (*Historical Essays* 8) was reserved for gods, not mortals. In his view, the prophetic content of any history depended upon the basic humility of historians. This reliance did not mean that they should disengage from the controversies of the past, any more than they should distance themselves from those of the present. On the contrary, Carlyle proclaimed that the goal for historians should always be to immerse themselves in both realms simultaneously, without trying to impose false continuums or progressions. For Carlyle, objectivity sprung from the impassioned endeavor to re-create the past as a living phenomenon, one that perpetually intersected with the present in an electric “conflux of two eternities” (“Signs of the Times” [1829], *Works*

27: 59). This brand of synthesis represented a conviction that he never entirely abandoned, even when writing the biography of Frederick the Great, a work that Acton regarded as a piece of flagrant and vulgar hero-worship.

Working in a period when the Rankean “science of history” was in its ascent and history was becoming an academic discipline, Acton approached the problem of “Omniscience” from a rigorously empirical viewpoint. In his inaugural lecture as Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge in June 1895, he insisted that “History, to be above evasion or dispute, must stand on documents, not on opinions” (*LMH* 17). But he too acknowledged that in most cases, such “indisputable” ground was often difficult, if not impossible, to locate. In consequence, the scrupulous historian was obliged to explore conflicting interpretations from the interior of each vantage point, and to do so exhaustively and in a spirit of goodwill. Acton explained, “No political dogma is as serviceable to my purpose here as the historian’s maxim to do the best he can for the other side, and to avoid pertinacity or emphasis on his own” (12). Still, historians could not assume that their adherence to this “maxim” would yield them precise answers. It was the quality of their investigation that mattered, not the strength of their opinions: “If, in our uncertainty, we must often err, it may be sometimes better to risk excess in rigour than in indulgence, for then at least we do no injury by loss of principle” (27). The promise of such excess was double-edged: it might lead to the creation of more objective and reliable histories, but it could also induce a kind of historical petrification reminiscent of Mr. Casaubon, a calcified pedant created by Acton’s favorite novelist, George Eliot.

From an early stage of his career, Acton identified Carlyle as his nemesis, both as a philosopher and as a practitioner of history. This hostility grew over the course of his career as Acton began to articulate his own approach to the study of the past. His chief grievance was that in his histories, Carlyle forsook “excess in rigour” in favor of “indulgence.” His idea of historical objectivity was vulnerable precisely because it failed to harness “opinion” to the stringent dictates of evidence. It was no coincidence that Acton’s most famous expression—“Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely”—occurred in

a letter to Mandell Creighton (1843–1901) in 1887, in which Acton attacked “the impropriety of Carlylean denunciations and Pharisaism in history.” Contrary to what Carlyle preached, Acton explained in the same letter, “Great men are almost always bad men, even when they exercise influence and not authority. . . . That is the point at which the negation of Catholicism and the negation of Liberalism meet and keep high festival, and the end learns to justify the means” (*HES* 504). For Acton, Carlyle’s “religiosity” paralleled that of the Ultramontanists, whose “negation” of pragmatic Catholic teaching was founded on the same authoritarian assumptions as his “negation” of objective historical decorum.

Acton was convinced that the dignity and usefulness of history was defined by its commitment to the upholding of morality in general, and of religion in particular. In his estimation, Carlyle’s spirituality was rooted in his contempt for flawed humanity and in his own inability to imagine a Creator motivated by pity and forgiveness. He craved the presence of heroes because he distrusted and despised the “average man.” In his inaugural lecture Acton explored the connection between Carlyle’s “religiosity” and his dogmatism. Along with other “recent classics,” including John Henry Newman (1801–90) and James Anthony Froude (1818–94), Carlyle had been “persuaded that there is no progress justifying the ways of God to man, and that the mere consolidation of liberty is like the motion of creatures whose advance is in the direction of their tails.” Like them he regarded the anarchic “freedom” celebrated by Liberals as a synonym for anarchy, mammonism, and mediocrity. They held that the animus of history was to show “that great and salutary things are done for mankind by power concentrated, not by power balanced and cancelled and dispersed, and that the Whig theory, is legitimate only by virtue of its checks, and that the sovereign is dependent on the subject, is rebellion against the divine will manifested all down the stream of time” (*LMH* 11). In theory, Carlyle’s “religiosity” should have deterred him from trying to read the illegible pages of the “Prophetic Manuscript,” but in practice, it tempted him to conform the “divine will” to the shape of his own despotic prejudices against both the ignorant rabble and the partridge-shooting aristocracy.

Carlyle's veneration of "power concentrated" evolved from his one-sided interpretation of German Romanticism. Responding to the news of Carlyle's death in 1881, Acton recalled in a letter to Mary Drew Gladstone how he had very nearly been tainted by the perverting influence of the "sage of Chelsea." It was another Germanist, Coleridge, who had saved him from this fate: "It is by accident, by the accident that I read Coleridge first, that Carlyle never did me any good. . . . I should speak differently if, reading him earlier, I had learned from him instead of Coleridge the lesson of intellectual detachment." Carlyle's "robust mental independence" was "not the same thing as originality." The Germans who revered him—Acton had in mind Carlyle's acceptance of the Prussian Order of Merit, which had been awarded to him by Bismarck in January 1874—did so because "he is an echo of the voices of their own classic age. . . . He lived in the era when it was not at its best, between Herder and Richter, before the age of discipline and science" (qtd. in Paul 70–71).

In reality, Acton viewed Carlyle as "the most detestable of historians" because he championed the "doctrine of heroes, the doctrine that the will is above the law, [which] comes next in atrocity to the doctrine that the flag covers the goods, that the cause justifies its agents." In spite of Acton's professed detestation, he recognized that Carlyle possessed strengths as a historian and as a social critic, at least as long as he was able to combat the vitiating effects of his pernicious "doctrine of heroes." Acton acknowledged that from Germany, Carlyle inherited "the most valuable faculty, that of standing aside from the current of contemporary English ideas, and looking at it from an Archimedean point, but it gave him no rule for judging, no test of truth, no definite conviction, no certain method and no sure conclusion." Carlyle also exhibited "historic grasp—which is a rare quality—some sympathy with things that are not evident, and a vague, fluctuating notion of the work of impersonal forces." Acton even conceded that there "is a flash of genius in 'Past and Present,' and in the 'French Revolution,' though it is a wretched history. And [Carlyle] invented Oliver Cromwell. That is the positive result of him, that, and his personal influence over many considerable minds—a stimulating, not a guiding influence" (qtd. in Paul 70–71).

But in their only direct confrontation, it was the twenty-nine year old Acton who evinced an “excess of indulgence” in attacking Carlyle’s integrity as a historian. Towards the end of 1862 Acton had purchased what he thought was an original version of a confidential memoir written by the King of Prussia, *Les Matinées royales, ou l’art de régner*, allegedly copied in secret at Sans-Souci in 1806 by Napoleon’s private secretary, the Baron de Méneval (1778–1850). Somewhat recklessly, Acton not only edited the memoir and persuaded Williams and Norgate in Covent Garden to publish it in January 1863, but he also “reviewed” the book in his article “Confessions of Frederick the Great,” which appeared in the same month’s issue of the *Home and Foreign Review*, for which he served as editor. The circumstances in which Acton publicized this indictment of Carlyle suggest the difficulty he had in trying to reconcile the ideal of “intellectual detachment” with his own preoccupations as a historian, a liberal Catholic, and a committed opponent of Ultramontaniam.

