

ARTICLE

Dispelling ‘das Herbert Butterfieldproblem’: A Rereading of *The Whig Interpretation of History*

Jack Haughton 

Faculty of History, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK

Email: joh35@cam.ac.uk

Abstract

Herbert Butterfield’s *The Whig Interpretation of History* (1931) is universally received as sceptical of ‘whig’ teleology in historical accounts and, therefore, of politically charged narratives of history. This view stands in need of a basic correction. Butterfield’s work targets teleological accounts which involve a determinate conception of progress such as would arm a partisan politics. He calls this the politics of the ‘general proposition’. Nevertheless, he does defend a conception of progress involving an indeterminate concept. The historian finds, intimated in the detail of the past, that progress is the fruit of interactions between opposing parties. The imperative for the statesman in the present, then, is to facilitate such interactions. In short, *The Whig Interpretation of History* is a positive work of political thought. Looked at this way, Butterfield’s later, controversial work, *The Englishman & His History*, does not appear to be in contradiction with the earlier book so much as a polemical expression of it. The two books together present what may be called Butterfield’s politics of historiography. Histories which present progress as a straight line, to be co-opted by one party, encourage precisely the political action which impedes progress. Butterfield, in short, is still a kind of ‘whig’.

I

Herbert Butterfield’s classic of historical method, *The Whig Interpretation of History*, is universally conceived as a paradigm refutation of teleological histories.¹ His academic works, more generally, bear the ambiguous character of upholding the reality of Providence whilst also, so it is generally held, emphasizing the value of ‘technical’, value-free history.² The starkest tension in his work is the relationship between the anti-teleological *The Whig Interpretation* and the patriotic defence of whig, teleological history in *The Englishman & His History*. J.G.A. Pocock, himself a former student of Butterfield’s, termed this contradiction ‘das Herbert Butterfieldproblem’.³ I want to

¹J.R. Elton, ‘Herbert Butterfield and the study of history’, *Historical Journal*, 27 (1984), pp. 729–43; J.G.A. Pocock, *Virtue, commerce, and history: Essays on political thought and history, chiefly in the eighteenth century* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 215, 258, 305; David Watkin, *Morality and architecture: The development of a theme in architectural history and theory from the Gothic Revival to the modern movement* (Oxford, 1977), pp. vii, 6, 113; Maurice Cowling, *Religion and public doctrine in modern England* (Cambridge, 1980), pp. 222–9. See also fnns. 4, 5, 6, the authors of which agree with this reading.

²See, e.g., Herbert Butterfield, *Christianity and history* (London, 1949), pp. 9–25.

³Pocock, *Virtue, commerce, and history*, p. 305.

suggest that this perceived tension is much exacerbated by a failure to interpret *The Whig Interpretation* as in fact displacing one form of teleology and substituting it for another. In short, the book is thought to be a fundamentally negative work. This article rereads the work as a positive account of progress and discerns the political conclusions which are entailed. Michael Bentley writes, in his masterful biography of Butterfield, that:

The Whig Interpretation of History became regarded instantly as a tour de force. It would remain in print for the rest of the century and become a bible of both historical scepticism and applied intelligence.⁴

This is an apt characterization of Butterfield's reception. The book is thought to constitute a decisive farewell to the great nineteenth century belief in progress, trumpeted especially by 'whigs' like Acton, and to herald the advent of a twentieth century scepticism. This reading stands in need of a basic correction. Butterfield emerges, by my analysis, as much more opposed to a morally segregating approach to history (such as Acton's) than to a belief in progress. Butterfield disdains any tendency to divide the dead into the wicked and the pure, the friends and enemies of progress, and this has been recognized in the scholarship. Nevertheless, recognition of the fact that Butterfield opposes historical narratives which crown a particular cause or political colour has accompanied a failure to recognize that *The Whig Interpretation* still presents an account of progress. History is on the side of the entire present order, such that no particular party or individual in the present is wholly pleased with it. The present order, even so, is the fruit of progress. There are political consequences to this. Namely, whatever the conditions of progress have been in the past, if any, they must be maintained in the present. If my rereading is correct, so I shall argue, then the tension between *The Whig Interpretation* and *The Englishman & His History* is much diminished, if not altogether removed. The books differ in emphasis, and certainly in context, but they do not constitute something worthy of calling 'das Herbert Butterfieldproblem'.

It must be immediately clarified that I am not seeking to emphasize Butterfield's belief in providence. The controversy lies in the relationship which Butterfield conceives between the belief in providence and the technical practice of history. Keith Sewell notes that:

Butterfield's reflections on what he called the historical process pointed repeatedly to his belief in the operation of providence in human affairs. Although such operations are clearly beyond the purview of the technical historian, an analysis of his work has shown that this belief nevertheless functioned as an ordering principle for his perceptions of the human past and in his construction of historiographical narratives. [...] In this respect, 'technical history' notwithstanding, Butterfield may be numbered among those

⁴Michael Bentley, *The life and thought of Herbert Butterfield: History, science and God* (Cambridge, 2011), p. 99.

who, from late classical antiquity to the present age, have offered a Christian interpretation of human history.⁵

Sewell's views here expressed are representative of the scholarship. Butterfield's Christianity is noted as real, and perhaps as important, but also as separate from 'technical history', such that 'providence in human affairs ... [is] clearly beyond the purview of the technical historian'.⁶ I wish to dispute that the 'technical' practice of Butterfield's historian, in their marshalling of detail, is essentially destructive. This is the ruling conception which provides the tension between *The Whig Interpretation* and both the patriotic history of *The Englishman* as well as the belief in providence of *Christianity and History*. By my reading, the argument of *The Whig Interpretation* is not exactly that the 'whig' narrative of progress is foiled by the detailed work of the historical specialist. Instead, the detailed works by specialists yield a non-partisan sense of historical progress and destroy a partisan sense of it. Detail is not the solvent of grand narrative, but only of partisan grand narrative. One might call Butterfield, in a certain sense – and mindful of the anachronism in the term – a non-partisan whig.

This reading of *The Whig Interpretation* provides a cleaner solution to 'das Herbert Butterfieldproblem' than the one widely and presently acknowledged, which is that of Sewell.⁷ Sewell claims to have solved 'das Herbert Butterfieldproblem' by reframing the argument of *The Englishman* as being not a defence of the truth of patriotic (falsifications) of history, but as a defence of their usefulness. Bentley accepts the arguments of Sewell.⁸ There is some merit to this analysis, and Sewell's attention to Butterfield's distinction drawn in *The Englishman*, between (Actonian) 'whig historians' and (useful, patriotic) 'whig politicians', is fruitful.⁹ I agree with Sewell in his claim that:

Butterfield regarded the Whig historians he attacked in *The Whig Interpretation* as un-Whig, in that they adopted in their historical writing an attitude contrary to the best Whig political principles praised in 1944. Where the Whig historians were anachronistic and divided men into good and bad camps, the Whig politicians worked with history and sought to achieve a *modus vivendi* between rival parties.¹⁰

The sense in which the 'Whig historians he attacked in *The Whig Interpretation*' are 'un-Whig' is that they do not think like whig politicians, whose politics consist

⁵Keith C. Sewell, *Herbert Butterfield and the interpretation of history* (Basingstoke, 2005), p. 3.

