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3. STUDI DI STORIA DELLA STORIOGRAFIA AMMINISTRATIVA

Lewis Namier, and institutional history

BY
LUCY SUTHERLAND

1.

Lewis Namier was, without doubt, one of the outstanding historians of his day, if the test of historical greatness which he himself laid down is applied to him. He himself said, «the great historian is like the great artist or doctor: after he has done his work, others should not be able to practise within its sphere in the terms of the preceding era».¹ Critics have sometimes impugned what they take to be his method and the effects of using this method on periods in the penumbra of his own studies, but even in so doing it is noteworthy that they accept most of his conclusions and still more that they perceive the world he studied in a way which these studies have rendered inescapable. Nevertheless he is a difficult historian to evaluate, partly because the fields in which his studies lay are varied, and their relationship derives more from his personality and his individual experience than from any formal connexion, and partly because his published works, learned and brilliant though they are, are rather of the nature of scattered peaks appearing as islands than of a connected continent.

A complete break in his life, and that at a formative period, when he left his parents' home on their estates in what was then Russian Poland and, after attending University in England settled there for life and adopted British nationality; two great wars in which he was actively concerned; and years of international stress and turmoil during which he was deeply engaged as an intellectual publicist and as a supporter of Zionism, played havoc with the plans he had drawn up for himself as a pure scholar - despite a life spent in the most strenuous mental activities. No doubt these experiences enriched his historical understanding, but they also ate into his time and for considerable periods intensely preoccupied his emotions and intelligence.

1. L. B. NAMIER *History* reprinted in *Avenues of History* (London 1952) 8-9.

As a historian he admitted to two long-standing ambitions, neither of which he fulfilled; to write the history of Europe between 1812 and 1918, and to lay bare the nature of English politics in the years leading up to and during the American War of Independence. To the former he contributed no more than a few lectures and articles,² though these were contributions of high importance. They show him, in this sphere of his activities, as a student of movements and (in his own definition of the term) of ideas rather than of institutions.

Namier was a historian who saw the foci of European nineteenth and early twentieth century developments in the old Habsburg Empire and the territories which adjoined it, and on which he was peculiarly fitted to pronounce judgment. He saw the nineteenth century basically as the era in which the triumph of linguistic nationality throughout Europe not only wrecked the territorial organization of the past based on dynastic ownership, which he could not regret, but also the future of a movement which he believed to be in process towards self-government and individual liberty, which he regretted deeply. Like all students of nineteenth century Europe he saw the origins of the explosive nationalism of the period in the transition which the French Revolution ushered in from dynastic to national sovereignty, and the progressive widening of the 'political nation' from the privileged orders to democracy. The core of Europe lay for him between the channel ports and the frontiers of Russia - Great Britain on the one side and Russia on the other lay «outside the world of continental Europeans». He saw the explosive forces of nationalism as emerging from the struggles for unity of Germany and Italy, divided by dynastic decisions of the past, and from the growing industrialism of the more advanced European countries, with the rootless dissatisfaction of the proletariat of great cities; but for him the real storm centres lay elsewhere, in those great areas where past conquests, political and cultural, had reduced original groups with their own language and traditions to a «state of social inferiority»,³ but remained nevertheless incomplete conquests. The centre of Europe to him remained a vast area where conquests and migrations had ebbed and flowed - the main migrations of the dark ages from the East to West; the reversal of this trend from about the 8th century onwards to a movement from West to East - the French against the Flemings and Germans, the Germans against the Lithuanians and Slavs, the Poles against the Russians; and the further invasions from the East of the Avars, Magyars and Turks into South Eastern Europe

2. The most important of these were his 'Raleigh Lecture' of 1944 before the British Academy, 1848, *the Revolution of the Intellectuals* (printed 1946); his lecture before the Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei of 1948 on *Liberty and Nationality* (printed in England in *Avenues of History*, 1952, and translated into Italian in 1957); and his 'Creighton Lecture' before the University of London on *Basic Factors in Nineteenth-Century European History* (printed in *Personalities and Powers*, London 1955).

