

INTRODUCTION: THAT NEVER-ENDING BATTLE

In September of 1854, the future popular historian Henry Thomas Buckle wrote to his friend Maria Grey, who was then becoming a powerful advocate of female education, to thank her for returning his much cherished six-volume set of August Comte's *Cours de philosophie positive* (1830–42). He had earlier lent Gray the volumes along with a set of instructions both for reading the difficult work and also for providing for its proper care. He suggested reading the 'Exposition' of the first volume but then skipping the analysis of the physical sciences contained in the first three only to return to them after reading the very important, in his mind at least, later volumes on the social sciences. He pressed her to keep *Philosophie positive* always in a safe place when not reading it, perhaps keeping it in a cupboard, 'as on several grounds I value it very much, and I never leave it out at home'.¹ When she returned the volumes because she was going on a trip to the country, Buckle expressed regret that she did not take them with her. Such a trip would have been the perfect time to try and get through Comte's rather unpleasant prose, but perhaps more importantly, 'in the country one particularly needs some intellectual employment to prevent the mind from falling into those vacant raptures which the beauties of nature are apt to suggest'. As Buckle explained, it was important to balance out that 'old antagonism ... between science and art' because 'that is a battle which will never be ended'.² Nor, according to Buckle, should it be.

For Buckle, there would always be an inherent tension between science and art; the key thing is finding the appropriate balance between the two and maintaining that never-ending tension. This was a central aspect of his two-volume *History of Civilization in England* (published in 1857 and 1861). In this work, Buckle took up Comte's call to apply the same scientific methods of the physical sciences to the study of the human world, in particular to the study of human history. While Buckle rejected Comte's Religion of Humanity, that is, his attempt to apply the scientific method to the ordering of society, he was profoundly impressed with Comte's determination to place the study of humanity on a scientific footing. He argued that if properly studied it would be found that

human history is governed by laws in much the same way that the motions of the planets are subject to the laws of gravity. The immense popularity of Buckle's book made 'the science of history' a surprisingly popular topic of conversation among the chattering classes and, perhaps not coincidentally, making history a science became a widespread goal within the burgeoning historical profession.³

But Buckle's reasons for wanting to put history on a scientific footing were quite a bit different from most other English proponents of scientific history, and he had a very different conception of just what it meant to make history a science. What Buckle found so unappealing about the contemporary state of historical writing was the failure of historians to generalize, to connect seemingly unconnected phenomena. He bemoaned the growing specialization of historians where one knows nothing about the economy while another knows nothing of society, the seeming lack of historical imagination and philosophical speculation, and, perhaps most importantly, the increasing devotion to facts and facts alone.⁴ Buckle would have very much sympathized with Charles Dickens's lampooning of fictional historian and fact-grubber Thomas Gradgrind who teaches his students that 'Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else.'⁵ Historians, for Buckle, certainly needed facts but they needed to think about them more imaginatively and speculatively. They needed ideally to be more like Newton and let their imagination be carried off from the discovery of a single (or simple) fact like an apple falling from a tree to the nether regions of the universe.⁶ Buckle advocated appropriating the new science of statistics while embracing a poetic imagination that would allow the historian to uncover history's equivalent to physics' gravity. A true science of history for Buckle could only be possible with an equal acceptance of the necessary artistic elements inherent in scientific discovery and dissemination, an acceptance, in other words, in that necessary and ever-present tension between science and art.⁷