Between 1858 and 1863, he had co-edited the bi-monthly Catholic journal, the *Rambler* with his colleague Richard Simpson (1820–76), a convert and admirer of John Henry Newman (1801–90) and John Keble (1792–1866). Roland Hill has aptly delineated the ways that Acton and Simpson too successfully realized their aim of elevating “the intellectual level of English Catholics by introducing the methods and thought patterns of the new German historical scholarship.” Eventually the English Catholic bishops, led by Cardinal Wiseman (1802–65) and dominated by those who “did not believe in a reconciliation with the increasingly godless tenets of the modern world,” combined to force the two editors to close the journal and to “present a more peaceable and conciliatory face” (Hill 116) in the form of the quarterly *Home and Foreign Review*. As editor, Acton found himself on the front lines of the struggle against the Ultramontanes.

Acton would use history as a key weapon in the battle against rigid scholasticism, and he especially did so in the wake of Pope Pius IX’s proclamation in 1854 of the Immaculate Conception of Mary as dogma. Increasingly, the Vatican attempted to bend the past to fit the requirements of theology, a process that reached its climax in a series of edicts, all of

which Acton opposed vehemently: the Syllabus of Errors in 1864, the canonization of the notorious Spanish inquisitor Pedro de Arbués in 1867, and the decree of Papal Infallibility in 1870. The common element underlying these initiatives was the promotion of the authority of the Church at the expense of its integrity. What disturbed him most about the Church's stance was that it emulated political trends elsewhere in Europe, including those occurring in Poland, Hungary, Russia, France, Albania, Bulgaria, the Balkans, and especially in Prussia, where Bismarck cynically manipulated the legacy of Frederick the Great to curtail civil liberties, persecute religious minorities, repress dissent, and extend control over the German confederation.

Acton rightly believed that Carlyle had exerted a decisive impact on this movement to glorify the militaristic cult of the "Iron Kingdom."<sup>1</sup> Carlyle's motives were similar to the Ultramontane extremists who virulently opposed secularism and modernity, and who sought the antidote to these evils in augmenting Papal power and in immunizing Papal doctrine. According to Acton, Ultramontanes had abused their authority as prelates, just as Carlyle had compromised his worth as a historian. Reviewing the first two volumes of *Frederick the Great* in the *Rambler* in 1858, Acton justified his intention to expose Carlyle's slipshod methods of research by reminding readers of the widespread attempts to preserve his fame: "[T]here is no English historian who has a right to be judged by a higher or severer test, for no one has spoken more deeply and truly on the character and dignity of history." Acton approvingly repeated Carlyle's assertion in *Latter-Day Pamphlets* (1850) that history is "an inarticulate Bible, and in a dim intricate manner

<sup>1</sup> Bismarck, who generally disliked and distrusted historians, knew the worth of Carlyle's contribution to Prussian national identity. As Christopher Clark has observed, "[T]he Prussian state made up its history as it went along, developing an ever more elaborate account of its trajectory in the past and its purposes in the present" (xvii). David Mathew has rightly focused on Frederick the Great as the key point of contention between Acton and Carlyle: "No two views of Frederick II of Prussia were likely to be more diametrically opposed than those held by Acton and Carlyle" (184). But it is also notable that Acton ignored Carlyle's persistent criticism of the cult of Bonaparte, and in particular of his ridicule of Napoleon III, whom he called the "Copper Captain" (Froude 2: 399).

reveals the Divine Appearances in this lower world.” Though *Past and Present* and *The French Revolution* were not “entirely unworthy [of this ideal]” (429), *Frederick the Great* fell far short of it for brutally obvious reasons. In Acton’s opinion, there was nothing “inarticulate” or “dim” about Carlyle’s blatant strategy of portraying Frederick in his biography as an “exemplar to my contemporaries” (*Works* 12: 17).

Acton conceded that in his earlier historical works, the “disgust which Mr. Carlyle feels for the men and things of his own time seemed to give him a clearer eye for the past than most of those possess whose vision is distorted by the prejudices of their age.” Carlyle could see further and deeper because he looked beyond parties and labels: “He showed an intelligence of things which no other English historian has understood. He dwelt upon the invisible impersonal forces that act in history, and appreciated, often with rare sagacity, the true significance and sequence of events.” Yet as this disgust intensified, Carlyle felt a greater compulsion to distort the past. Acton argued that his disenchantment with flawed humanity increasingly led him to inflexible solutions:

[Carlyle] could not distinguish in history what was unknown to him in religion: thus he fell to the exclusive contemplation of certain typical individuals, whose greatness appeared to supply what he wanted, an object of worship, and personified invisible elements in visible men. And now the belongings of his hero possess so great an importance that they distract his attention from him; he invests with an absurd dignity not only his relations, but their goods and chattels, and allows merely material things to eclipse the human interest of his subject. It is a history made of eccentricities. (429)

Carlyle’s research in the first two volumes of *Frederick* at once betrayed his intolerance and exposed his cavalier approach to historical accuracy.

In his review Acton seized on a typical example of Carlyle’s erratic procedures. In his summary of the career of the Hohenzollern Holy Roman Emperor Kaiser Henry VII (ca. 1275–1313), Carlyle repeated the popular but unfounded allegation that he had been “poisoned in sacramental wine” by a “rat-eyed Dominican” (430) monk hired by the Florentines with the covert approval of Pope Clement V (ca. 1264–1314).

Kaiser Henry, who had striven to revive the medieval empire and pacify the warring Guelf and Ghibbeline factions in Italy, had been extolled by Dante in the *Paradiso* as a deliverer for whom a crown was reserved (30: 137). Echoing German sources while archly alluding to the situation in Italy in 1858, Carlyle expressed outrage at Clement's involvement: "That is not the way to achieve Italian Liberty, or Obedience to God; that is the way to confirm, as by frightful stygian oath, Italian Slavery, or continual Obedience, under varying forms, to the Other Party!" (*Works* 12: 123).

Acton coolly disposed of the legend of Henry's murder.<sup>2</sup> The original accusation, supposedly endorsed by the Dominican Ptolemy of Lucca (ca. 1236–ca. 1327), "was contained in an interpolation, with the heading 'additio.' Whereupon, of course, the Catholic historians were accused of fraud" (431). But when the primary text was found from which the interpolated passage was taken, it was proved to be a calumny. Held to account by the highest standards of scholarship, Carlyle had been exposed as an anti-Catholic propagandist. It was a victory, albeit a minor one, for the young Acton, but he was eager to follow it up with a more decisive and complete repudiation of the author of *Frederick the Great*. The stage was set for Acton's publication of the *Matinées*.

During the period in which Acton published the alleged memoir of Frederick, his attention was consumed by the two "isms" that threatened his vision of the progress of liberty in Europe: Nationalism and Ultramontanism. Both "isms" posed a grave challenge to the survival of freedom and religion, which Acton viewed as mutually dependent upon one another for their intellectual and spiritual sustenance. In an essay published in July 1862, Acton traced the toxic rise of nationalism: "Beginning by a protest against the dominion of race over race . . . it grew into a condemnation of every State that included different races, and finally became the complete and consistent theory, that the State and the nation must be

<sup>2</sup> By 1911, the author of the entry for Kaiser Henry VII in the eleventh edition of *Encyclopaedia Britannica* had concluded that his death "was attributed, probably without reason, to poison given him by a Dominican friar in the sacramental wine" (13: 279). Recent scholarship has concluded that Henry died at the siege of Siena from malaria; see Jones 6: 536.

co-extensive” (qtd. in McNeill 146). Nationalism, for Acton, represented the culmination of a process that began with the French Revolution. As Gertrude Himmelfarb has observed, “All the sins of democracy—its penchant for abstractions, contempt for history and worship of the masses—Acton saw reflected in its most recent and unattractive offspring, nationalism” (83). He was disturbed particularly by the prospect of a chauvinistic brand of nationalism brought about by retrograde developments in Catholic theology. Ultramontane logic proceeded along lines projected by Joseph de Maistre (1753–1821) that “[c]ivil society cannot subsist without the maxim that the king can do no wrong. The Church requires the same privilege for the Pope. Absolute infallibility in the one is a corollary of despotism in the other” (“Ultramontanism” [July 1863], qtd. in McNeill 170). Acton contended that these twin developments needed to be checked and retarded by historians, whose own discipline was in danger of being undermined by them.