3. *Basic Factors in Nineteenth-Century European History* cit., 106.

where « the Germans met them at the gate of the Danube » where « Germans and Magyars in their head-on collision split off the Northern from the Southern Slavs and established their dominion over that middle zone »,⁴ and where the Turks established their rule over the Balkans. Speaking to an English audience he compared the resulting situation on a grand scale with one with which they were familiar on a small one - nineteenth century Ireland, with Ulster as the bastion of the conquerors and the representatives of the «Protestant ascendancy» scattered throughout the rest of the country in the land-owning classes and the population of the towns both «alien to or alienated from the peasantry which retained its own language or religion or both». In his large scale picture of Europe as the product of incomplete conquests he maintained

« Self-government meant, in the earlier stages, the rule of the big land-owners and their retainers in the countryside, and of the upper middle class and the intelligentsia in the towns; their language or religion determined the national character of the country... Hence in the numerous Irelands scattered all over Europe turmoil and strife were bound to result from the rise of the lower classes, and especially of the peasantry to political consciousness and action... Consider the amount of disturbance which during the nineteenth century was caused in the political life of this country [Great Britain] by an Ireland geographically isolated and not subjected to any further encroachments; and you can gauge the effect which two dozen Irelands were bound to have on the life of nineteenth century Europe as borderlands between contending nations, especially while attempts continued to be made to complete conquest and conversion ».⁵

« The Language Chart is our Magna Carta » became the slogan of nationalism on the European Continent and a movement, at first hailed as « a great and noble force which was to have regenerated Europe »,⁶ became in his view a destructive hurricane, the vehicle as well as the source of passions destructive at once of the peace of nations and the freedom of the individual.

One of the criticisms most constantly advanced against Namier's approach is that in his study of institutions and movements he has «taken the mind out of history», that he has ignored the force of ideas and ideals over men. This criticism is usually attached rather to his institutional studies of eighteenth century England than to his European writings, but on the one occasion in which he replied to them in print, he related them to the latter. Little though we know of the nature of mass psychology, he maintained, one thing has resulted from

4. *Ibid.* 107-108.

5. *Ibid.* 106-107.

6. *Liberty and Nationality* cit., 21.

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«heightened psychological awareness», a change of attitude towards so-called political ideas. «To treat them as the offspring of pure reason would be to assign to them a parentage about as mythological as that of Pallas Athene». And he continued

«It certainly seems impossible to attach to conscious political thought the importance which was ascribed to it a hundred, or even fifty, years ago. History is primarily... made by man's mind and nature; but his mind does not work with the rationality that was once deemed its noblest attribute - which does not, however, mean that it necessarily works any worse».⁷

2.

It is on his major works on the structure of English politics in the reign of George III that his reputation as a historian must ultimately rest. It is on these works too that his claim to be a historian of institutions can be founded. The origin of the works which were published in two consecutive years, *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III* (2v 1929) and the first volume of what he thought of as his «magnum opus» *England in the Age of the American Revolution* (1930) is well-known. As soon as he had completed his historical studies in Oxford he set about what he hoped would be a work on the American colonists and their attitude to England in the years leading up to and during the American War of Independence. While at work on this subject in the United States (in the intervals of other business) he was advised by a distinguished American historian to change his objective to one at that time much less studied, the English background of the events in America. This advice he adopted in 1914. It was not only the interruption of four years of war, but also his realization how he must treat his subject, which prevented even the first instalment of his labours from seeing the light until fifteen years later.

As soon as he began to examine his revised subject he observed, as he said that «the constitutional and political formulas of the problem were exceedingly simple, and the contemporary discussions of it very trite». As he perceived that the facts behind these formulas were far from simple, he saw no value in examining and reassessing these contemporary discussions or in following up other means of analysing «what is called «public opinion»» for, as he remarked

«political problems do not, as a rule, deeply affect the lives and consciousness of ordinary men, and little real thought is given them by these

7. *Human Nature in Politics* (Printed in *Personalities and Powers* cit.) 4-5.

8. Preface to *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III* (London 1929) I, V.

men, whose concerns, none the less, supply the basis of the problems and determine the course of their development ».⁹

He looked out therefore for the site of political decision-making and found it in the eighteenth century House of Commons. In doing so he found the method of structural analysis which has become identified with his name, and for the first time introduced on a large scale the sociological method into the study of English political history.

There was nothing new in itself in this concentration on the House of Commons. Every eighteenth century historian who preceded him had given much of his attention to the proceedings of the House, to the oratory of leading statesmen there, to the great speeches of the two Pitts, of Burke and of Charles James Fox, to the clashes between governments and oppositions. But the historians of the whig school (representative in a rather gentlemanly way of nineteenth century liberal historicism) saw these conflicts and activities in broad political terms, linking them with the constitutional conflicts between King and Parliament of the seventeenth century on the one hand and the conflicts of parliamentary government dominated by the party system of the late nineteenth century on the other; and they paid little attention to the detail or the peculiar characteristics of the institutions as they operated in the mid eighteenth century. Namier, like others who were beginning to focus their attention on the period itself and who began to study its politics in depth, found the framework which his predecessors provided a hindrance rather than a help to his understanding. He therefore decided that, putting preconceptions aside, he would concentrate on a detailed examination of the House of Commons itself, its members, their personal relationships, their elections and their constituencies. He would make a study of « that marvellous microcosmos »¹⁰ of English social and political life which would give him the clue to the understanding of an age which no less laborious method could achieve.