Those many English historians who followed Buckle in calling history a science were less accepting, however, of what he believed was an inherent but necessary tension between science and art and they were less convinced by his particular brand of scientific history.⁸ For this group, the problem with the discipline of history was not that historians had yet to discover laws of historical development, but that there seemed to be very little to distinguish history from other forms of literature, particularly that of fiction. The first half of the nineteenth century witnessed a general blurring of the boundaries between the historical and the fictional. This blurring was most particularly felt in the form of Romantic historical novels that often purported to give a true sense of past historical times and persons without having to rely on the constricting nature of mundane and minute facts that would generally turn such interesting stories into a form of writing that was, according to Walter Scott, 'dryas dust.'⁹ Just as a revolution in printing and literacy was taking place,¹⁰ historical novels flooded

the marketplace, presenting a picture of the past that was romantic and exciting, poetic and heroic, and very often published under the explicit label of ‘history’ as was William Makepeace Thackeray’s novel *The History of Henry Esmond* (1852). Literature about the past became hugely popular, and many historians of the first half of the nineteenth century seemed to generally embrace what Ann Rigney calls a ‘romantic historicism’ that accepted the sublime nature of the past, of its central unknowability, while appropriating rather than rejecting the literary and narrative techniques of their fictional counterparts. Men of letters such as Thomas Carlyle and Thomas Babington Macaulay wrote works of history that very much read like Romantic novels. Carlyle, in particular, was not afraid of blending the fictional with the factual, while Macaulay wrote about moments in time that read like scenes right out of Scott’s Waverly novels.¹¹ There was very little separating the novelist from the historian and history as the subject of analysis was certainly not limited to a select group of historical observers.

Most historians who embraced the science of history in the second half of the century wanted to transform the public perception that, according to Carlyle, ‘all men are historians.’¹² For these historians, making history a science meant making history above all an autonomous discipline of study, where historians would have to adhere to a common set of methodological assumptions thereby separating the *trained* historian from a mere man of letters. As we will see in Chapter 2, this group, led by the Anglicans William Stubbs, J. R. Seeley and Edward A. Freeman, and the liberal Catholic Lord Acton, looked not to post-Revolutionary France for their scientific inspiration (as was often pejoratively claimed of Buckle) but to Protestant Germany, finding in the work of Leopold von Ranke in particular a scientific model worth replicating.¹³ This was a method that emphasized the importance of individual facts that were to be uncovered not by reading other historians but in the newly opened and expanding state archives. Ranke also stressed that the presentation of such facts must be devoid of an individual subjectivity and literary style, that the facts alone must be presented. The historian, for Ranke, was no longer a literary genius writing about the past in the same way a novelist writes about the fictional world, full of judgements and lessons of morality. The true scientific historian merely presents the past as it actually happened – ‘*wie es eigentlich gewesen*.’¹⁴

This was a message that accorded more closely with most English historians’ religious beliefs and it actually seemed to be the application of an English tradition of science stretching back to Francis Bacon and Robert Boyle.¹⁵ What is more, the royal road to science seemed to follow the general adoption of the Baconian method as was clearly the case with new sciences such as geology in the early nineteenth century. Baconianism was becoming an ‘idol of the marketplace’, and historians looking to make their own discipline a science found in Ranke’s work a powerful exemplar of Baconian induction applied to historical

phenomena.¹⁶ Ranke's inductive approach was, therefore, an authoritative scientific method that English historians had a much easier time embracing than Buckle's rather deterministic model that was also still explicitly literary. Indeed, Buckle's method seemed to give prominence to generalists or literary geniuses, whereas the Rankean method promoted the creation of historical workers and researchers, those ready to engage in a difficult and gruelling analysis of specialized sources and subject matters that would be presented to the public in as accurate a form as possible. They wanted in particular to get away from the Romantic portrayals of English history that tended to skew the boundaries between history and literature, science and art.

Of course, there were still many historical writers in the second half of the century who felt little allegiance to any 'science of history' and they set about carrying on the English tradition of Romantic historicism and maintaining the inherent connections between history and literature. Chapter 3 considers the two most outspoken artistic historians in this period, Charles Kingsley and James Anthony Froude, two fairly radical Anglicans who were both highly influenced by Thomas Carlyle and who also had earlier in their literary careers written quite controversial works of autobiography that masqueraded as fiction. They were both openly sceptical of Buckle's science of history which, they argued, undermined the essential indeterminacy of the past. Froude in particular openly doubted whether history could be a science at all, even under the Rankean approach.¹⁷ The historian was first and foremost a writer in Froude's mind and he became a powerful and popular voice upholding history's art against its science throughout the later Victorian period.