⁶See also M. Hobart, 'History and religion in the thought of Herbert Butterfield', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 32 (1971), pp. 543–54.

⁷K.C. Sewell, 'The "Herbert Butterfield problem" and its resolution', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 64 (2003), pp. 599–618.

⁸Michael Bentley, 'Herbert Butterfield and Maurice Cowling', in Robert Crowcroft, S.J.D. Green, and Richard Whiting, eds., *The Philosophy, politics and religion of British democracy: Maurice Cowling and conservatism* (London, 2010), pp. 88–9.

⁹Sewell, 'The "Herbert Butterfield problem" and its resolution', p. 605.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 605–6.

in 'gradualist, empirical, and ameliorating anti-doctrinaire policies'.¹¹ I agree with Sewell that these are, broadly, Butterfield's politics, both in 1931 and in 1944.¹² But Sewell still retains the view that *The Whig Interpretation* firmly rejects all forms of whig history. Sewell recognizes the importance of the historical imagination such that 'Butterfield's narratives were in practice based upon his own belief in a "providential order"' but this is *only* 'in practice'.¹³ The role of detail in Butterfield is, for Sewell, still essentially destructive of narrative. This forces him to the view that, where providence or progress are implied in Butterfield's historical narratives, he is making a technical error, or departing into, strictly defined, non-historical writing.

It is much better to read the contrast, in *The Englishman*, between the 'whig historians' and the 'whig politicians' as a contrast between partisan historians and those non-partisan historians who, applying medicine to the political community, emphasize the continuity of a shared past with a shared present. This emphasis on continuity is certainly starker in *The Englishman*, and the obviously pertinent background of the Second World War can play the role of accounting for this emphasis, but the distinction between partisan and non-partisan history belongs to *The Whig Interpretation*. An argument for non-partisan, progressive history, in *The Whig Interpretation*, can intelligibly become an emphasis upon patriotic history, under the pressures of 1944. The common point is that the present public order is not the inheritance of a partisan past but the piecemeal gift, over centuries, of the whole of a people. This is a fruit of progress, and it is threatened by partisan histories which serve partisan politics. If a body politic comes to see its historical progress in terms of an abstract idea, then it may change its politics accordingly and thereafter cease to progress. Partisan historiography is, for Butterfield, an existential threat to the state. Reversibly, non-partisan historiography serves a real political purpose. One ought to read *The Englishman* as a patriotic simplification of the position argued in *The Whig Interpretation*, in the context of the war, but not as advocating for merely useful falsification.

In this article I offer a close reading of *The Whig Interpretation* and then seek to demonstrate the plausible continuity it has with *The Englishman*. I recognize that my analysis faces the accusation of being an exercise not of history so much as of close reading. This is a fair criticism so far as it goes. However, the perceived contradiction between *The Whig Interpretation* and *The Englishman* is not the product of a misuse of context to be corrected. *The Whig Interpretation* is thought to advocate an anti-teleological position *per se*, by the plain reading of the text, and not *in the light of* any context. Nevertheless, in order to avoid the accusation of anachronism – of my new reading jarring with the surrounding works of Butterfield – I offer first a survey of the literature on these works. Far from my rereading of *The Whig Interpretation* creating fresh tensions between Butterfield's other works, as anachronistic readings are wont to do, it alleviates them. By my reading, not only do Butterfield's works look more integrated, but *The Whig Interpretation* can be seen to edge from the field of historical method into that of positive political thought. In that book, Butterfield

¹¹Ibid., p. 608.

¹²Ibid., p. 607.

¹³Ibid., p. 609.

offers an historical argument for what one may call a non-partisan 'whig' politics: of facilitation, amelioration of political tensions, and of a balancing between reaction and revolution.

II

Butterfield's *The Peace Tactics of Napoleon, 1806–1808* (1929), as is widely agreed upon in the scholarship, emphasized the role of personality, as opposed to policy, as the driver of historical change. This did not mean that diplomats and states lacked policies. It meant that the question of why policies were adopted, and of how they impacted affairs, required a description of the involved personalities and their interaction. As is also widely recognized in the scholarship, this kind of person-focused historiography was a realization of the imperative of Butterfield's first book, *The Historical Novel* (1923).¹⁴

The point of disagreement, in understanding *The Peace Tactic*, concerns the significance of the historical process to which the interplay of personalities gives rise. In short, scholars are split on whether Butterfield's narrative is suffused with teleology. For Alberto Coll, Butterfield's narrative history was a complex and intricate story of the interactions of personalities. It constituted an historical process, but it did not have *direction*. 'The subtlety of the historical process' lay in its 'unpredictability' such that, for Coll, Butterfield's 'ways of history' were to be contrasted with that of 'the moralistic, progress-oriented historians'.¹⁵ In other words, Coll's account of *The Peace Tactics* is continuous with his (orthodox) interpretation of *The Whig Interpretation*, to which the works of 1923 and 1939 'led'.¹⁶

Coll's views are shared by Ian Hall and by C.T. McIntire. Butterfield's *The Peace Tactics* is a personality-anchored narrative of complexity, which vision is directed, in *The Whig Interpretation*, against teleological narrative and consequently against politically-motivated historiography.¹⁷ Complexity is conceived to be the opposite of teleology. Corresponding to their interpretation of *The Peace Tactics*, all three historians understand Butterfield's emphasis on the historical imagination, in *The Whig Interpretation*, to be an effort at grasping the personalities of the past, rather than (as I understand it) the glimpsing of *direction* in history.¹⁸

Bentley and Sewell agree, in opposition to Coll, Hall, and McIntire, that *The Peace Tactics* does, in fact, follow a teleological arc. But whereas Sewell conceives this to form a deliberate even if allusive component of the book,¹⁹ Bentley reads the various instances of blatantly teleological writing as merely ephemeral, and as

¹⁴Alberto Coll, *The wisdom of statecraft: Sir Herbert Butterfield and the philosophy of international politics* (Durham, 1985), p. 8; C.T. McIntire, *Herbert Butterfield: Historian as dissenter* (New Haven, 2004), pp. 43–8; Ian Hall, 'Christianity and diplomacy: Sir Herbert Butterfield and international relations', *Review of International Studies* 28 (2002), pp. 719–36; Sewell, *Herbert Butterfield*, pp. 26–9; Bentley, *The life and thought of Herbert Butterfield*, pp. 60–3.

¹⁵Coll, *The wisdom of statecraft*, p. 39.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹⁷McIntire, *Herbert Butterfield*, pp. 62–4; Hall, 'Christianity and diplomacy', p. 723.