Acton was also convinced that Carlyle, who published volumes 4 and 5 of *Frederick the Great* in 1862 and 1864, was corrupting the discipline by inviting Prussian nationalists to rewrite the past as a preparation for militarism and conquest. In the same month that he published the *Matinées*, Acton lamented the baneful effect of biography, particularly Carlylean biography, on historical study:

The interest of biography awakens a thirst for knowledge, long before history can be understood; and we have our minds crowded with objects of hero-worship before we can understand the intricacies of character, and before we can appreciate the sanctity of a cause. In this way the imagination may be aroused and the memory stored; but the judgement is warped instead of being formed, and the historical faculty and habit, which is the most valuable fruit of historical study, and may survive even historical knowledge, is spoiled. (Woodruff 429)

Armed with incontrovertible proof of Frederick the Great’s true character—proof that Carlyle had earlier derided as “false and spurious to a reader who has made any direct or effectual study of Frederick” (*Works* 12: 169)—Acton launched his bid to discredit the biographer of “the last of Kings.”

In the preface to the *Matinées*, Acton announced that an

“authentic and complete” (i) text of the document was being published for the first time, and that readers seeking evidence of its veracity could consult the forthcoming issue of the *Home and Foreign Review*, which featured a lengthy essay (written by him) on the “Confessions of Frederick the Great.” In the journal piece Acton began by underscoring the importance of this discovery for students of modern European history. Here was “the most portentous exposition of the state of waning royalty in Europe a century ago, when it has lost its chivalrous and religious character, and has not submitted to the control of opinion and law,” written confidentially by the King of Prussia to convey his “innermost thoughts” about “the art of reigning, for the use of the nephew who was to be his heir” (“Confessions” 154–55). Acton went on to contend that the document revealed a peculiarly topical form of Machiavellian “sophistry” then being revived in Rome and Berlin to advance policies of theological and political absolutism.

Religion and *Realpolitik*,<sup>3</sup> in Acton’s view, were deviously fused in the strategies of Frederick the Great. As an informed “infidel,” he “understood the power of religious belief, both as a limit and as a protection to authority.” To Frederick, Christianity offered governors a convenient means of social control: “[Its] morality . . . acted as a check on the people, and need not be feared by their rulers, because it was simply a restraint, not an incitement.” Frederick’s ecumenicalism was consistent with his posture as an enlightened thinker. He tolerated diverse faiths because he sought to subdue their adversarial energies: “He was resolved to put an end to all that he could divide men amongst themselves, in order that their duties as subjects might take precedence of everything else” (“Confessions” 156–57). According to Acton, Frederick’s tactic as an “enlightened despot” relied upon the façade of enlightenment to conceal his despotism. The King adopted this pretense of liberality to enervate religious authority: “The prince, by keeping aloof from religious controversy, extinguishes it in his dominions” (58). By encouraging indifference to religion, Acton argued, Frederick covertly stripped legality of any moral sanction. He

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Steinberg defines the term in its Bismarckian context: “[D]o what works and serves your interest” (131).

eroded the belief in an independent judiciary by instilling in his subjects the precept that “the public good and his own glory are the supreme law” (158).

In order to disguise this vast expansion of his own power, Frederick made Prussians feel “that the Potsdam drill and manœuvring had some real efficacy and value,” and he employed “men of letters to publish his praises” (160). Frederick’s life, “down to the smallest details, was carefully studied, for the purpose of deceiving and astonishing the world.” The myth of the ascetic king—Carlyle’s “lean little old man . . . in a Spartan simplicity of vesture” (*Works* 12: 1)—was contradicted by the brazen candor of Frederick’s remarks in the *Matinées*: “When I arrive at a place, I always look fatigued, and show myself in public in a very bad coat, and with my wig uncombed: ce sont des riens qui produisent souvent une impression singulière” (“Confessions” 161). In the event that readers missed the polemical context of Acton’s discussion, he reminded them that it “is easy to see how far these confidential explanations modify . . . the admiration of those who think, with Mr. Carlyle, ‘that in his way [Frederick] is a Reality; that he always means what he speaks; grounds his actions, too, on what he recognises for the truth.’” Acton concluded that “No biographer has ever done justice to his profoundly calculating intellect, to his power of dissimulation, to his cynical candour, or to his knowledge of the men of his time.” The *Matinées* removed any pretext “for those who have made [Frederick] their idol to attribute to him either moral respectability, honour, or public spirit” (161). Acton expected that his book would banish Carlyle permanently from the ranks of serious historians. Instead, it was his own reputation as a scholar that was jeopardized by the affair.

The aftermath of his attack left Acton feeling personally embarrassed by his failure to convince either scholars or the general public that his edition of the *Matinées* was “a more reliable source” (“Confessions” 162) than any of the previous versions of the pamphlet that had circulated. The political repercussions of his misjudgment were equally damaging to his reputation. A year earlier he had been a guest of the Prussian royal family at the coronation of King William I (1797–1888) at Königsberg. The tensions he witnessed at the festivities were unexpectedly exacerbated by the publication of the *Matinées*. William I was

a military man and a conservative who despised the majority liberal party in the Landtag, and at various points threatened to resign if their influence could not be curbed. On 23 September 1862 he appointed the abrasive Otto von Bismarck (1815–98) Minister-President with the expectation that he would divide and neutralize the disloyal parliament. The King's strategy temporarily backfired, partly as a result of Bismarck's disastrous maiden speech, in which he clumsily equated national honor with autocratic repression at home and aggressive expansion abroad, promising to settle the "great questions of the day . . . by blood and iron" (qtd. in Steinberg 181).

By 14 January, when the Landtag met for its new session, relations between Bismarck and the liberals had deteriorated further as a result of a dispute about increasing the military budget. A week later, a revolt against Russian rule broke out in a Russian-dominated region of Poland. Bismarck condemned the rebels, promised support for the Russians, and mobilized four army corps to assist them. He then instructed General Alvensleben to negotiate an agreement with the Tsar that "allowed both Powers to cross the borders of the other in hot pursuit of Polish armed units" (Steinberg 192). The Alvensleben Convention horrified liberals across Europe. Within the royal family itself, there were sharp divisions of opinion about Bismarck's character and morality. Crown Prince Frederick (1831–88), Crown Princess Victoria (1840–1901), and Queen Augusta (1811–90) voiced their dismay at the reactionary drift of Bismarck's policies and their alarm at the hold he exerted over the King.

Many of the liberal politicians in the Landtag were aware of Frederick's popularity among the working-classes, and they were generally receptive to the image of him as a reformer. Acton's book undercut their position by reinforcing the Minister-President's frequently voiced contention that all liberals were unpatriotic and disrespectful towards Prussia's greatest hero.<sup>4</sup> The Crown Princess wrote to her mother Queen Victoria on 12 January:

<sup>4</sup> Had Bismarck read *Les Matinées*, he might have been gratified by Frederick's theories of statecraft, which seemed to anticipate his own. The King's cynical attitude to religion would have especially interested this young and ambitious politician, who in Jonathan Steinberg's shrewd estimate "served nobody, neither man nor God but only himself" (57).