In order to establish the inductive scientific method of history as the one true historical method, historians such as Stubbs set out to establish a clean break between their scientific and serious pursuit and the more artistic and immature practice of their literary enemies. Romantic history was presented as a practice of a time when the actual facts of the past were little known and the historian had to generalize and imagine as much as possible in order to establish some sense of what happened. Such studies were by necessity subjective and overly burdened by the presence of the author. The state of historical knowledge in the nineteenth century, however, rendered Romantic historical writing an antiquated practice that must be abandoned. In the place of the subjective, untrustworthy, and inherently controversial writer of *belles lettres* only interested in entertaining and selling books with little regard for the actuality of the past, scientific historians advanced an objective, trustworthy, and disinterested historical worker only interested in presenting the past as it actually happened. For Stubbs, in particular, the historian was no literary genius but an archival worker tasked with uncovering and disseminating the facts of the past.¹⁸ Or, as Lord Acton would have it, it was not genius that made the historian but the inductive method.¹⁹ This

was a message that the historical community would for the most part embrace, though, as we will see, even among the Rankeans there was by no means absolute consensus on just what that message meant.

What the Rankean historians did agree upon, however, was the necessity of ridding the discipline of what Freeman would refer to as the 'torrent of Lives' that had been flooding the general reading market, those Romantic studies of great men and women masquerading as serious history.²⁰ Part of the process of establishing the Rankean approach as the orthodox historical methodology involved emphasizing the *discipline* of history in establishing an appropriate demarcation between good history and bad, between a proper scientific analysis of the past and a mere Romantic narrative of a largely imaginary past. Here English historians were also following the lead of their more properly scientific colleagues who were seeking to establish more formal boundaries between the work done by men of science and that done by popularizers and other interlopers who often appropriated the work of others and at times even put forward such findings to suit their own interests while embracing a Romantic form of narration that would appeal to broader audiences.²¹ Robert Chambers's hugely popular and anonymously published *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1844) is a case in point. That work sought to synthesize current work on the question of transmutation in order to explain the history of essentially everything, written in a pleasing Romantic narrative that found its way onto many Victorians' night tables and reading stands. In attempting to establish themselves as the proper investigators and disseminators of scientific knowledge, men of science such as Thomas Henry Huxley often viciously attacked the work of popularizers, supposed imposters and promoters of pseudo-science like that of phrenology. *Vestiges* was, in particular, brutally attacked and not just because it had popularized a heretical theory of transmutation. Huxley, for instance, was simply disgusted that a work of such shoddy scholarship could find a large readership simply because of the way in which it was written.²² The boundaries that were established through fights such as this one, between scientific naturalists, natural theologians, North British physicists, popularizers of various stripes, gentlemanly naturalists and professionalizing men of science, were part of a broader struggle for cultural authority that historians of science have found so central in the formation of Victorian science.²³

Scientific historians were very much a part of this struggle for cultural authority. Much like the burgeoning men of science, scientific historians criticized works that seemed to rely on an overblown Romantic narrative. Such reviews would essentially be foils to promote the Rankeans' supposedly more serious and scientific approach. Buckle, who was largely seen as a popularizer of pseudo-scientific ideas, suffered from such epistemic boundary work, as did Macaulay, Carlyle, and Kingsley. However, it was Froude who likely suffered the

most sustained criticism, as we will see in Chapter 4.²⁴ Froude's studies were not only written in an artistic style but they were immensely popular and what is more, he relied quite extensively on archival research thereby undermining the chief complaint about Romantic histories, that they were not based on an extensive reading of the primary sources. Not only was Froude suggesting that artistic history could be based on primary research, his historical studies also made it more than clear that such work need not be unreadable but could be enjoyed by the general public.