¹⁸Coll, *The wisdom of statecraft*, pp. 8–9; McIntire, *Herbert Butterfield*, p. 66; Hall, 'Christianity and diplomacy', p. 723.

¹⁹Sewell, *Herbert Butterfield*, p. 68.

being simply the unfortunate hangover of Harold Temperley's influence.²⁰ In consequence, Bentley does not feel pressed to change the orthodox reading of *The Whig Interpretation*. Moreover, it does not bring him to reconsider the book as being more than a tale of the complexity of historical process, pivoting on the involved personalities. Bentley's view winds up being much the same as McIntire, Hall, and Coll's – his only caveat being that Temperley, rather than giving Butterfield a healthy helping of Rankean method,²¹ blemished the work with his un-Rankean eccentricities. For Bentley, then, *The Whig Interpretation* was a graduation from Temperley into a purer Rankeanism: namely, history purged of indulgent teleological flourish.

Sewell stands isolated in the scholarship for his view of Butterfield's surrounding works about *The Whig Interpretation*. For him, the 1931 work contradicts not only *The Peace Tactics* but also *Napoleon* (1939) and *The Statecraft of Machiavelli* (1940).²² (While Coll has also discerned a serious tension between *The Whig Interpretation*, as a text which conceives historical detail to hold purely negative import, and Butterfield's thought, he conceives this to solely apply to Butterfield's later work, post-1945.)²³ Sewell's position is founded on his reading of *The Peace Tactics* as putting forward a refined form of teleological argument. My own position can be understood as a development on his. I completely agree with his reading of *The Peace Tactics*, and with his carrying over of this interpretation to *Napoleon* and *The Statecraft of Machiavelli*. I disagree with his understanding, shared with the rest of the literature, that *The Whig Interpretation* is a fundamentally negative work. As I understand it, *The Whig Interpretation* provides the theoretical outline and justification of the refined teleology which his surrounding narrative works realized. The demonstration of this point is the burden of this present article.

For Sewell, the historical narrative of *The Peace Tactics* is not only hostile to simplistic Whig histories, such as Acton's, but it possesses a positive political argument. The argument is that statecraft, if it is to be successful, must practise an 'anti-revolutionary gradualism', characterized above all by 'flexibility'.²⁴ Napoleon's downfall is presaged by his overconfidence, which results in an inflexible foreign policy. In other words, Butterfield conceives Napoleon's downfall to be *fated* by virtue of his hubris, because of 'his idea of a providentially ordered historical process that cannot be challenged with impunity'.²⁵

Sewell reads *Napoleon* as a more emphatic version of *The Peace Tactics*.²⁶ What is centrally important to grasp – as Sewell does – is that Butterfield's historical narrative cannot be said, as Bentley writes, to have 'lacked a problematic', but it instead puts forward a politically-loaded account.²⁷ In short, Sewell sees the point of Butterfield's teleology. History is structured by the interplay of personalities. It is inflexibility and tyrannical will, as opposed to tact and flexibility, which loads the

²⁰Bentley, *The life and thought of Herbert Butterfield*, pp. 61–2.

²¹McIntire, *Herbert Butterfield*, p. 48; Coll, *The wisdom of statecraft*, p. 8; Hall, 'Christianity and diplomacy', p. 723.

²²Sewell, *Herbert Butterfield*, pp. 14, 40, 61.

²³Coll, *The wisdom of statecraft*, pp. 29, 41–3.

²⁴Sewell, *Herbert Butterfield*, pp. 68, 65.

²⁵*Ibid.*, p. 68.

²⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 67–8.

²⁷Bentley, *The life and thought of Herbert Butterfield*, p. 60.

dice of time against one. As a corollary to this, Sewell recognizes the intimate connection between *The Statecraft of Machiavelli* and the two works on Napoleon. Where the canary in the arc of Napoleon's story is the ameliorating Talleyrand – whose alienation from Napoleon signals the beginning of his fated downfall²⁸ – the flexible Guicciardini and inflexible Machiavelli form a parallel pair in the 1940 work.

Napoleon's inflexibility is founded upon hubris. And Butterfield's narrative works, of *The Peace Tactics* and *Napoleon*, are designed to show the folly of hubris. In other words, the narrative positively commends Butterfield's gradualist politics by showing the fateful cost of an overbearing statecraft.²⁹ Conversely, it is Guicciardini's understanding of historical change, as a complex interplay of personalities, which brings him to commend the kind of flexibility in statecraft which Machiavelli does not.³⁰ In other words, it is as though Guicciardini had read *The Peace Tactics of Napoleon* or *Napoleon*, and applied the lessons to his politics. Machiavelli, on the other hand, takes precisely the view of history which *The Whig Interpretation* attacks. And he founds his inflexible statecraft upon it, just as Napoleon is at first like Guicciardini and later, from Tilsit onwards, like Machiavelli.³¹ Machiavelli and Napoleon each adopt, in the language of *The Whig Interpretation*, the politics of the 'general proposition', with its attendant partisan-whig view of the past.

Sewell's reading of *Napoleon* and of *The Statecraft of Machiavelli* is a continuation of his view of *The Peace Tactics*. It is not too strong to suggest that much of the scholarship has found these later texts less than significant. If *The Peace Tactics* 'lacked a problematic', as Bentley writes, then, even if such a charge is not levied at the 1939 and 1940 works, they are thought to be merely tangential to Butterfield's purposes. Bentley and McIntire treat the work as merely a distraction from Butterfield's set task of working on George III and Fox.³² Coll and Hall tacitly brush past it, in the view that, while Butterfield wrote on statecraft and international relations, the works of interest to this area were all written post-1945.³³ In fact, Coll flatly writes, of *Napoleon*, that 'Butterfield surprisingly said very little about the political or philosophical implications of Bonaparte's statecraft, focusing instead on Napoleon as a man'.³⁴ Coll and Bentley briefly mention *The Statecraft of Machiavelli* to note how Machiavelli is shown to have founded political thought on bad history, but, consistent with the rest of their analyses, there is no mention of history providing a positive justification of statecraft.³⁵ In short, Coll does not see the point of Butterfield's use of historical narrative, whereas Sewell does.

Readings of *The Whig Interpretation* itself universally agree on two points: it was an attack on Acton, who is the emblematic 'whig', and this attack was an employment of historical complexity as a solvent of (Actonian) teleology. The most common

²⁸Sewell, *Herbert Butterfield*, pp. 28, 70.

²⁹*Ibid.*, p. 68.

³⁰*Ibid.*, p. 65.

³¹*Ibid.*, p. 70.

³²McIntire, *Herbert Butterfield*, p. 84; Bentley, *The life and thought of Herbert Butterfield*, pp. 137–8.

³³Hall, 'Christianity and diplomacy', p. 720.

³⁴Coll, *The wisdom of statecraft*, p. 9.

³⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 29, 41–3, 90; Bentley, *The life and thought of Herbert Butterfield*, pp. 150–1.

interpretation is that Butterfield levied Ranke's technical history – history 'for its own sake' – against Acton's anachronistic, partisan moralism. Bentley, McIntire, Coll, and Hall all take this view.³⁶ While Coll takes the view that Ranke does not have to be read solely as a technical historian, he does not conceive this side of Ranke to have been important to Butterfield before the late 1940s.³⁷ Sewell, who is the only scholar I have found to not see *The Whig Interpretation's* attack as an application of Rankean objectivism, nevertheless does not dissent from the orthodox reading. For Sewell, Butterfield knew of the non-objectivist side to Ranke, but, in 1931, 'Butterfield's association of general propositions with Actonian moralism apparently inhibited his reflections at this point'.³⁸

My intervention in the scholarship on Butterfield is very simple. *The Whig Interpretation* is not a purely negative book. It does advance a conception of teleological progress. This is a progress which is emergent from the interplay of personalities. Moreover, the attempt to override the wills of others, in an effort either of reaction or revolution, leads to a fateful downfall, as it did to Napoleon. In other words, I understand what Sewell took to be the point of *The Peace Tactics*, *Napoleon*, and *The Statecraft of Machiavelli*, to be given a theoretical outline and justification in *The Whig Interpretation*. Far from my new reading jarring with the existing corpus of work, it integrates it. My intervention can be summarized in a single point. The meaning of historical detail, in *The Whig Interpretation*, is not acidic towards narrative but is instead intimating of a fateful direction. It is precisely this direction with which the wise statesman seeks to co-operate. The fate embedded in historical narrative is the teacher of political moderation.

The new solution which this reading provides to 'das Herbert Butterfieldproblem' is that the patriotic historiography commended, in *The Englishman*, is the commendation of narrative which does not show progress to be the fruit of heroes vanquishing the wills of villains, as Machiavelli construed history. This would arm a contemporary partisan politics, of one party overbearing the other. Instead, patriotic history shows progress to be the fruit of interaction, and therefore tacitly commends a statecraft characterized by flexibility and gradualism. This is 'patriotic' because it does not divide the nation but unites it, in a consensus which serves and also partially disappoints both 'whig and tory'.

My rereading of *The Whig Interpretation* does not involve the levying of a new context, so much as a changed conception of Butterfield's relationship to his interlocutors. Acton still looms large as the target of *The Whig Interpretation*. This is unchanged. Butterfield's relationship to Ranke now looks to be more subtle, however. Butterfield does deploy historical detail against grand narrative, but it is *partisan* narrative which is the target. The detail is not wholly positivistic, then, but instead it intimates a sense of progress. This sense of progress is indeterminate. One cannot form a concrete conception thereof, such as would arm any contemporary

³⁶McIntire, *Herbert Butterfield*, pp. 60–1; Hall, 'Christianity and diplomacy', p. 723; Coll, *The wisdom of statecraft*, p. 29; Bentley, *The life and thought of Herbert Butterfield*, pp. 100, 102, 111, 233.

³⁷See fn. 23.

³⁸Sewell, *Herbert Butterfield*, p. 61.

politics. This looks to be much closer in sympathy to how Sewell, and recently George G. Iggers, have understood Ranke's work.³⁹

There is a final interlocutor to consider, Lewis Namier, who is often mischaracterized as wholly 'Other' from Butterfield. Bentley is right to write that 'this is a mistake'.⁴⁰ Butterfield's challenge to the whig orthodoxy followed the challenge which Namier had levied in *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III* (1929). For Namier, the conception of political change as a game between parties was flatly incorrect. He writes, famously, that 'the political life of the period [at the accession of George III] could be fully described without ever using a party denomination'.⁴¹ That with which Namier replaces the parties, as the subject matter for the historian's explanation, is 'the details', and 'the reader [...] must not mind the time spent over details'.⁴²

Butterfield, in making the subject matter of history the interactions and interplay between actors, is similarly displacing the role which party has played in traditional whig history. For Bentley, Butterfield is 'egged on' in his 'attack on whig platitudes' by Namier's work.⁴³ Butterfield sought 'to extend Namier's vision' by integrating the role of ideas.⁴⁴ This role was not the simple vision of progress and anti-progress, as in classical whig history – which conception Namier had replaced – but that ideas 'developed a significance not always intended by its manipulators'.⁴⁵ In other words, history is not to be understood as the victory of whig over tory, but nor is the structure of politics the only subject matter. Rather, change emerges from the clash of ideas, towards such a conclusion as nobody intends.

My only disagreement with Bentley's conception of Butterfield's reception of Namier lies in the sense of this emergent direction. The details of history, for Butterfield, intimate a progress to which the statesmen can rejoin themselves, in a posture of gradualist politics, or against which they can set themselves at their peril.

III

Early in *The Whig Interpretation*, Butterfield lays out his argument in the following terms:

What is discussed is the tendency in many historians to write on the side of Protestants and Whigs, to praise revolutions provided they have been successful, to emphasise certain principles of progress in the past and to produce a story which is the ratification if not the glorification of the present.⁴⁶

³⁹See the archival work of Georg G. Iggers from Ranke's papers, as well as his 'Introduction', in Leopold von Ranke, *The theory and practice of history*, ed. Georg G. Iggers, new trans. Wilma A. Iggers (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011).

⁴⁰Bentley, *The life and thought of Herbert Butterfield*, p. 245.

⁴¹Lewis Namier, *The structure of politics at the accession of George III* (2 vols., London, 1929) I, p. vii.

⁴²Ibid., p. viii.

⁴³Bentley, *The life and thought of Herbert Butterfield*, p. 106.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 246.

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 246.

⁴⁶Herbert Butterfield, *The whig interpretation of history* (Harmondsworth, 1931), p. 9.

Butterfield might be read, here, as arguing for an amoral account of the past, the amorality of which entails that history is neither 'on the side of Protestants and Whigs' nor 'the ratification if not the glorification of the present'. This is the orthodox interpretation of *The Whig Interpretation*. Close attention to the work as it develops, however, suggests that Butterfield is primarily concerned with giving credit to Catholics and Tories too, as opposed to simply divesting Protestants and Whigs of credit by way of dismantling the notion of credit altogether. Rather than seeking to 'ratify old party-cries', he is seeking 'to find the unities that underlie the differences and to see all lives as part of the one web of life'.⁴⁷ Butterfield seeks to avoid a partisan account of the past and with it the endorsement of a partisan politics in the present. This is not, in other words, a rejection of partisan history through the deployment of an unpurposive, amoral account.