Sir John Acton has published a book called “*Matinées Royales*,” an infamous libel against Frederick the Great, well known here as such ever since Frederick the Great’s own time; and now Sir John publishes it as a composition of Frederick the Great. I cannot tell you what indignation it has caused here in all circles. To have the first of our Kings so blackened at a time when the whole of Europe is laughing at our sad and crippled state, is bitterly felt—the newspapers have taken it up very warmly and the King and Queen feel much hurt at Sir J. Acton’s having brought out the book as he was treated with so much kindness here by every body last year at the coronation. . . . If the book had not been well known as a fabric (not authentic) less might have been said about it, but even Carlyle in his work pronounces it to be spurious, and it is nothing else than a really shocking libel. (qtd. in Fulford 161).

Queen Victoria, irritated by the news, passed the letter to Lord Granville, president of the Privy Council, a Whig peer, and Acton’s stepfather. Granville wrote to Acton on 13 January to convey the Crown Princess’s displeasure and to ask Acton whether he was prepared to acknowledge his error and to issue a public apology:

I have told the Queen that you will be sorry to know that the Princess Royal is annoyed and that your wish will be to meet the Queen’s desires but that if you continue to believe in the authenticity of the writings, it is difficult to know what you can do. That the great point in your controversy with the Cardinal [Wiseman] is that truth in history must be sought, and when ascertained be published without reference to its appearing to favour or not the cause one has at heart. That I doubt whether you will accept Carlyle’s authority as conclusive, but if you could be convinced that you had been deceived by a spurious document, I was sure you would be anxious to make a public acknowledgement of the mistake.—Have you any doubts?” (qtd. in Woodruff 473–74).

Acton doubted neither himself nor his source, but Granville’s question obliged him to seek allies.

Acton hoped that his position would be vindicated by German scholarship. In a 23 January letter to his friend and mentor Ignaz von Döllinger (1799–1890) he reported that “Die

Königin [Victoria] ist sehr erzürnt über die *Matinéés*” [“the Queen is very angry about the *Matinéés*”] (qtd. in Conzemius 1: 294), but he trusted that the authenticity of the confessions would be corroborated by the leading historians of the day, including Johann David Erdmann Preuss (1785–1868), Heinrich Karl Ludolf von Sybel (1817–95), and Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886). In the meantime, in a bid to appease the Crown Princess, Acton sent her a letter through Granville in which he tried to minimize the scope of the dispute (the letter has been lost). She wrote back to Queen Victoria on 26 January:

Many thanks for the copy of Sir J. Acton’s letter to Lord Granville also for the original second letter to Lord G. Both confirm what I was perfectly sure of and what I said to every one here—which is that his interest in the thing is purely literary and that he is not actuated by any other motives. I defended him both to the King and to the Queen and to all the infuriated historians here, and I hope you will tell Lord Granville so. To my mind it is clear as sunlight that these *Matinéés* are not by Frederick the Great—as since I have been here I have had so much opportunity of becoming fully acquainted with his sentiments, character, habits and peculiarities; many of the sentiments are no doubt his though just as many are not—but the way of expressing them, the style and the arguments are certainly not his. In England he is not sufficiently known for people to be able to distinguish between his real and his popular character but here every child knows all about him and those that knew him are still alive. I know two people who knew him. (qtd. in Fulford 167–68)

Acton persisted with his campaign, but he began to find himself increasingly isolated. On 30 January the Berlin correspondent of the *Times* reported that in a 15 January article published in the *National Zeitung*, “Professor Preuss, [had disposed] of the authenticity of the work in a manner so conclusive as, apparently, to leave no room for reply.” Acton was evidently unaware that Preuss had called his edition of the *Matinéés* “[l]ewd, idle newsmongery” (qtd. in Neuberg, *Athenæum* 193). More damning, the same correspondent included in his article a letter from Ranke that cast further doubt on the

validity of the confessions.<sup>5</sup> The esteemed professor focused on a passage in the fifth *Matinée* in which Frederick claimed to have doubled the size of the Prussian army when he became king. Ranke noted that Frederick “augmented the army by some battalions, but how far is that from doubling the army he found, from exercising it several years, and all the other nonsense he is supposed in the little tract in question to have written. To believe that you must imagine he was sometimes out of his senses.” Citing Frederick’s well-known respect for “historical truth,” Ranke dismissed the *Matinées* as “spurious”: “I do not deny that it is written by a man of talent; he gives some striking satirical traits of the pen, but his knowledge of the King is very superficial. A man of high cultivation, as my honourable friend Sir Acton Dalberg, must have overlooked the page above quoted, else he never could have thought it genuine” (8). Rather surprisingly, with Preuss and Ranke aligned against him, Acton chose to go on the offensive.

In a letter to the *Times* on 5 February, Acton conceded that the “German critics are the best in the world . . . but in the present instance they have hitherto failed to vindicate their established renown.” He felt that Preuss had cast his verdict prematurely, having not had a chance to look at Acton’s manuscript copy of the confessions. Though Ranke “speaks with greater authority,” his “testimony is not entirely independent or unprejudiced.” Invoking a comparison that signaled his own back-peddling, Acton asserted that the esteemed professor was “as strongly pledged as Mr. Carlyle to a view of the character of Frederick which does not quite consist with the authenticity of the *Matinées*, and it appears from his letter that he formed it without examining any of the earlier editions of the work.” Acton disputed Ranke’s contention in *Neun Bücher Preussischer Geschichte* (1847–48) that the Frederickian state was one “in which oppression, though still in many ways unavoidable, was tempered by the recognition of its necessity, and in which submission did not exclude the consciousness of freedom.”

<sup>5</sup> Acton’s relations with Ranke were always unsettled. Herbert Butterfield has noted, “Something in the ecclesiastical outlook of the Döllinger circle in the 1850’s induced that circle, including Acton himself, to speak deprecatingly of Ranke, whom Acton, later in life, however, described as his teacher” (Acton 7). See also Butterfield, *Man on His Past* 86–95.

Ranke's opinion was fallible because his political morality was suspect. Acton concluded that he could not "accede to [Ranke's] opinion, even if it was that of all Germany" (10).

While Acton scrambled to shore up his front, Carlyle vented his exasperation at yet another "grand Discovery" of the *Matinées*. In a letter of 23 January to his German-Jewish friend and secretary Joseph Neuberg, who was at this time translating *Frederick the Great* into his native language, Carlyle urged him to write to either the *Times* or to the *Athenaeum*, "and put an end forever" to "that enormous Platitude." He also advised him to visit Williams and Norgate, and to "let them know what a mighty Pair of Ears (bigger than those of Balaam's Ass) their 'Editor,' 'Contributor,' their &c. &c. have put upon them" (*CL* 39: 33). Neuberg dutifully complied, and in a long and detailed article in the *Athenaeum*, he systematically disparaged Acton's claims. Neuberg began by pointing out that "whilst the people in Prussia are preparing to commemorate . . . the conclusion of the Seven Years' War[,] . . . a respectable London publishing firm has thought fit to put forth a reprint of an often-printed gross lampoon on the hero of the said war, and even to claim a sort of originality for a production which, at its first appearance nearly a century ago, was officially denounced as a forgery." Of the text itself, Neuberg commented that "[o]ne feels humiliated to have to argue about such an article, somewhat as if one were called upon to demonstrate to an adult person that the moon was not made of green cheese" (193–94). Acton alerted Simpson to this "frantic" (*Correspondence* 3: 81) letter, but hoped that his own piece in the *Times* would discourage any further criticism until he had a chance to print a definitive defense of his position.