The chief disciplinarians for the Rankean method were Freeman and Seeley who did much to promote the new scientific method while challenging the merits of a history that seemed to rely more on artistic flair than a strict representation of the facts. Their primary concern was the way in which they believed artistic historians skewed the facts of the past in order to please a popular readership. How could such writers be true to the past while entertaining such a wide audience? Seeley, in particular, believed that such a thing was impossible and he sought to show that proper scientific history would simply be uninteresting for the general reader, that it was ideally for historical peers alone.²⁵ Freeman was not entirely convinced that good scientific history could not also be interesting, but he was sure that historians who explicitly embraced an artistic method simply could not tell the past as it actually happened. Because of their method, they would always be tempted to shape the facts to fit a more fascinating narrative.²⁶ He spent much of his career victimizing Froude, engaging in painstaking reviews that sought to point out the countless inaccuracies engendered by Froude's false historical method. There were very real consequences for not adhering to history's new scientific method. The diagnosing of 'Froude's disease' was one such consequence, that is, the artistic disease of inherent inaccuracy, which became a powerful stigma that would blight Froude's name well after his death.²⁷

It was certainly much easier to explain what was wrong with artistic history than to explain just what a proper inductive science of history was supposed to look like. If both scientific and artistic historians admitted that histories had to rely on primary authorities, the difference suddenly becomes one of degree rather than one of kind. What scientific historians began to stress about Froude and others was not the lack of research but rather the subjective presence in their writing. Scientific historians, on the other hand, wanted ideally to absent themselves from their discourse and in this way become truly disinterested while letting the past speak for itself. In other words, their identity as scientific historians was connected to a particular form of objectivity, though 'disinterest', 'impartial', 'impersonal' or 'self-restraint' were the key terms more likely to be used by these historians. They sought to let the past speak by being true to their sources, that is by detaching their own subjective views from the study and dissemination of those sources. In this way Rankean historians seemed to mimic a

'mechanical' form of objectivity that has been noticed in the work of naturalists during the same period who sought to let nature speak for itself,²⁸ though it is important to note that it was not just a passive, self-effacing process – an escape from self. It was also an act of self-overcoming, of the creation of a new detached self who could be trusted to impart knowledge of the past while even making judgements about what happened.²⁹ There was something deeply moral that underpinned the creation of this detached scientific self as if it was the primary duty of the truly scientific historian. This was a duty that was clearly shirked by Romantic historians whose obvious literary style was a clear sign of an author's presence and therefore of his or her weak historical mind. At its most ideal, a true scientific history would be devoid of style and perspective, of all imprints of individuality and subjectivity, something that could only be the product of a strong-willed devotion to overcoming Romanticizing temptations. The scientific historian would essentially be a trusted mediator of historical truth, much like the men of science who sought to establish themselves as trusted authorities on natural knowledge.

Actually fulfilling the requirements of such a method is surely impossible, whether for the historian or the naturalist, but a few historical monographs were held up as powerful exemplars of just this method, most notably William Stubbs's *Constitutional History* (1873–8), a book where it was said that the author's 'power of restraint' holds any 'personal expression' in check 'until the last paragraph of the third volume' where his presence is finally felt.³⁰ Other publishing ventures such as the quarterly *English Historical Review*, first published in 1886, and the Acton-directed *Cambridge Modern History*, first published in 1902, also provided a space outside of the general periodical press for the scientific historian to write under the inductive methodology, free, in theory, of the pressures of the dramatic dictates of popular publishers and their reading audiences (see Chapter 5).

