"Power Tends to Corrupt . . ."

Lord Acton: Historian of Liberty,

This book is dedicated to F. A. Hayek. It could go a long way towards fulfilling Hayek’s hope that, through Acton, "the great masses who are neither Left or Right," the "decent people" who are religious, may be brought over to the idea of liberty. For Schuettiger’s book should make Acton more accessible and better understood to a wider audience of Americans.

The inevitable comparison will be made with Gertrude Himmelfarb’s Lord Acton: A Study in Conscience and Politics. In this reviewer’s opinion, the evaluation will favor the book under review. It is no derogation of the earlier work to say Schuettiger’s is as scholarly, is richer for the new materials used, and is more fun to read. More importantly, the newer work seems to capture better the essence of its subject. A first example is most essential to understanding Acton. Where the earlier view of Acton stressed his pessimism (mitigated, to be sure, by his religion), Schuettiger begins his final evaluation by stating that, "his religion had always been the most important thing in the world to Acton. ‘The first of human concerns is religion,’ he had declared." That is, Acton’s religion, not his pessimism, dominated his life.

The author emphasizes Acton’s "theory of development," as a convergence epistemology. This thesis is most clearly shown in a recently discovered letter to John Henry Cardinal Newman concerning Acton’s stand against papal infallibility. Here Acton writes: "I am sure it [infallibility] will be all right. . . . If one does not see how the new and old can be reconciled, time will show it and the new will be digested and assimilated." Schuettiger concludes, on the basis of all the evidence now available, that Acton finally accepted papal infallibility because, he believed, it would become a limited doctrine, assimilated into the redeeming tradition of the Church.

As the author shows, Acton’s optimism was not misplaced. Infallibility was never invoked during Acton’s lifetime and has been used only once since then. Moreover, Acton’s doctrine of political liberty, presumably defeated at Vatican I, was institutionalized at Vatican II. Acton was not ultimately pessimistic, then, even about this world, although he was the first to appreciate its power for corruption. But Acton thought liberty could work, if given a chance, and this is anything but pessimism.

There are many other examples where this book seems to present a more rounded picture of Acton. Schuettiger shows, to my satisfaction, Kochen’s belief that Acton had an unhappy family life is without support, and even wrong. He nicely demolishes the myth that Acton did not write much, by saying his completed works would fill fifty volumes of four hundred pages each. He believes that, although it would have been nice to have Acton’s grand "History of Liberty," Acton mostly fulfilled his goals; he never planned to write such a magnum opus. The author easily deals with the charge that Acton used the concept liberty loosely or that it was his highest value. And Schuettiger presents a more balanced view of Acton’s strictness in the application of moral standards.

One could quarrel with some points. The author states it was Quaker Pennsylvania which Acton believed was the ideal commonwealth. While Acton admired Pennsylvania, it was in Catholic Maryland that he said there was “established for the first time in modern history, a government in which religion was free, and with it the germ of that religious liberty which now prevails in America.”

But this is nitpicking. The author presents much that is of value. As a political scientist, he records valuable data on Acton’s committee behavior in, and on his election to, the House of Commons. He gives a convincing description of Acton’s
political and intellectual difficulties (he published nothing but one review between 1878 and 1885) during his period of self doubt and failure. He tells how this ends with Acton’s appointment as Lord-in-Waiting to Queen Victoria which office, in his professional view, actually was a subcabinet position on Irish matters. As a political philosopher, our author presents us with his view of Acton’s “avoidance of the pitfalls of both the absolutist and relativist position in ethics.”

We are informed while we are served delights such as this comment, following a section on Acton’s election problems: “With the increasing democratization of the franchise, the market value of votes has, of course, dropped considerably.” Or this wit on All Souls, as an introduction to Acton’s successful conclusion of his career at Cambridge: “Part of its distinction was due to the fact that it had somehow managed to achieve Platonic perfection as a college . . . it had no students. Its complement of dons was a bit inbred, however; as late as the 1850’s, two-thirds were descendants of the family of the founder.”

Of greatest importance, Schuettinger properly places the idea of responsible liberty at the core of Acton’s philosophy. He even shows that Acton regarded liberty so centrally he considered the state and society distinction (through the “render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s; and to God, the things that are God’s” injunction) a doctrine of Christian faith. Theocracies and authoritarian states of every variety were “anti-Christian” to Acton because they did not separate Caesar from society. For, to have a moral society, Acton believed individuals must be protected, so they may follow their informed consciences. As the author says, “This profound concern for the freedom of the individual conscience is above all what Acton has to teach us today.”

—Reviewed by DONALD J. DEVINE


Out in the Keynesian Cold


Here we have two collections of essays: one in appreciation of Hayek and the other in critique of Keynes. In his foreword to Essays on Hayek, a collection prompted by Hayek’s 1974 Nobel prize, Milton Friedman, himself a Nobel laureate, writes:

Friedrich Hayek’s influence has been tremendous. His work is incorporated in the body of technical economic theory; has had a major influence on economic history, political philosophy and political science; has affected students of the law, of scientific methodology, and even of psychology . . . all of these are secondary to Hayek’s influence in strengthening the moral and intellectual support for a free society.

These are extraordinary achievements even for a Nobel laureate, and these essays, which were prepared for a Mont Pelerin Society meeting at Hillsdale College, by George Roche, Fritz Machlup, Arthur Shenfield, R. M. Hartwell, William F. Buckley, Gottfried Dietze, and Shirley Letwin will help the reader to appreciate them. But conspicuously absent is any mention of Hayek’s impact on public policy. Public policy has been the preserve of Key-