The two volumes on the *Structure of Politics* seemed to him therefore when he wrote them an introductory work which would provide the institutional and sociological background to his later studies.

« I take the reader » he said in his preface « through the House of Commons as constituted about the time of George III's accession, and I try to analyse it from the angle of purpose. Here is an ant-heap, with the human ants hurrying in long files along their various paths; their joint achievement does not concern us, nor the changes which supervene in their

9. *Ibid.* I, V.

10. *Ibid.* I, VI.

11. *Ibid.* I, VII.

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community, only the pathetically intent, seemingly self-conscious running of individuals along beaten tracks ».¹¹

The sub-titles of his first Chapter headed «Why Men went into Parliament » have become famous.

«Predestination: the Inevitable Parliament Man.

Honour with Ease: the Country Gentlemen.

The Treasury Bench: the Politicians.

Coronets: the Social Climbers.

«Private and Pecuniary»:¹² Placemen and Purveyors of Favours.

Professional Advancement: the Services and the Law.

The Soldiers

The Sailors

The Civil Servants

The Lawyers.

Contracts, Remittances and Loans: the Merchants and Bankers.

Immunity: Robbers, Muddlers, Bastards and Bankrupts ».

He went on to treat in further chapters, each illustrated by a wealth of material, the electoral structure of England, the general election of 1761, several specific political areas – Shropshire politics and men at the accession of George III, the Cornish boroughs: «there was a peculiar excellence in the Cornish boroughs which makes them worthy of attention, irrelevancy having reached in them its highest development»¹³ –, two Treasury boroughs, and the Secret Service Money, believed by historians, on the evidence of contemporary allegations, to have been the centre of a vast system of parliamentary corruption and proving in fact to be something much less sinister with more «jobbery, stupidity and human charity about in than bribery».¹⁴ In all he found neither anything resembling the interplay of constitutional principles or political parties enunciating them, nor a system of government by corruption counteracting the free working of these parties; but on the contrary an infinite complexity of interests and what he denominated by the eighteenth century generic term of «connexions».

In his *Structure of Politics* he aimed only at clearing the way for his further exploration of English political life in the age of its American Revolution, and for the narrative history in which the characteristics would unfold them-

12. The marking on a letter addressed to the Duke of Newcastle. Namier comments «The best part of the correspondence addressed to the Duke by Members of Parliament deserves this heading». (*Ibid.* I, 21).

13. *Ibid.* II, 371.

14. *Ibid.* I, 290.

selves. But the first volume of this projected «magnum opus» which he published next year did no more than touch on these great issues, and it had no sequel. He was himself fully aware that an analysis of the structure of the House of Commons did not provide a comprehensive study of the structure of eighteenth century politics or even fully explain how this House carried out its political functions. At the beginning of *England in the Age of the American Revolution* he did indeed bring together in general terms the conclusions of his first work insofar as he sought to explain how his human ants in their ant-heap could provide the basis for a tolerable system of government. It is an explanation which makes clear that he applied to his English studies the same psychological criteria as to his European ones - that the rational plays less part in politics than the rationalizers have assumed, and that men's minds do not necessarily work the worse in society for being largely non-rational.

His House of Commons «that peculiar club» was one to which election at all times «required some expression of consent on the part of the public», and it was at no time «truly unrepresentative»¹⁵ whatever the demoralizing nature of the contemporary electoral system and its «nonsensical features». «The rotten boroughs were a necessary part of the eighteenth-century organization of the British Government» he wrote «while corruption in populous boroughs was the effect of citizen status in an electorate not fully awake to national interests».¹⁶ Even at its worst such corruption «was a mark of English freedom and independence, for no one bribes where he can bully»,¹⁷ and, without these highly questionable institutions in the political life of the time, the House of Commons would have represented «one class only, the landed interest».