This is not to suggest, however, that those promoting scientific history at the expense of Romantic history wanted to make history as unreadable as possible, as a mere list of facts. While, rhetorically, some Rankean historians such as Seeley approached such extremes in their methodological pronouncements, they were never quite as 'dryasdust' as someone like Scott or Dickens might have lamented, and certainly many of the so-called Romantics shared much of the same respect for the importance of primary research and of historical facts, Froude being a primary example. Much of the battle between the two groups seemed to have less to do with the actual content of the histories than with the answer one might give to a fundamental question: Is history a science or a form of art? The Romantic Froude and the Rankean Seeley would have given knee-jerk responses to such a question, reflecting the opposite sides to this seemingly binary debate – and yet their work, much like most other historical writing of the period, reads as

if underpinned by a more nuanced method. Indeed, Rankean historians who were adamant that history was a science, that it *had* to be a science, still wanted to make their work more palatable to a wider audience than their normative one of historical peers and they struggled with finding a balance between their new scientific demands and their personas as very public literary figures. In the same way that men of science such as Huxley sought to erect boundaries between their own work and that of interlopers even while seeking ultimately to diffuse their views about science to society at large, scientific historians above all wanted their work to be appreciated, their findings disseminated, and their method embraced in the classrooms as much as in the reading halls and in parliament.³¹ Some historians, like Freeman, became very good at addressing different audiences with ultimately the same message, at wearing different hats depending on the occasion, and at writing very specialized and (admittedly) repetitive studies largely for historical peers and more popular studies for general audiences, while others, like Stubbs, seemed only capable of addressing an audience of peers alone, unable to change hats as it were.

There was also a general assumption by Rankean historians that there was a large reading audience that was not being served by the Romantic works that filled the bookshops, and that a wider audience could be found for more serious scholarly work. But convincing publishers of the value of their work was just as important as convincing the public and, as Leslie Howsam has shown in a series of important studies, historians often had to bend to the demands of their publishers rather than suffer the consequence of refusing to bend their scientific principles.³² That consequence was silence, and every historian under study here, perhaps with the exception of Seeley, wanted a large public audience for their work (and Seeley found a large audience whether he wanted one or not). Some historians were certainly better able to speak to that audience than others, and that supposedly large readership clamouring for the normative Rankean work promoted by the likes of Freeman, Seeley, Acton and Stubbs, never quite materialized as was made most clear by the rather small group of readers who subscribed to the *English Historical Review* despite attempts to change its initially narrow editorial mandate (discussed in Chapter 6).

What is more, as discussed in Chapter 5, there were moments when the consensus among the Rankeans fell apart. Previously unspoken problems in the rhetorical method were exposed, such as when Mandell Creighton's devotion to a more 'mechanical' presentation of the facts of the Catholic Counter-Reformation did not do justice, according to Lord Acton, to the vast abuses of the Catholic Church. Creighton, of course, believed that he was following the Rankean prescription of avoiding making his history into a series of judgements on the past. Acton, who was seen as the foremost practitioner of the Rankean method, suddenly appeared as a great defender of an older view of history where the past was

judged by the preconceptions of the present. Their fascinating debate about the role of judgements in historical analysis, as well as the necessary centrality of a universal Christian moral code, sheds much light on just how divided historians could be who appeared, on the surface at least, to agree on fundamental methodological principles.

The gap between the practice and principle of an inductive scientific history is considered further in Chapter 7 where the obituaries of the main Rankean historians are discussed as a forum where their historical careers received critical appraisal from a younger generation. The obituaries that mark their deaths read like death notices not just for the historians but for the scientific history they promoted. It is not as if the obituary writers did not appreciate the critical methods of research and writing that the Rankean historians promoted, to the contrary. However, the obituary writers all highlighted the artistry of their works, or regretted when it was not relied upon more fully. The art of history was not only alive and well at the end of the century, it was deemed an unspoken part of the scientific historian's method from the beginning, despite the deceased's methodological claims to the contrary. By the turn of the century, there seemed to be a general acceptance that a certain amount of poetic imagination along with a reliance on primary sources, makes for the best history, that history was at once a science and a form of art. It would be going too far to suggest that the tension and even battle between science and art in historical writing ends at the turn of the century as the boundaries separating the two as well as the grudging overlap between them has continued to be negotiated and renegotiated throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries much like it was during the Victorian period. But, in Britain at least, it has been over 100 years since it was fashionable to try and let the past speak for itself despite the long hegemony of empiricism during the same period.³³