Acton pinned his hopes on being redeemed by additional archival proof. He had requested a letter of support from Henri Nadault de Buffon (1831–90), editor of *Correspondance inédite de Buffon* (1860), a collateral descendant of the naturalist Comte Georges Louis Leclerc de Buffon (1707–88), whose son Georges Louis Marie (1763–93) had obtained possession of one of the manuscripts of the *Matinées*. He also reached out to James William Whittall (1838–1910), a merchant in Smyrna, Manchester, and Constantinople, who wrote anonymously in the London papers on Oriental questions and later published his own edition of the

*Matinées* in 1901. Through Döllinger, Whittall had met Benjamin Herder (1818–88), the director of the Verlag Herder publishing house at Freiburg and a dedicated bibliophile. On 10 February, Acton notified Simpson that “[t]here is such a raging disturbance in Germany that Ranke’s statement was impudent—The whole thing is being translated at Freiburg, and controversy is much excited” (*Correspondence* 3: 82). Though he admitted that the “Smyrna merchant looks to me rather suspicious” (*Correspondence* 3: 81), Acton continued to believe that a he would be rescued by new manuscript evidence. A distinguished jurist, Karl Samwer (1819–82), had discovered another edition of the *Matinées* in the Gotha archives, and he was preparing to write an article on the subject.<sup>6</sup> On 3 March Acton told Simpson, “We shall have Ranke’s collection at Berlin, the Princess’s extracts from the Gotha MSS. & the French imperial archives, all in our short notice—Also, probably a letter from Buffon, and from Whittall. I am told the Princess is determined to have it out with me en tête à tête, and am meditating a precipitate flight” (*Correspondence* 3: 80, 82–83).

Acton’s “flight” proved to be more “precipitate” than he anticipated. When archival evidence failed to materialize, he simply dropped the matter entirely and confined it to what Carlyle had called in “On History” the “formless oblivion” (*Historical Essays* 6) of the past. Acton made no public acknowledgement of the error, nor did he mention the subject again. Meanwhile, Carlyle savored his triumph over the foolish “London mooncalf” of the *Home and Foreign Review*. In volume 5 (1865) of *Frederick the Great*, he pilloried the research of the “Editor and reviver . . . illuminated ‘by the Secretary of the Great Napoleon,’ ‘by discovery of manuscripts,’ ‘by the Duc de Rovigo,’ and I know not what; animated also, it is said, by religious views.” Like the “arch-Quack” Cagliostro, who rightly

<sup>6</sup> Acton may have been irritated by a letter written by “Veritas” that was published in the *Times* on 5 February, in which the author asserted that the original manuscript of *Les Matinées* “was destroyed,” and that “only one copy was taken from it, which is now in the hands of Mr. Whittall, a British merchant of Smyrna.” He added that Acton’s pamphlet, “just published is apparently only a hurried copy, taken either from the original or from that in Mr. Whittall’s hands; many parts are identically the same, while others are quite left out” (5). Samwer published his evidence in “Über Unechtheit und Ursprung der *Matinées* royales,” *Die Grenzboten: Zeitschrift für Politik und Kultur* 22 (1863): 473–84, but his arguments did not exonerate Acton.

predicted the French Revolution, Acton unwittingly gained “real, though very small” historical fame by uncovering the probable author of the *Matinées*. With respect to Acton’s boast that the pamphlet reveals a hitherto unknown side of the King of Prussia, Carlyle was brief and blunt. The *Matinées* sole value is that it confirms “that you have not yet the faintest preliminary shadow of correct knowledge about Friedrich or his habits or affairs, and that you ought first to try and acquire some” (*Works* 18: 181). Coming from the exponent of “Pharisaism in history,” Carlyle’s was a rebuke that Acton could not and did not forget.

The impact of the blunder on Acton’s own career was largely self-imposed. George Watson rightly observed that the “incident [was] unlikely to have endeared the idea of book publication to his mind” (2).<sup>7</sup> It multiplied Acton’s fears about his own ability to write history and exposed the naïveté of his certitude that “[b]y going from book to manuscript and from library to archives, we exchange doubt for certainty, and become our own masters. We explore a new heaven and a new earth, and at each step forward the world moves with us” (qtd. in McElrath 11). Like many other historians, he was affected by what Walter Benjamin later called “the strongest narcotic of the [nineteenth] century,” one encapsulated in Ranke’s dictum that the task of the historian was to show things “as they really were” (“*wie es eigentlich gewesen*”) (qtd. in Smith 51).<sup>8</sup> But in his particular case, the “narcotic” debilitated Acton’s powers of composition by instilling in him a sense that no opinion could be considered safe until it had been

<sup>7</sup> Curiously, some of the most distinguished Acton scholars have neglected to comment on the episode, including Gertrude Himmelfarb, Damian McElrath, and more recently, Roland Hill. A notable exception was Owen Chadwick, who described it as a “historical disaster” and attributed it to Acton’s lifelong prejudice that all governments were bad, “therefore if a king with an absolute power said that the only way to govern well is for the ruler to be unscrupulous, this was a marvellous illustration of a continual danger which afflicts all governments.” Chadwick also pointed out that Acton’s animus against Frederick the Great was partly due to the fact that he was “half a Rhinelander by descent from his mother” and that he had “many links with Bavaria and was soon to marry a Bavarian” (16).

<sup>8</sup> E. H. Carr has tartly declared, “Three generations of German, British, and even French historians marched into battle intoning the magic words ‘*Wie es eigentlich gewesen*’ like an incantation—designed, like most incantations, to save them from the tiresome obligation to think for themselves” (8–9).

overwhelmingly secured by the facts.<sup>9</sup> Acton's "Madonna[s] of the Future" hovered in his imagination throughout his life, awaiting the ægis of some new archival discovery.<sup>10</sup> The list of his postponed projects multiplied, together with the index cards that he filled with jottings outlining fresh topics for research. In forsaking rigor for an excess of indulgence, he had fallen into a labyrinth of Casauban-esque paralysis.

Perhaps understandably, the historian who never wrote history books out of fear that his conclusions might be controverted by future discoveries was resentful of Carlyle's prodigious output. Fortunately, resentment and rivalry constituted only a small part of the intricate web that linked them. If the younger Acton resented Carlyle because of his lack of Coleridgean detachment in his histories, then the more mature Acton—the author of transcribed lectures on the French Revolution and modern history—arrived at a vantage point deeply enhanced by Carlylean insights. As Acton gradually came to appreciate, there was no escaping the gravitational pull of the present when historians strove to reconstruct the past. Complete "detachment" constituted an illusion that could only impede a direct engagement with history.<sup>11</sup> Carlyle's writings richly demonstrated to Acton that the same personal energies that drove historians to engage in the controversies of the present also called them to the crucial

<sup>9</sup> With respect to the provenance of *Les Matinées*, Acton was eventually "corrected" by the sources. G. P. Gooch (1873–1968), who was a close friend of Acton's and wrote a biography of Frederick the Great in 1947, later informed Douglas Woodruff in a private letter that the "*Matinées* are ignored by biographers because they are a fake—one of many such concoctions in the 18th and early 19th centuries. When Acton says that there were many omissions in the Preuss edition of the Correspondence, we must remember that he was writing before the vast (and still unfinished) *Politische Korrespondenz* began to appear" (qtd. in Woodruff 474).

<sup>10</sup> The name coined by Mary Gladstone, from Henry James, to describe what Hill refers to as his "intellectual and spiritual 'blockage'" (276).