The reason therefore why so extraordinary an institution served a political purpose lay in the nature of English society itself. In a few brilliant pages he sketched out his vision of eighteenth century England, a country «which knows not democracy as a doctrine, but has always practised it as a fine art», where good fortune in history and geography had made possible the growth of regard for property and law, where land was the most prized form of property but where trade was acknowledged to be the great concern of the nation, where civilization «is essentially the work of the leisured classes», and the civilization neither urban nor rural, and where movement between classes was comparatively easy yet classes sharply marked, and, most important of all, a country where the social structure «the product of many centuries of close organic growth was compact and complex». Namier, sardonic in his judgments on individuals, showed himself, like Edmund Burke before him, some-

15. *England in the Age of the American Revolution* (London 1930) 3.

16. *Ibid.* 4.

17. *Ibid.* 4-5.

thing of a romantic about the institutions of his adopted country; but though he no doubt magnified some of its virtues (contrasting them with the very different conditions of which he had had personal experience), his judgments never failed to be perceptive and acute.¹⁸

But to have explained the House of Commons and its function in society was not to have completed a study of English politics; for the House of Commons played an essential part in the government of England, but it did not govern the country, nor did it even make up the whole of the legislative part of that theoretical entity the King in Parliament (Namier, though deeply interested in the influence of Peers on the lower House, displayed little interest in the corporate activities of the House of Lords). He recognized fully that the government of the country rested with the King and his ministers, and that a study of governmental activities was at least as important for an understanding of mid-eighteenth century politics as that of the House of Commons with which government was so closely connected. In a brief 'Prolegomena' to his *England in the Age of the American Revolution* he sketched out the position as he saw it in the two preceding reigns.¹⁹ In his Ford Lectures delivered at Oxford in 1934 and entitled *King, Cabinet and Parliament in the early years of George III* he made a tentative but more comprehensive approach to the subject. He told his auditors «Previously I had concentrated to a large extent on the nature of Parliament in the early years of George III's reign, on members, constituencies and the subtler connexions with Government». He told them that he now hoped to move on to the study of «the nature of the government at the centre»²⁰ between 1763 and 1770, but he admitted that work on the scale he considered necessary for this study was still far from complete and that his views were not yet fully crystallized; he was not prepared to publish the lectures until he had carried his research further and the coming of the second World War brought to a final conclusion this part of his historical ambitions. When many years later he returned to his eighteenth century studies, it was to concentrate in his work in the great *History of Parliament* on still further perfecting his knowledge of the House of Commons by detailed biographical studies of its members.²¹

18. *Ibid.* 6-46.

19. *Ibid.* 49-134.

20. Quoted from some notes on his 'Ford Lectures' published posthumously with an introductory note in *Crossroads of Power* (London 1962) 75.

21. NAMIER and J. BROOKE were editors of the *History of Parliament The House of Commons 1759-1790* in three volumes which came out in 1964 after Namier's death. He had not been able to work on the 'Introductory Survey' which took up nearly half of the first volume, but he had contributed greatly to volumes II and III (which consist of biographies of members of Parliament and which contain some of his most characteristic work), and to the study of constituencies which made up the second part of the first volume.

There survives only one publication of his later years in which he sought to give expression to his views on the nature of the English government system, as they had matured in his mind during the past twenty years. This is his Romanes Lecture, delivered in Oxford in 1952 entitled *Monarchy and the Party System*.²² In this he described the «mixed form of government» as he saw it in the period of which he had made himself the master. Contemporaries admired it for its «skilful division of power», but in fact it was highly unstable since it depended on «the insoluble contradictions of a political system which, incongruously, associated a royal executive with parliamentary struggles for office. Yet the two had to coexist in an organic transition from royal to parliamentary government». The transition was to be carried out «by the direction of government passing from the Sovereign to the Prime Minister by a process that can be logically defined but eludes precise dating»²³ through the development of the modern party system.

«Parliamentary Government based on the party system» he said «is not an ingenious device, the product of creative thought... Its bases are deep down in the political structure of the nation, which was being gradually transformed during the period of so-called mixed government. An electorate thinking in terms of nation-wide parties is its indispensable basis; and it is therefore at least as much in the constituencies as in parliament that the growth of these parties will have to be traced. In the eighteenth century parliament was without that background of enfranchised masses thinking in terms of party; it was to a high degree a closed arena with its own life and divisions».²⁴

«To clear up these antecedents must be the contribution of us eighteenth-century historians to the essential work on the least explored period of British constitutional history», but he no longer confidently believed that it was within his own powers to make this contribution.²⁵

22. Printed in *Personalities and Powers* cit., 13-38 and *Crossroads of Power* (1966)

23. *Personalities and Powers* cit., 14.

24. *Ibid.* 37.

25. *Ibid.* 38.