Indeed, it was not long after Lord Acton's death in 1902 that it became common currency not to take seriously the specific scientific claims typical of his generation. It is for partly this reason that the historiography on the topic has received scant attention outside of a few articles and chapters.³⁴ There has been much work done on Victorian history-writing from very general studies on the period as a whole to monographs on individual historians.³⁵ There is also a considerable historiography on the institutionalization of history.³⁶ The historians of English history in particular have been analysed and their studies are often grouped under a term that at the time had a strictly political meaning: *whig*.³⁷ Historians as methodologically diverse as Froude and Freeman, Macaulay and Stubbs are said to have shared the same essential narrative framework of English history, one that foregrounded tradition, continuity, progress and a natural historical process.³⁸ No doubt there are elements of this tradition that extend throughout many historical works that have been produced in the Victorian

period and beyond. Indeed, these studies tell us a great deal about the content of Victorian history-writing, but they tell us little about the actual engagement historians were making with scientific methodologies when their scientific claims are dismissed as mere rhetorical strategy.

This book takes seriously the scientific discourses that were constructed throughout the period under study, whether from the pen of Henry Thomas Buckle or that of his more conservative inductive critics. The focus here is less on the content of the monographs and historical studies of the historians discussed and more so on those places where we find the historian engaged in methodological analysis. That was more typically found in prefaces, in lectures, in periodical articles, in reviews and in letters – those places where historians spoke specifically to one another while they at times also addressed the public. This leaves much of the analysis at the level of rhetoric but not only so. In considering the creation of scientific history in Victorian Britain we are essentially considering the creation of a community and the construction of its central myth. Such requires the consideration of a broader historical context, one that includes the biographies and personalities of the key figures as well as the religious and social debates of the day as they informed the much more narrow struggle to make history a science.

Given that this book is about the attempt to make history a science and establish a scientific historical method, a word, perhaps, should be said about the method that underpins this study, though such a statement in some ways undermines the narrative strategy employed throughout, one that seeks to analyse through description and illustration rather than through explicit causal interpretation. The more I study this period and the more in-depth my research becomes, from initially examining published sources to expanding my research base to include the correspondences and other archival and unpublished materials, the more difficult it is to make specific causal interpretations about what it all means. It is perhaps necessary that the more one studies about a given topic the less easy it becomes to make bald statements of generalized fact without countless exceptions and hedges, that the analysis must become more nuanced and the general argument less specific and determinate. It has become clear to me that, ironically, telling the story of ‘what actually happened’ is less and less possible the more one learns about it and I have become sceptical of the historian who is far too sure of him or herself, who is able to condense the vicissitudes of any event into a few choice statements, making it far too apparent that what happened happened necessarily in a certain way. Indeed, it should be clear to anyone who has taken the time to thoroughly investigate the past that ‘replaying life’s tape’, as Stephen Jay Gould once so eloquently put it in a slightly different context, would bear witness to an entirely different narrative thanks to countless contingencies.³⁹ With this in mind I have sought, wherever possible, to let the

facts speak for themselves but not as Lord Acton would have done had he written a book, but rather by letting the subjects speak in their own words as often as is possible and without the intrusion of a metahistorical voice telling the reader what it is all supposed to mean. I certainly have my own broad interpretation about what happened as the introduction will have made clear, and even more particularly what, for instance, was meant by a particular quoted statement. But the analysis throughout is meant to be subtle and presented in the organization of the material and in illustrations and descriptions; it is an analysis that should allow the reader to make his or her own way. While this method has been influenced by much more recent studies of the contingency of historical events, of the strangeness and incomprehensibility of the past, and of the importance of self-conscious literary modes of representation in expressing such contingency,⁴⁰ it is not a method that would have been entirely foreign or incomprehensible to the diverse historians under study. A few might even have approved.⁴¹

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