The partisan historian in question 'very quickly busies himself with dividing the world into the friends and enemies of progress'.⁴⁸ Butterfield's principal solvent, deployed against such an account, is historical detail. 'Whig' accounts of 'the contest of Luther against the popes, or that of Philip II and Elizabeth, or that of the Huguenots with Catherine de' Medici',⁴⁹ are 'corrected to some extent by the more concentrated labours of historical specialists'.⁵⁰ There is, Butterfield argues, a disjuncture between the historian of detail and the historian of generalities. In the specialized areas of research, the 'Whig' view is weakened by empirical reality. Nevertheless, 'these exceptions are lost indeed in that combined process of organisation and abridgement by which we reach our general survey of general history'.⁵¹ That is, 'all our deference to research brings us only to admit that this needs qualifications in detail'.⁵² Butterfield writes of this misreading as the tendency to read the present into the past. He writes:

On this [whig] system the historian is bound to construe his function as demanding him to be vigilant for likenesses between past and present, instead of being vigilant for unlikenesses; ... he will imagine that he has discovered a 'root' or an 'anticipation' of the twentieth century. ... The whig historian can draw lines through certain events, some such line as that which leads through Martin Luther and a long succession of whigs to modern liberty ... he comes to imagine that it represents something like a line of causation ... demonstrating throughout the ages the workings of an obvious principle of progress, of which the Protestants and whigs have been the perennial allies while Catholics and Tories have perpetually formed obstruction.⁵³

Of pivotal importance is the nature of 'the present' which such a history supports. Critically, it is a vision of the present which is Protestant and whig. Following this, the

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 12.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 13.

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 13.

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 13.

⁵¹Ibid., p. 13.

⁵²Ibid., p. 13.

⁵³Ibid., pp. 17–18.

'line of causation' thus drawn across the past plays a normative, partisan function of organizing contemporaneous political purposes. That is, Protestant and whig (which one might perhaps foreshorten as 'liberal progressive') politics are credited by the mirror of the past, such that it becomes 'easy to believe that Clio herself is on the side of the whigs'.⁵⁴ Butterfield therefore writes of the function of such histories in present politics:

Behind all the fallacies of the whig historian there lies the passionate desire to come to a judgement of values, to make history answer questions and decide issues and to give the historian the last word in a controversy ... he feels that loose threads are still left hanging unless he can show which party was in the right. He wishes to come to a general proposition that can be held as a truth demonstrated by history, a lesson that can be taken away and pondered apart from the accidents of a particular historical episode ... [his work is] the eliciting of general truths or of propositions claiming universal validity.⁵⁵

In other words, the whig historian is a kind of upstart philosopher king. He seeks an empirically unconditioned 'general proposition', clean of any and all 'accidents of a particular historical episode', by way of which 'judgement of values ... the historian' may conduct present politics. On the orthodox reading of *The Whig Interpretation*, Butterfield dispels this partisan weaponization of history through an empiricist deployment of detail *contra* universal propositions. Detail may be deployed to render implausible the 'line of causation' of whig history, as a Humean antidote to rationalist politics. Close attention, however, indicates that Butterfield's primary qualm is with the understanding that 'Catholics and tories have perpetually formed obstruction' (to progress). Corollary to this, Butterfield dissents from an account of progress which takes it to be a determinate concept: one which may be 'pondered apart from the accidents of a particular historical episode'. Instead, Butterfield defends a non-partisan account of progress.

Regarding the view that 'Catholics and tories have perpetually formed obstruction', Butterfield argues that change must be thought of as 'emerging from the clash of both Catholic and Protestant', rather than from one party (viz. the Protestants) being victorious.⁵⁶ That is, rather than seeing history as a series of struggles between 'the friends and enemies of progress', of 'progressive fighting reactionary', one ought to generally see 'two parties differing on the question of what the next step in progress is to be'.⁵⁷ Rather than being the product of a partisan position, the modern world is:

The result of a clash of wills, a result which often neither party wanted or even dreamed of, a result which indeed in some cases both parties would equally

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 14.

⁵⁵Ibid., pp. 51–2.

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 27.

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 28.

have hated, but a result for the achievement of which the existence of both and the clash of both were necessary.⁵⁸

Two significant points follow from this view of progress as being emergent: progress is not predictable and thus not reducible into a determinate concept (viz. 'a line of causation' with its attendant 'general proposition'); progress is a non-partisan reality, since it cannot be said to be owed to one group and not another. Butterfield, moreover, does not conceive of the emergent progress as amoral. That is, Butterfield does not dissent from the language of progress *per se*, and consistently writes of historical change in the language of 'achievement'. Whilst it follows from the dismissal of whig history that it is anachronistic to conceive past Protestants as on the side of present liberal politics, Butterfield writes of the error regarding Catholics and Tories as not only a vilifying misconception, but as a denial of a genuine, positive contribution. Regarding the crediting of Luther as harbinger of progress:

If one party is misconceived through this method of historical approach, it would seem that the opposing party is even more gravely maltreated. It is taken to have contributed nothing to the making of the present day, and rather to have formed an obstruction.⁵⁹

Catholics and Tories are conceived as being 'gravely maltreated' in the claim that they 'have contributed nothing to the making of the present day'. In other words, 'the making of the present day' is a matter of progress, as opposed to mere change. This does not mean that the result is predictable. Therefore:

If Protestants and Catholics of the sixteenth century could return to look at the twentieth century, they would equally deplore this strange made modern world, and much as they fought one another there is little doubt that they would be united in opposition to us; and Luther would confess that he had been wrong and wicked if it was by his doing that this liberty, this anarchy had been let loose, while his enemies would be quick to say that this decline of religion was bound to be the result of a schism such as his.⁶⁰

It is clear, however, that Butterfield himself does not take such an attitude to modernity. The language of *achievement* is repeated:

Instead of being grateful to Calvinism for our liberty we are just as reasonable if we transfer our gratitude to those conjunctures and accompanying circumstances which in certain countries turned even Calvinism, perhaps in spite of itself, into the ally of liberty. [...] Let us be grateful for the Puritans of seventeenth-century England, but [...] grateful that they were for so long in a minority [...]; for this was the very condition of their utility.⁶¹

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 28.

⁵⁹Ibid., p. 33.

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 33.

⁶¹Ibid., p. 36.

There is no sense, here, that Butterfield is dissenting from the reality of 'liberty' as an achievement of progress. Importantly, 'our gratitude' is not directed towards the 'friends' of progress, and diverted from its 'enemies', but instead 'to those conjunctures and accompanying circumstances'. This is co-extensive with Butterfield's employment of the first-person plural, since progress is thus not co-opted in political partisanship. Progress, then, is a reality which eludes a determinate conception. For this reason, it may not itself be disentangled (*viz.* abstracted) from the concrete details through which it is seen. Conversely, the concrete details of history are not the solvent which the historian deploys against all sense of progress. Rather, they are the myriad details through which movement is discerned.

