Comment: *Roland Hill's Lord Acton*

Roland Hill's biography of Lord Acton (Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 2000, 548 pages) will not be replaced for many years, if ever. The endnotes, often substantial, run to 84 pages; the eighteen pages of bibliography cover eighteen archives. Mia Woodruff, Acton's grand daughter, contributes an introductory note, composed shortly before her death in 1994; and a preface is provided by Owen Chadwick.

John Emerich Edward Dalberg Acton, born in Naples in 1834, succeeded as eighth baronet at the age of three when his father died. Educated at St Mary's Oscott and by a private tutor in Edinburgh, refused entry to Cambridge colleges because he was a Catholic, he spent five years in Munich studying under the eminent church historian Ignaz von Döllinger, returning to England in 1857, the wealthy squire of Aldenham, Shropshire, with something of a mission to introduce English Catholics to European Catholicism. His mother married Lord Granville, who was in and out of the British cabinet from 1848 until he retired in 1866 (twice foreign secretary). Briefly an MP himself (Carlow in 1859-65; then Bridgenorth, the first Catholic to win a seat in England), Acton was given a peerage by Gladstone in 1869.

According to Matthew Arnold, 'Gladstone influences all round him but Acton; it is Acton who influences Gladstone'. Besides his involvement in Westminster politics at this level, Acton is best remembered for his efforts during the Vatican Council to head off the definition of the doctrine of papal infallibility. His main objection seems to have been that, as he saw it, the definition would operate retrospectively and thus confer authority on past papal utterances that prescribed or endorsed a variety of imprudent or immoral acts. As a loyal Catholic, he wanted to keep the papacy clear of even deeper responsibility for discredited 'acts of the buried and repented past'. For years after the Council he feared excommunication, but never considered leaving the Church.

From about 1875 until 1895 Acton devoted himself to historical research, publishing a handful of substantial essays (including 'Democracy in Europe', 'The History of Freedom in Antiquity', 'The History of Freedom in Christianity'). 'Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely': the famous saying comes in a letter to Mandell Creighton (5 April 1887), first published in *Historical Essays and Studies* (1907).

Aldenham was let; his finances were by now somewhat straitened. But only relatively. He went on buying books. In 1890 Gladstone persuaded Andrew Carnegie, the Scottish-born American steel millionaire, to purchase Acton's library, but to leave him with it (giving it to John Morley after Acton's death, who in turn donated it to Cambridge University).

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Acton remained rich enough to move with his family between London, Cannes and Tegernsee in Bavaria. On the Riviera he loved taking his daughters to parties and dances at the neighbours' villas. In 1865 Acton married his Bavarian cousin Marie: seven years his junior, with none of his intellectual interests, she belonged to the international smart set of her day. The marriage seems to have undergone considerable strain — Roland Hill quotes some moving letters; but they were devoted parents. They had six children, a son who died when he was twelve months old; the son who was to succeed to the peerage, got to Oxford, but had none of his father's interests (overwhelmed by him probably); and four daughters: one who died when she was seven; one who was to die aged forty three, depressed and obese, years after Acton's death; a third, a great reader, who died aged thirty nine; and Mamy, the first child, 'the sun of our life' as he wrote when she was six, who was confirmed in 1878 ('I have ... seen that she was not disturbed by the wrong-headedness of priests — I chose the oldest I could find — in her calm and unaffected faith'), the only one of the daughters who married (a Herbert of Llanarth, in 1901, a few months before her father's death).

Acton remained in close touch with British affairs. In 1892, for example, he stayed at Dalmeny, the Earl of Rosebery's mansion near Edinburgh, to help with Gladstone's election campaign. There was a serious possibility of Acton's receiving a cabinet post. In the end he was made Lord-in-Waiting to Queen Victoria; his job was to steer guests to their places at the dining table; and take his turn chatting with the Queen, about Catholicism, the German aristocracy, Carlyle and Tennyson.

In 1895 Lord Rosebery, now Prime Minister, appointed Acton Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge, having considered the objections — that (1) he was a Catholic; (2) he would probably be a poor lecturer and (3) he had no Oxford or Cambridge degree — and deciding to take the risk. Acton's lectures were crowded; he delighted to have women attending; indeed he took part in the struggle to allow women into lectures and to take examinations (they were not allowed to graduate until after the Second World War). His daughter Mamy kept house for him in Cambridge. He fitted very well into academic life. He planned the *Cambridge Modern History* but, as many predicted, never produced the books he was so well equipped to write. He was invited to give the Romanes Lecture in Oxford — three boxes of notes with 383 cards survive. But his health broke down: he was affected by a 'strong gouty tendency'. In June 1902 he suffered a severe stroke; he received the last sacraments from a Benedictine friend and died in Marie's arms. His remains were buried at Tegernsee — 'time and neglect', Hill says, make the grave impossible to locate. Sad, no doubt; but a remarkable man, whose story has at last been told, with scholarship and flair.

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