<sup>11</sup> Siegfried Kracauer's analysis is pertinent to Carlyle's practice as a historian: "The higher the level of generality at which a historian operates, the more historical reality thins out. . . . It is true, as Proust says, that the poet exists independently of the man in whom he lives, but it is equally true that the man does exist also; and the full story would tell us about the poet *and* the man. Moreover, with increasing distance the historian will find it increasingly difficult to lay hands on historical phenomena which are sufficiently specific and unquestionably real" (118).

task of historical excavation. Carlylean history evoked at once a clamorous debate and an intimate conversation, reflecting a thoroughly human endeavor that set into motion the full play of the author's empathetic skills.<sup>12</sup>

Acton's preoccupation with archival omnipotence obscured his recognition of Carlyle's stubborn honesty as a historian, particularly in *Frederick the Great*, in which his authoritarian impulses conflicted sharply and frequently with his sincere doubts about the King's character and morality. In the "Proem" to the biography, Carlyle conceded that Frederick fell far short of the standards expected by readers of Homer, Shakespeare, or Milton: "To the last, a questionable hero; with much in him which one could have wished not there, and much wanting which one could have wished" (*Works* 12: 14). Throughout the book—a qualified epic, at best—Carlyle heeded his own advice in "On History" and deferred to the "inscrutable purport" of history. Though he robustly disputed the legitimacy of the *Matinées* and objected to its caricature of Frederick as an "adroit Machiavell[ian]" and a "devout worshipper of Beelzebub" (*Works* 12: 169), Carlyle frequently eschewed hero-worship in favor of "some picture of the thing acted."

The portrait he produced was more nuanced and Rembrandtian than Acton pretended in his essay on the "Confessions." The heartlessly cynical, amoral, and atheistic ruler of the *Matinées* had already been amply displayed by Carlyle in the first four volumes of *Frederick the Great*. In reality, the "Confessions" offered a less shocking revelation of the King's amoral nature than his memoirs, which Carlyle had mined extensively in the biography.<sup>13</sup> Carlyle's narrative of transfiguration, which charted Frederick's conversion from French dandyism to Protestant self-renunciation and duty was uneven

<sup>12</sup> In describing his *Arcades Project* (1927–40), Walter Benjamin disclosed his own very Carlylean plan for juxtaposing past and present in a "montage" form: "It isn't that the past casts its light on the present or the present casts its light on the past: rather, an image is that in which the Then . . . and the Now . . . come into a constellation like a flash of lightning" (Smith 49).

<sup>13</sup> A point made in a slightly different context by Derek Beales, who also noted that Bismarck was so embarrassed by the frankness of Frederick's private papers that he "refused to allow the disclosure of [his] deep-laid schemes of military aggrandisement" (270).

precisely because it tended to counter the King's own testimony in *Histoire de mon temps* (1788). Carlyle's assiduous exertions in the first volume of the biography to justify Frederick's invasion of Silesia in relation to broken promises, violated treaties, and the Habsburg's humiliation of Prussia crumbled in the second volume when he invited his audience to "Hear Frederick himself" in the pages of his memoir. There the young King admitted that his primary goal was fame and glory: "[The invasion of Silesia] was a means of acquiring reputation; of increasing the power of the State; and of terminating what concerned the long-litigated question of the Berg-Jülich Succession" (*Works* 14: 404). Carlyle praised Frederick for his candor, but it is notable here that he avoided his usual attempts to categorize the invasion as another example of the congruence of might and right.

In Carlyle's portrayal, Frederick, the "adroit Machiavell[ian]" often competed with a second less "questionable" version of the king, one that coincided with the more austere, dutiful, and "popular" ruler recalled by Crown Princess Victoria and the Prussian liberals. Frederick "the Great" was the ruler who renounced his "French" enthusiasms—fine clothes, young men ("Potsdamites," as Voltaire called them), flute-playing, rococo architecture and painting, Mirabeau-style free market economic theories, and eventually Voltaire and Maupertuis—in favor of a Spartan stoicism rooted in a humble and selfless service to the Prussian state. For Carlyle, Frederick's psychological struggle looked forward to the French Revolution, during which sentimental effusiveness yielded to Jacobin virtue, righteousness, and the "Gospel according to Jean Jacques" (*French Revolution*, *Works* 2: 54). The figure whom he introduced at the outset of the biography, "a king every inch of him; though without the trappings of a king; with no crown but an old military cocked hat . . . no sceptre but one like Agamemnon's walking stick cut from the woods" was not "what is called a beautiful man; nor yet . . . what is called happy" (*Works* 12: 1–2). The incarnation of sobriety and rural simplicity, this Frederick served as an apt symbol of Prussia: a paternalistic society that survived as a humane alternative to the sclerotic monarchies of *ancien régime* Europe and the chaotic *laissez-faire* "No-Government" (*Latter-Day Pamphlets* [1850], *Works* 20: 100) of England.

Following the *Matinées* affair, Acton continued to assail this

dangerously sentimental and misguided view of “Fritz.” He focused on the affinities between Bismarck and his “Machiavellian” predecessor to highlight the ways in which the current Prussian school of historians—aided immeasurably by the prestige of Carlyle’s apologia—had contributed to the misrepresentation. In a review of Onno Klopp’s *Der König Friedrich II. und Seine Politik* (1867) in the *Chronicle* of October 1867, Acton denounced “the partisan idolatry of Frederick II, and the political traditions which spring from him.” Klopp (1822–1903), an archivist at Hanover who had tried to refute Frederick’s story of an Austrian conspiracy in the lead up to the Seven Years’ War, had shown “how faithfully the precepts and examples of Frederick have been followed by the inheritors of his power. The projects of aggrandizement were kept persistently in view, and the intervals of peace and public confidence were employed to prepare new difficulties for Austria, and to acquire new influence for the Hohenzollern.” According to Acton, Klopp’s dissent set a heroic example for other historians to follow. Driven into exile by the Prussian authorities, Klopp retained a “numerous audience among those who are not worshippers of success, and who are disgusted at the art which selects, arranges and even alters the events of the past to justify the contemporary acts and claims” (qtd. in Woodruff 413).<sup>14</sup>

Ironically, Acton came around to a view of Frederick the Great that was closer to Carlyle’s in the aftermath of a succession of personal failures: the resounding defeat of his movement against Papal infallibility at the Vatican Council in 1870; his inability to complete his projected magnum opus, *The History of Liberty*; and his bitter quarrel with his mentor Döllinger about “theological Machiavellianism” (qtd. in Hill 319) in history. The Regius Professor who delivered *Lectures on the French Revolution* (1895–99; 1910) and *Lectures on Modern History* (1899–1901; 1910) evolved into a humbler and wiser commentator on the

<sup>14</sup> Butterfield pointed out that Klopp’s critique of Frederick, motivated as it was by hatred of Prussia and by the conflict in 1866 between it and Austria, “ran into extravagances” (*Man on His Past* 149), which he was forced to correct in the second edition of his book in 1867. Butterfield concluded, “The papers available to him confirmed the fact that Frederick the Great had received disquieting reports and had seemed to take genuine alarm; though the diplomatic documents of the Prussian government of course could not be authoritative for the conduct of Austria or Russia or France.”

past than the editor of the *Matinées*. His subtler vision of the past resulted partly from his chastened views of liberalism itself. William McNeil has astutely remarked, “Acton’s strikingly a-historical preoccupation with the historian’s role as a ‘hanging judge’ . . . was a tangible expression of his belief in an absolute morality and in the liberty which, he thought, that morality required. But intellectually, Acton could not really persuade himself that the actual course of history fitted into the sort of liberal mold his moral principles demanded” (xv).