This view may be expressed from loosely three different positions. One may speak of history as progress; of the details; or of the two in tandem. Firstly, history is conceived as constitutive of interactions rather than an indomitable force. That is:

The whig historian is apt to imagine the British constitution as coming down to us safely at last, in spite of so many vicissitudes; when in reality it is the result of those very vicissitudes of which he seems to complain.⁶²

'Those very vicissitudes', namely the fruitful interactions, are written of in terms of an agency. That is, because progress is a reality, the language of moral agency is unavoidable, but not in a manner divorced from the details, such as 'the whig historian' imagines progress 'in spite of so many vicissitudes'. On this account, history is a kind of moral agent, and the whig historian – in making detail their enemy – is a kind of anti-historian:

In the most concrete sense of the words our constitution is not merely the work of men and parties; it is the product of history. Now there is a sense in which the whig historian sometimes seems to believe that there is an unfolding logic in history [...] but there is a concrete sense in which it might be said that he does not believe there is an historical process at all. He does not see whig and tory combining in virtue of their very antagonism to produce those interactions which turn one age into another. He does not see that time is so to speak having a hand in the game, and the historical process itself is working upon the pattern which events are taking. He does not see the solidity with which history is actually embodied in the British constitution and similarly in the modern world. [...] In reality they are the result of interaction; they are precipitated by complex history.⁶³

By 'our constitution', Butterfield refers to the present order which has emerged from the interactions (which are) constitutive of history. History is, then, at once the myriad interactions, irreducible into 'an unfolding logic' and best described as a 'process', as well as a kind of agent. 'Our constitution', which is a *good* thing (and thus a proper object of 'gratitude'), is history's 'product': 'time is so to speak having a hand in the game, and the historical process itself is working upon the pattern which

⁶²Ibid., pp. 36–7.

⁶³Ibid., p. 37.

events are taking'. History, then, 'is actually embodied in the British constitution and similarly in the modern world'.

Corollary with this view, progress, considered simply in terms of itself, is a denial of history and simply lacks all empirical content. Whilst progress does, then, transcend details – 'as part of the one web of life' – it cannot be sensibly (that is, with any empirical content) spoken of in terms of itself:

If there is a deeper tide that rolls below the very growth of Protestantism nothing could be more shallow than the history which is mere philosophising upon such a movement, or even the history which discovers it too soon. [...] Such a doctrine would be the very negation of history. It would be the doctrine that the whole realm of historical events is of no significance whatever. [...] The deep movement that is in question does not explain everything, or anything at all. It does not exist apart from historical events and cannot be disentangled from them.⁶⁴

In this sense, 'time is [only] *so to speak* having a hand in the game'.⁶⁵ One cannot form a determinate conception of 'time' (viz. progress). So Butterfield writes: 'To whom do we owe our religious liberty? We may ask how this liberty arose, but even then it takes all history to give us the answer'.⁶⁶ That is to say, Butterfield conceives of us *owing* the past, but this past cannot be reduced to a force. It is, in this sense, the past in its entirety which we owe.

Both progress *qua* progress, and detail *qua* detail, are for this reason empty. 'The deep movement' has no empirical content, and detail is insufficient without its sum. Butterfield's debt to Ranke is, at this point, at its most clear. The historian is to work from detail, but not merely to pile it up as a heap of facts. Rather, the historian must employ the 'historical imagination':

It is easy to forget that in the art of the historian there is the exhilarating moment, the creative act. It is by no means the historian's duty to whittle himself down to a mere transparency, and simply to transcribe information with colourless, passionless impartiality.

It is through something like a creative act of the historical imagination that we [...] have learned how to come with a different feeling for things and so to discern the inner relations of a world so different from our own.⁶⁷

Butterfield writes again:

The problem of abridgement is the problem of abridging a complexity. [...] Of how to reduce details without losing the purport and tenor of the whole. All abridgement is a kind of impressionism [...] it implies the gift of seeing the

⁶⁴Ibid., pp. 46–7.

⁶⁵See fn. 63. My emphasis.

⁶⁶Butterfield, *The whig interpretation*, pp. 37–8.

⁶⁷Ibid., pp. 68–9.

significant detail and detecting the sympathies between events, the gift of apprehending the whole pattern upon which the historical process is working. It is not the selection of facts in accordance with some abstract principle.⁶⁸

The debt to Ranke in the above is clear, provided one recognizes Ranke to be a German idealist and not an English empiricist.⁶⁹ For Butterfield, details are to be imaginatively ordered such that one attains to 'the purport and tenor of the whole'. The detail is the vehicle through which the historical imagination attains to such an understanding. Detail has, in Ranke's language, a spiritual (*Geistliche*) significance such that it 'intimates' (to use Wordsworth's term) a significance beyond itself.⁷⁰ Details are not, then, selected 'in accordance with some abstract principle'; instead, they in some (*Geistliche*) way suggest it themselves. Concomitantly, the progress which is discerned – viz. 'the inner relations' of 'the whole pattern upon which the historical process is working' – cannot be grasped as an essence separate from (its constitutive) accidents. In language reminiscent of Kant's first Critique: the idea of progress is a transcendental idea which is 'merely intelligible'.⁷¹ One cannot know it, like a determinate cognition (*Vorstellung*), but only gain an intimation through the historical imagination playing upon the manifold details.⁷² (This is akin to Kant's 'aesthetic idea', where the idea is *nearly* given adequate formulation – that is, an intuition adequate to the concept – through the imagination's 'rapid spread over objects' in aesthetic experience.) Since it cannot then be grasped concretely, it cannot yield decisive political direction. The historian, in short, cannot be a philosopher king in Plato's authoritarian sense. More strongly, the historian destroys the possibility of philosopher kings appealing to history.

IV

Progress may not be discerned as a determinate concept. That is, it cannot be thought of abstractly, but only sensed, by the historical imagination, through historical details. There is no sense, however, in *The Whig Interpretation*, that the historical imagination is not rational; it is a form of thinking. It does not follow, moreover, that nothing politically significant may be said of progress, simply because it is not a determinate concept. For Butterfield, progress is the fruit of clashes of wills, and not of abstract rationality. History consists not in a series of changes, the logic of which may be abstractly understood, like necessary causes, but instead changes are the offspring of 'mediation'.⁷³ In other words, change is *internal* to the institutional

⁶⁸Ibid., p. 76.

⁶⁹See the archival work of Georg G. Iggers from Ranke's papers, as well as his 'Introduction', in Ranke, *The theory and practice of history*.

⁷⁰See especially 'On the relations of history and philosophy (A manuscript of the 1830s)', in Ranke, *The theory and practice of history*, pp. 5–7.

⁷¹Immanuel Kant, *The critique of pure reason*, 2nd edition, 1787, ed. & trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge, 1998). See 'The antinomy of pure reason', pp. 511–50, especially 513: 'meanwhile we can call the merely intelligible cause of appearances in general the transcendental object, merely so that we may have something corresponding to sensibility as a receptivity'.

⁷²See, especially, Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the power of judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge, 2000), §49: 'On the faculties of the mind that constitute genius', pp. 191–6.

