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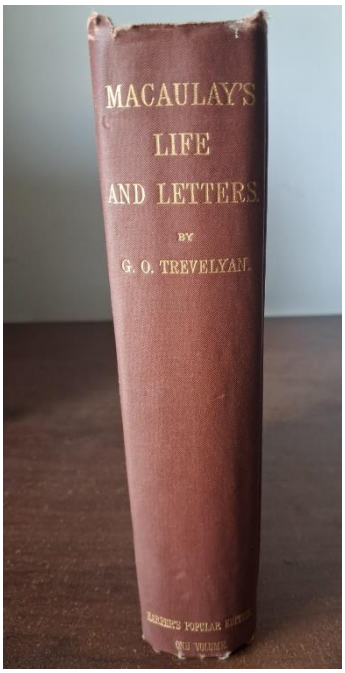
Book Review

'The Life and Letters of Lord Macaulay' by G Otto Trevelyn, Harper and Brothers Publications, New York and London. 1901, pp 422.



Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800-1859) occupies an important place in the history of modern India. His father Zachury Macaulay was appointed the Governor of Sierra Leone in West Africa by the Sierra Leone Company. Freetown was made the capital of the colony and the Company aimed to bring up this British colony with the help of freed Black Loyalist African labour. Zachury stood for abolition of black slavery, and he had a big influence on his (eldest) son.

Thomas Macaulay did his master's from Cambridge University and followed it with a degree in law. He became a member of the British Parliament at the age of 32 and made a mark there. He was instrumental in the passing of the Electoral Reforms Act (1832), the passing of the Anti-slavery Act (1833) and the (East India Company) Charter Act of 1833. The Charter Act transformed the East India Company into solely a governing entity.

Due to the pecuniary difficulty faced by his father, he gave up his membership of the Parliament and joined the East India Company. He came to India at the age of 34. While at the Parliament, he had become a member and soon the Secretary of the Board of Control that oversaw the functioning of the East India Company in India. It was for this reason that on joining the East India Company, he remarked that 'from being the master, he would now become the servant of the company'!

Controversy around Macaulay's role in introducing English in India

Macaulay arrived in India in June 1834, embarking first at the port of Madras and then sailing for Calcutta to join the Council of the Governor- General of India. William Bentick was then the Governor-General of India. The Charter Act of 1813, enacted by the British Parliament, included a duty for the Company to educate the population coming under its jurisdiction. Prior to this Charter, education in India in the areas controlled by the British,

was imparted by religious institutions of madrasas, Christian missionaries, Hindu temples and individuals belonging prominently to the Kayasthas, the Brahmins and similar other castes. Since the students paid very minimal fees to the teachers, they earned very little. The intervention by the Company in education raised the remuneration of teachers in the schools and institutions funded by it.

The issue being debated in the Committee of Public Instruction was '*what should be the medium of instruction*'. There were opposite views on this, with one group in favour of the traditional languages of Arabic and Sanskrit and the other group favouring English as the medium of instruction. Finally, it was the latter view spearheaded by Macaulay - who was also the President of the Committee - that prevailed.

Macaulay's views as emerging from the Minutes of the Meeting (dated 2nd February 1835), may be summarised as follows:

(a) English stands prominent in the contemporary world as the repository of a vast pool of knowledge,
(b) Greek and Latin - at their peak - were vehicles of spreading knowledge in Europe,
(c) Language has played an important role in uplifting a backward society into a civilized society as demonstrated by the Russians. They took to learning other languages to acquire from the rest of the world, rather than flattering national prejudices.

Macaulay also pointed out that the missionaries in India were already teaching in the English medium. The English Education Act 1835 enacted the by the Governor-General's Counsel replaced Persian with English as the administrative language. This further boosted the usefulness of English as a language in India.

Macaulay has been frequently criticised for his alleged remarks that the propose of introducing this language in India is to create a class of anglicized Indians who would serve as cultural intermediaries between the British and the Indians. This appears to be an afterthought and was said so in retaliation to the criticisms of his decision. In retrospect, it may be argued that the objectives as observed in the Minutes of the Meeting (may refer to the book under review, pp.353 to 355) were very much achieved.

Macaulay as the President of the Law Commission

In the capacity of the President of the Law Commission, Macaulay played an equally eminent role in giving to India its Penal Code. It later became the basis of the Indian Penal Code, the Criminal Procedure Code and the Civil Procedure Code. The Indian Penal Code came into force in 1860, the Criminal Procedure Code in 1872 and the Civil Procedure Code in 1908. It is obvious that a lot of effort was made in giving shape to the Penal Code.

The Indian Penal Code has been praised by one of its admirers (*Stephen Fitzjomas*) in the following words: 'The Indian Penal Code is to the English criminal law what a manufactured article ready for use is to the materials out of which it is made. It is to the French 'Code Penal', and I may add to the 'North German Code of 1871', what finished picture is to a sketch'.

Macaulay as a family person

Macaulay left India on 19th February 1838. On his return to England, he again entered the British Parliament. He was made Secretary of War in 1839 and subsequently Paymaster General in 1846. In his later years, he withdrew from politics and devoted his time more on writing.

Macaulay remained very attached to his father 's family and never married. His feelings at the marriage of one of his sisters comes out very vividly in the following poem that forms part of one of the letters to his sister:

'*There were two birds that sat on a stone,*
One flew away and there was but one,
The other flew away and there was none,
And the poor stone was left alone!'

Macaulay further writes that those foolish lines contain 'the history of my life'. The book under review has been written by his nephew G. Otto Trevelyan and is a treasure House of the lived history off Macaulay It is worth reading even after lapse of more than a century.

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