Paradoxically, Carlyle and Acton were capable of writing great history only when they yielded to the confusion inherent in their intellectual outlooks. Quoting his favorite fictional German pundit “Gottfried Sauerteig” [“God-Peace Sourdough”] in the “Proem” to *Frederick*,<sup>15</sup> Carlyle deliberately used language intended to alienate him forever from historians who might benefit from his example. Sauerteig, author of *Aesthetische Springwurzeln* (“Aesthetic Springlocks”), prophesied that the “imprisoned Epic” of history would be liberated from its dependence on “Dryasdust,” the moldy and hidebound archivist and researcher, and that it would rise to its divinely ordained status as “the inspired gift of God employing itself to illuminate the dark ways of God.” Betraying his own brutal intolerance of historical context, Sauerteig hurtfully likened Dryasdust to a “hapless Nigger gone masterless; Nigger totally unfit for self-guidance” (*Works* 12: 19). Yet *Frederick the Great* never assumed epic stature because Dryasdust refused to “unlock” the absolutist interpretation that Carlyle demanded. Carlyle’s grudging respect for the facts saved the historical integrity of the biography at the same time as it announced the impossibility of the epic re-creation of history. Contrary to what Carlyle had originally envisaged, the figure who emerged at the conclusion of his six-volume biography was more enigmatic than either the detractors or the admirers of the book assumed.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> For the history of this fictional spokesman in Carlyle’s writings, see Cumming 415.

<sup>16</sup> Carlyle’s friend and disciple, the physicist John Tyndall (1820–93; *ODNB*), recalled that writing *Frederick the Great* “drew heavily upon [Carlyle’s] health and patience. His labours were intensified by his conscientiousness. . . . The facts of history were as sacred in his eyes as the ‘constants’ of gravitation in the eyes of Newton; hence the severity of his work. The ‘Life of Frederick’ . . .

Far less egregiously, but no less single-mindedly, Acton too had been tempted by the prospect of reaching the historian's promised land of "All-knowledge." His presumption that "whole Truth" of archival disclosure would finally give him "omniscience and final judgment" (McNeil xiii) evaporated into speculation when he confronted the intractable terrain of historical interpretation. It was not only his personal frustrations that brought him nearer to Carlyle. Politically, he shifted ground in the 1870s and 80s as he began to study economics and socialism, including the writings of Marx.<sup>17</sup> The complacent Whiggism of Macaulay had given birth to Benthamite Utilitarianism and "the greatest happiness of the greatest number" principle.<sup>18</sup> Acton was suspicious of John Stuart Mill's notion of free individuals pursuing self-interest, which too often seemed to be at the expense of the public good. He questioned the widespread worship of political economy and its supposedly ineluctable laws, and pondered the long-term social cost of the panaceas of Smith, Ricardo, and Malthus.<sup>19</sup> Sounding like Carlyle in *Latter-Day Pamphlets* in his attacks against the "Pig Philosophy" (*Works* 20: 315), Acton

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worried him; it was not a labour into which he could throw his whole soul. He was continually pulled up by sayings and doings on the part of his hero which took all enthusiasm out of him. 'Frederick was the greatest administrator this world has seen, but I could never really love the man'" (357).

<sup>17</sup> See G. E. Fasnacht, *Nationality and Socialism* 28, and Hill 411. Of Acton's *Lectures on the French Revolution*, Himmelfarb pertinently observed, "In [them], more than anywhere else, can be seen the profound ambivalence that was at the heart of Acton's philosophy" (220).

<sup>18</sup> Watson noted that in Acton's copy of Froude's *Life of Carlyle* (1882, 1884), he marked a passage in which Carlyle declaimed against Whiggery, "in this case Macaulay's: He considers reform to mean a judicious combining of those that have money to keep down those who have none, the highest endeavour of Whiggery, Carlyle adds, being to ensure that 'pigs be taught to die without squealing.' The sentiment, though repellant, was interesting: it marked a position" (37).

<sup>19</sup> Himmelfarb rightly compared his attitudes to Carlyle's disciple John Ruskin: "Towards those economists for whom the laws of Smith, Ricardo and Malthus were the Bible of modern man, he felt something of the same repulsion once expressed by Ruskin [in *Modern Painters*], that it was horrifying how ready men were to declare 'that the laws of the Devil were the only practicable ones, and that the laws of God were merely a form of poetical language'" (176).

charted the perverse course of liberal progress in a review of Sir Erskine May's *Democracy in Europe* in 1878: "Wealth increased, without relieving [the masses of the people]. The progress of knowledge left them in abject ignorance. Religion flourished, but failed to reach them. Society, whose laws were made by the upper class alone, announced that the best thing for the poor is not to be born, and the next best, to die in childhood, and suffered them to live in misery and crime and pain" (qtd. in Hill 411).

This Carlylean slant was clearly discernible in the style, philosophy, and symmetry of Acton's lectures on the French Revolution and on Modern History. Still haunted by the ghost of the *Matinées* debacle, he made a point in these works of trying to keep his distance from his old rival. In the *Lectures on the French Revolution*, he invented an anecdote that was destined to become part of the furniture of rote thinking about Carlyle's *French Revolution* in the twentieth century. Referring to latter's thwarted attempts to consult the Croker papers in the British Museum library, Acton reported that Carlyle "was scared . . . by an offender who sneezed in the Reading Room. As the French pamphlets were not yet catalogued, he asked permission to examine them and to make his selection at the shelves on which they stood. He complained that, having applied to a respectable official, he had been refused. Panizzi, furious at being described as a respectable official, declared that he could not allow the library to be pulled about by an unknown man of letters." As a result, Carlyle was forced to fall back on "the usual modest resources of a private collection" (358). Neither accurate nor true, but undoubtedly appealing to Acton's Anglocentric undergraduate audience, the anecdote served his purpose of damaging Carlyle's credibility as a researcher. In practice, of course, Acton himself was indebted to many of Carlyle's sources, including works such as Buchez and Roux's *Histoire parlementaire* (1834-38), Clavelin and Kerverseau's *Histoire de la Révolution* (1792-1803), Toulangeon's *Histoire de France* (1801-10), *Le Moniteur* (1789-97), *Debats de la Convention* (1828), and *Choix de Rapports* (1818-25). These titles belonged in any first-rate "private collection," even one that was lavishly

subsidized by Andrew Carnegie (see Hill 289–91).<sup>20</sup>

In a further effort to diminish Carlyle, Acton ridiculed his picturesque style, which in his view operated to distract readers from the author's threadbare research. He alluded slightly to the "vivid gleam, the mixture of the sublime with the grotesque, [which] make other opponents forget the impatient verdicts and the poverty of settled fact in the volumes" (*LFR* 358). But Acton himself was evidently deeply touched by this "gleam." Owen Chadwick singled out his account of the Flight to Varennes as a proof of his imaginative proclivities: "Colourless? He had the sense that history is a drama. His account of the flight . . . is narrative history in the most gripping form" (222). In a manner similar to Carlyle, Acton evoked the patriotism and paranoia of the French masses, as well as the torpidity and aristocratic presumption of Louis XVI and his entourage, with the electric intensity of a poet, and the depth and the sympathy of a novelist.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> For Carlyle's sources and research, see the forthcoming Strouse Edition of *The French Revolution*.