⁷³Butterfield, *The whig interpretation*, pp. 40, 49.

order, because it is conditioned by *all* of the existing personalities; its logic cannot be *externally* grasped.

Politically speaking, then, Butterfield's statesman is to seek to facilitate these sorts of 'clashes', which one might call productive disagreements. Implicitly in *The Whig Interpretation*, this is not an inevitability, and it may be impaired or altogether abrogated by the (partisan) dominance of a single group. That is, the politics of the 'general proposition' is a political threat, and not simply an historian's aberrancy. In *The Englishman*, the advocate for 'whig history' is emphatically non-partisan (unlike the 'whig history' of *The Whig Interpretation*), and there is an attendant emphasis upon the danger of partisan politics: rationalist progressivism, based upon a misconception of progress, and 'die-hard-ism', which is a resistance to progress.⁷⁴ Far from *The Whig Interpretation* and *The Englishman* being antipodal works, then, they complement each other. Put directly, patriotic history is a kind of antidote to whig history. Rather than separating the past into 'friends and enemies', and legitimizing partisan politics, it does the opposite and commends a politics which is progressive in the proper, indeterminate sense. Patriotic history is, if my reading of *The Whig Interpretation* is correct, not historically erroneous, if perhaps simplistic. Butterfield begins *The Englishman* with a celebration of the fact that, in England, 'the past, like the spent part of a cinematograph film, is coiled up inside the present'.⁷⁵ This, importantly, is not an inevitability but an achievement, contingent upon the fact that: 'we [Englishmen] have been wise, for we have taken care of the processes which serve to knit the past and the present together'.⁷⁶ This ought to be read as the opposite of partisan 'whig history' which Butterfield cautions against in *The Whig Interpretation*. The past is conceived as begetting the present, in the sense that the arrangements of the present are 'the result of interaction; they are precipitated by complex history'. The present owes the whole of the past for itself, rather than the actions of partisan heroes, such as might be abstracted into a general principle of action. It is a political-historiographical achievement to illuminate this truth because it not only avoids partisan politics but positively commends a non-partisan politics. Butterfield writes that whig politicians, unlike whig historians:

Evolved an attitude to the historical process, a way of co-operating with the forces of history, an alliance with Providence, which the whig historians were much slower to achieve – which they were even perhaps too partisan to discern. We shall see how this, too, became the common heritage of Englishmen – how the services of the whigs (like the influence of Shakespeare on English life) are things which pass, so to speak, into a conjuror's hat, precisely because they become the property of all, the heritage of both whig and tory [...] absorbed into a tradition that is nation-wide.⁷⁷

The achievement of these whig politicians is their ability to turn historical change into conceivably 'the common heritage of Englishmen': 'the heritage of both whig and tory'. So far as I understand this, it is their writing of the past as being the

⁷⁴Herbert Butterfield, *The Englishman & his history* (Cambridge, 1944), pp. 107, 123.

⁷⁵*Ibid.*, p. v.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, p. v. See also p. vi.

⁷⁷*Ibid.*, p. vii.

non-partisan heritage of the (whole) nation. This attitude to the past entails 'an alliance with Providence', because progress is – as *The Whig Interpretation*, on my reading, argues – the fruit of 'interplay' and not of a partisan political force. To represent the past in this way is to encourage the kind of non-partisan politics which is a 'co-operating with the forces of history'. To depict historical changes as non-partisan – to have them 'pass, so to speak, into a conjuror's hat, precisely because they become the property of all' – is not unhistorical. It is, perhaps, a simplification, but it cannot be said to be opposed in essence to the argument of *The Whig Interpretation*, that progress is the fruit of 'whig and tory' interaction. Butterfield provides an example of such an attitude to the past, regarding seventeenth century English attitudes to political liberties:

We must congratulate ourselves that our 17th-century forefathers [...] did not resurrect and fasten upon us the authentic middle ages. Those 'historic rights' to which Englishmen (especially in the Stuart period) so loved to appeal – it was essential that they should not have been rigid, but should have moved with the centuries, that 'ancient custom' should have been a living thing, to save us from the pressure of a fossilised antiquity. The good terms that Englishmen have managed to keep with their own bygone centuries have been the counterpart of their ability to make the past move with them, so to speak. They have depended on the ability of our 17th-century ancestors to see the middle ages not – if one may use the phrase – 'as they really were', but in terms that were appropriate to the Stuart age.⁷⁸

What is really central, here, is that the 'ancient custom' of the middle ages should have been present in the Stuart period, but on terms which suited the Stuarts. In other words, the Stuarts – 'our 17th-century forefathers' – simplified a nevertheless real relationship. The element of truth is the fact that, for Butterfield, a body politic changes in relation to itself. On the other hand, the relation is oversimplified. It is politically-unifying for an age to think of itself as the inheritor of an unproblematically continuous past, and in consequence to see the past in terms which are somewhat anachronistic. Even so, Butterfield's account of progress and of mediated change is such that this thinking is better called a convenient simplification than simply false. The non-partisan function of patriotic history is supported by the non-partisan historical reality: that the present owes every party of the past. It is instructive to consider his offered counter example, of a nation where they have not *moved with* history. This is equivalent to a nation which has not, in Butterfield's sense, progressed. Their view of the past has not changed, because they have not changed. Butterfield continues:

The French, having been too much the slaves of their own preceding centuries, set out to free themselves in 1789 – they ended in fact by cursing their middle ages and repudiating their past. French liberty springs from a revolt against history and tradition – a revolt that suffered a serious handicap

⁷⁸Ibid., p. 6.

because it was based on the abstract 'rights of man'. [...] England [...] did not need to resort to abstract philosophy – our liberty is based on 'the historic rights of Englishmen'. We did not have to demolish a tradition which stood rigid like a wall, hindering the transmutation of custom. And though we did have a revolution in the 17th century [...] [w]e hastened to tie up the threads and reconstitute the customs which linked the past with the present.⁷⁹

Precisely in resisting change, the French nation increasingly destroyed their chances of progress and made inevitable the pseudo-progress of an abstract, 'general proposition'. The sort of politics which France practised, first rigid tradition and second a merely abstractly conceived progress, are the twin opposites of Butterfield's commended emergent change.