<sup>21</sup> Acton claimed that he had been inspired by the novels of George Eliot, but this was a path that led him back circuitously to Carlyle. Writing to Mary Drew Gladstone in 1881, Acton commended Eliot's powers of conjuration: "[S]he seemed to me capable not only of reading the diverse hearts of men, but of creeping into their skin, watching the world through their eyes, feeling their latent background of religion, discerning theory and habit, influences of thought and knowledge, of life and descent, and having obtained this experience, recovering her independence, stripping off the borrowed shell, and exposing scientifically and indifferently the soul of a Vestal, a Crusader, an Anabaptist . . . without attraction, or caricature" (Paul 60–61). Yet Acton was almost certainly aware that Eliot had identified Carlyle as the fountainhead of her multifarious conception of the past. In her review of Carlyle's writings for the *Leader* in October 1855, she opened with the pronouncement that "there is hardly a superior or active mind of this generation that has not been modified by Carlyle's writings; there has hardly been an English book written for the last ten years that would not have been different if Carlyle had not lived." She then squarely confronted the issue of Carlyle's political extremism and urged those who quarreled "with the exaggerations of the 'Latter-Day Pamphlets'" to look more deeply at his "dangerous paradoxes." It was his historical writings that offered the richest exhibition of his wisdom, artistry, and humanity. As a novelist, Eliot was particularly drawn to how "he seizes grand generalizations, and traces them in the particular with wonderful acumen." His renditions of "Mirabeau and the men of the French Revolution, [and] Cromwell and the Puritans" showed that his "greatest power lies in concrete presentation" (qtd. in Seigel 409–10). In an essay on

Perhaps the most striking indication of Carlyle's influence on the Regius Professor of History was in the philosophy and design of Acton's lectures. Summarizing the limited achievement of *The French Revolution*, he noted that Carlyle had "delivered our fathers from thralldom to Burke. They remain one of those disappointing stormclouds that give out more thunder than lightning" (*LFR* 358–59). Yet Acton's own lectures suggested that his release from the "thralldom to Burke" was more attributable to Carlyle's "lightning" and "thunder" than he was ready to concede. Like Carlyle, Acton was convinced that Burke in the *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) had "gilded the old order of things" (31) in order to stress the unprecedented horrors of the upheaval.<sup>22</sup> No less than Carlyle, Acton understood the irony that "popular power may be tainted with the same poison as personal power" (108). But at no stage did he succumb to nostalgia for the *ancien régime*. On the contrary, in the lectures on the French Revolution, Acton wholeheartedly endorsed Carlyle's verdict that the "great Burke remains unanswerable; 'the Age of Chivalry is gone,' and could not but go, having now produced the still more indomitable Age of Hunger" (*French Revolution, Works* 3: 228).

Acton's chapter on Frederick the Great in *Lectures on Modern History* (1906) further illustrated how far he had traveled in the direction of Carlyle. Here there was much less discussion of Frederick the Machiavellian, and far more analysis of the King as a statesman, soldier, diplomat, and enlightened despot, with the stress on his "enlightened" qualities. Acton labeled Frederick "the most consummate practical genius that, in modern times, has inherited a throne" (*LMH* 290). Though Acton did not sanction the King's invasion of Silesia, he did argue that it had to be considered in the context of the times, when "no accepted code regulated the relations between States." Questions about the legitimacy of his actions were warranted, "but if conquest by unprovoked attack was a crime, in the same sense or the same

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Eliot that he published in the *Nineteenth Century* in 1885, Acton described the novelist arriving in London in 1851, shrinking "from avowing the extent of her dislike for Carlyle" (*HE* 288).

<sup>22</sup> In undated manuscript notes on Burke, Acton wrote that Burke failed because he produced "no principle to reconcile national and universal—continuity and Revolution. He thought France ought to make the best of institutions which had slumbered for ages" (qtd. in Fasnacht 61).

degree as poisoning a man to obtain his property, . . . [then] respect for sovereign authority must be banished from the world." No consensus had been reached about the ethics of Frederick's actions, but Acton granted that at the time, the King "was much more widely applauded for his prompt success than detested or despised for his crime" (291). By accommodating Carlyle, Acton had also demolished Macaulay's estimate of the Prussian ruler as the progenitor of violence and mayhem in eighteenth-century Europe.<sup>23</sup> This was perhaps as close Acton could get to the outlook of Carlyle without having to acknowledge the proximity.

Acton did not go so far as to defend Frederick's desire to "make himself a name." Nonetheless, it was significant that he organized his discussion of Frederick and his legacy around Carlyle's thesis that "Fritz" was "the last of the Kings; that he usher[ed]-in the French Revolution, and close[d] an Epoch of World-History" (*Works* 12: 6). More than any other ruler of his time, Frederick was responsible for initiating what Acton called the age of the "Repentance of Monarchy" (*LMH* 302). It was a period in which the "selfish, oppressive, and cruel became impersonal, philanthropic, and beneficent." The omnipotent State was now "obliged to take account of public, as distinct from dynastic interests," and its chief employments were directed towards "the good of the people." "It was still a despotism," declared Acton, "but an enlightened despotism" (303). Less skeptical of Frederick's aggrandizing motives than he had been earlier, Acton enumerated the positive effects of the King's momentous change in priorities: "There was a serious tendency to increase popular education, to relieve poverty, to multiply hospitals, to promote wealth by the operations of the engineer, to emancipate the serf, to abolish torture, to encourage academies, observatories and the like" (303). Recalling Carlyle's vignette of the abstemious and austere ruler, Acton pointed out that Frederick "did more work and had fewer pleasures than any [monarch]." He was a philosophically inclined leader who emancipated the State from the Church, and practiced tolerance as well as preached it. In a dig at

<sup>23</sup> Owen Dudley Edwards succinctly summarizes the debate between Macaulay and Carlyle with respect to Frederick the Great: "The basis of their grand confrontation is Macaulay's indictment of the Prussian king for throwing the world into slaughter in 1740, versus Carlyle's insistence that he asserted order" (200).

the author of "Jesuitism," Acton noted that the order's "best and most determined protector was Frederick the Great" (304).

Though he was nearer to Carlyle's viewpoint, Acton refused to serve as an apologist of the Prussian king. Frederick had his limits, and so too did his Scottish biographer, and these faults needed to be foregrounded in a century in which Prussia was again aggressively asserting its rights as a major European power. Carlyle had dissected the contradictions in Frederick's character, but he had not satisfactorily explained their origins, which were rooted in the King's disdain for liberty. Carlyle had likened Frederick to Milton's Samson Agonistes (*Works* 12: 5) without fathoming the destructive repercussions of this parallel. Frederick may have "ushered" in the French Revolution, but "the great change that came over Europe in his time did not make for political freedom" (*LMH* 304). The Revolution that promised liberty, equality, and fraternity "ended in a wild cry for vengeance and for a passionate appeal to fire and sword" (*LFR* 19). Rather than lauding the man who "finish[ed] off forever the trade of King" (*Works* 12: 6), Acton deplored the fact that he had created the moral and political groundwork for the "Blood and Iron" belligerence of a reactionary Junker.

Acton himself had witnessed firsthand how Bismarck had exploited Frederick's memory to implement his crudely illiberal goals. Bismarck's imperialism, his *Kulturkampf*, his suppression of the Social Democratic Party, and his cruel persecution of Jews and Catholics were disguised as patriotic measures that were meant to serve the needs of the ordinary Prussian people. What Bismarck admired most about Frederick was his absolutism, not his enlightenment ideals. It was Carlyle who gave the Minister-President cover for his ruthless and unprincipled consolidation of state power, and Bismarck returned the favor by awarding him the Order of Merit. This betrayal rankled Acton more than even the *Matinées* affair. He could never quite forgive Carlyle for impugning a principle that was dear to them both as practicing historians: the spiritual conviction that the study of the past "is a most powerful ingredient in the formation of character and the training of talent, and our historical judgments have as much to do with hopes of heaven as public or private conduct" (*LMH* 8).

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