One may analyse the nature of progress in terms of a necessary empirical conditioning of politics' direction. In other words, change is emergent from the institutional order – which is to say of 'clashes' within the body politic – and this means that it is possible to (simplistically or otherwise) emphasize continuity of the whole of the past with the whole of the present. It is possible, in an historical work, 'to tie up the threads and reconstitute the customs which linked the past with the present'. There is, then, 'the transmutation of custom', by which there is 'the continuity of our history'. For this reason Butterfield can write, with self-evident sincerity, that:

Many English institutions have century upon century of the past, lying fold upon fold within them – because they preserve somewhat in the present all the previous stages of their being – they possess not merely the kind of romantic colouring which is so dear to the historical novelist, but something like the life of organic creatures; they show therefore greater elasticity in the face of those crises which are beyond prediction than do the paper-constructions of yesterday. Such institutions, in their customary acceptance and in the common sentiment that they inspire, provide also the basis for at least a minimum of national unity.⁸⁰

On account of change, then, being internal to a body politic, its institutions in turn contain 'the past, lying fold upon fold within them'. There is a cumulating heritage of past orders, and this constitutes a storing up (and here it seems natural to allude to Burke's conceptions) of knowledge. This is a doctrine of progress, and one which enjoins a sort of soft Burkeanism. Change is to continue in the manner of non-partisan emergence. This is a political doctrine intelligibly at home with the notion, in *The Whig Interpretation*, that 'we transfer our gratitude to those conjunctures and accompanying circumstances' of change, and not to one party position.

The substance of this inheritance is that the institutions of a body politic provide an empirical-conditioning of political direction – as opposed to a politics governed by an abstract 'general proposition' – which ensures 'greater elasticity in the face of those crises which are beyond prediction than do the paper-constructions of yesterday'. That is, such orders are epistemically superior to the political order of the

⁷⁹Ibid., pp. 7–8.

⁸⁰Ibid., pp. 113–14.

'general proposition'. Lastly, through their non-partisan origins and thus natures, they 'provide also the basis for at least a minimum of national unity'.

One might call the central argument of *The Englishman* that such histories that do 'tie up the threads again' are of crucial political importance. Butterfield must not, however, be taken to be endorsing a useful lie, but instead as developing the implications of *The Whig Interpretation*. The reason for the truth of such patriotic history is precisely because institutional orders do 'preserve somewhat in the present all the previous stages of their being', such that the non-partisan accent of patriotic history is entirely appropriate. This reading is made possible, and I think necessary, once *The Whig Interpretation* is understood to be putting forward a case for non-partisan teleology. If the role of detail is reframed from a destructive to a productive reality, then Butterfield's attitude to 'whiggism' becomes much more interesting than a simple binary of bad historiography and good politics. The shortcoming of patriotic history may be spoken of as a simplification, in the sense of an abridgement for political ends,⁸¹ but it is not an essential falsification.

V

The Kantian distinction between cognition and mere thinking, alongside his corollary conception of imaginative judgement intimating transcendence from the myriad, looks to be a ready tool for approaching Butterfield's conceptions of progress, the 'general proposition', and of detail. If my analysis is correct, then this may well indicate a lingering influence of Ranke on Butterfield, albeit a Ranke understood in terms of Kantian Idealism rather than Humean positivism. The question of Butterfield's relationship to Ranke is, however, tangential to my basic purpose of reframing *The Whig Interpretation* as being, in a specific sense, not sceptical of teleology.

There are other contexts involving Butterfield which may now look different. Butterfield's relationship to the 'Peterhouse Right' – especially to its figurehead, Maurice Cowling – is a long-standing dispute,⁸² and the pertinence of detail in history may now be seen to be a parallel question. Whether *The Whig Interpretation* has a positive political point, or simply a negative one, seems to hinge upon the question of what detail is for historical explanation. In Butterfield, detail adverts to the complexity of historical change, but it does not carry a scepticism to progress in itself. One might read *The Whig Interpretation* in loosely Oakeshottian terms: taking the displacement of government by the 'general proposition' as displacement of 'rationalism in politics' and its mechanical conception of reason; and its replacement with a soft Burkeanism of non-abstractly conditioned change.⁸³ That is, Oakeshott's conception of politics as 'conversation' and incrementally changing 'idioms of activity', as opposed to 'rationalism', is hardly foreign to Butterfield's of emergent change.

⁸¹ See fn. 68.

⁸² See, for example, Richard Brent, 'Butterfield's stories: "high politics" and the writing of modern British political history', *Historical Journal*, 30 (1987), pp. 943–54; *Public and private doctrine: Essays in British history presented to Maurice Cowling*, ed. Michael Bentley (Cambridge, 1993); Michael Bentley, 'Herbert Butterfield and Maurice Cowling', *passim*, and many of the other essays in *The philosophy, politics and religion of British democracy: Maurice Cowling and conservatism*.

⁸³ See especially Oakeshott's famous essay 'Rationalism in politics', in *Rationalism in politics: And other essays* (New York, 1962), pp. 1–36.

Cowling's famously industrious deployments of detail in his high political trilogy,⁸⁴ as well as his rhetoric of detailed complexity in his two acerbic books of 1963, might change their aspect from mere negativity if detail has a more than destructive purpose in *The Whig Interpretation*. Rather than seeing the dominant political influence on Cowling as Oakeshott,⁸⁵ Cowling's work might be additionally thought of as re-deploying Butterfield's twin conception of detail and progress to his own political purpose. Lastly, Butterfield's emphasis upon individual persons, as the interlocutors out of which historical change emerges, can be given theological articulation. Certainly his emphasis upon individual persons looks to be a doctrine at home in his Methodist faith. McIntire has remarked that:

Butterfield was a lifelong, active Methodist, with a piety marked by contemplation, humane reverence for individual persons, tolerance, and devotion to God. In the most profound sense his Methodist spirituality animated his historical work.⁸⁶

These are speculations which I hope may spark interest and future research, but I do not substantiate them here. My aim has been principally to reframe the orthodox reading of *The Whig Interpretation*. What is clear, from this article, is that the message of *The Whig Interpretation* is not, as Elton said, 'in essence plain enough'. Whilst some historians, particularly Bentley, have found Butterfield's work to be a source of continuing interest, it must be acknowledged that others have conceived it to be a kind of textbook. Elton remarks that it 'deserved and probably required hammering home' as a worthy and wholesome text for undergraduates but, one hears in the sub-text, he had no need to read it himself.⁸⁷ This simplistic reading of the book is no longer tenable.

Butterfield emerges, by my analysis, as a more integrated thinker than the present orthodoxy allows. *The Whig Interpretation* takes on the aspect of something approaching political theory in a positive sense. His conception of historical detail in *The Whig Interpretation*, if my reading is correct, tends towards a kind of anti-rationalistic politics of intersubjectivity. This may be legitimately expressed as non-partisan, and to that extent as 'patriotic'. as *The Englishman* is rightly deemed. In short, there is no need to look upon *The Whig Interpretation* and *The Englishman* as presenting what the German-speaking world saw in *The Wealth of Nations* and *A Theory of Moral Sentiments*. There is no 'Herbert Butterfieldproblem'.

Competing interests. The author declares none.

⁸⁴See, for example, Michael Bentley, 'The retiring Mr Cowling', in *Public and private doctrine*, p. 8.

⁸⁵See, in general, *The philosophy, politics and religion of British democracy: Maurice Cowling and conservatism*.

⁸⁶McIntire, *Herbert Butterfield*, p. xiv.

⁸⁷Elton, 'Herbert Butterfield', p. 729.