Keith C. Sewell

Herbert Butterfield and the Interpretation of History

Studies in Modern History General Editor: J. C. D. Clark

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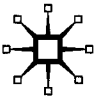

Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2005 978-1-4039-3928-9

First published 2005 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN
Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS and
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N. Y. 10010
Companies and representatives throughout the world

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ISBN 978-1-349-51978-1 ISBN 978-0-230-00093-3 (eBook)
DOI 10.1057/9780230000933

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Sewell, Keith C.
Herbert Butterfield and the interpretation of history / Keith C. Sewell.
p. cm. – (Studies in modern history)
Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN 978-1-4039-3928-9
1. Butterfield, Herbert, Sir, 1900- 2. History–Philosophy. 3. Historiography.
I. Title. II. Studies in modern history (Palgrave Macmillan (Firm))

D15.B86S48 2004
907'.2'02–dc22

2004048942

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
14 13 12 11 10 09 08 07 06 05

Transferred to Digital Printing 2012

for Alida

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Acknowledgements

At the outset I would like to record that it was Dr John Cookson of the University of Canterbury, New Zealand, who, in the context of his lectures on eighteenth-century English politics, first drew my attention to Herbert Butterfield's *The Whig Interpretation of History*. At a later stage Dr C. Thomas McIntire, then at the Institute for Christian Studies, Toronto, Canada, greatly stimulated my interest in Butterfield with his reading of key passages in Butterfield's *Man on His Past*. Thereafter Professor Peter Munz of the Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand, further encouraged my interest in the theory of history and the history of historiography at what proved to be a crucial time. I would like to record my appreciation for the way in which Dr Brian Wormald and Professor F. H. Hinsley, both of the University of Cambridge, and Dr Francis West, then of Deakin University, Victoria, Australia, all set aside valuable time in order to discuss the work of Herbert Butterfield. This volume is an updated revision of my 1991 doctoral dissertation. Here I owe special thanks to Professor Irmline Veit-Brause, of the School of Humanities, Deakin University, for her challenging supervision, and Dr Ian Weeks also of the School of Humanities, and Mr Roy Hay of the School of Social Science for their timely and practical advice. More recently I have benefited from the encouragement, patience and advice of Professor Jonathan Clark and the staff at Palgrave Macmillan in connection with the publication of this work. Evelyn Hielema gave valuable assistance at a crucial time.

I owe special thanks to Lady Pamela Butterfield and the Cambridge University Library who so kindly gave me permission to research the Butterfield papers held by the Department of Manuscripts, Cambridge University Library. The Department of Manuscripts catalogued the Butterfield papers after I had completed my research. My thanks also to Mr John D. Wells of the Cambridge University Library for so efficiently providing me with the relevant correct references. I should also like to acknowledge the many courtesies I have received from university and other research librarians and archivists over the years. I am particularly grateful to Dr Roger W. Lovatt, the College Archivist, Peterhouse, Cambridge for his assistance on a number of bibliographical matters.

In addition, I wish to thank the many friends and colleagues who have variously stimulated my thinking on Butterfield. I fear that these

have been too many to be all mentioned by name. I should like to express my special appreciation to Dr Bruce C. Wearne of Point Lonsdale, Victoria, Australia, and Professor Harry Van Dyke of Redeemer University College, Ancaster, Ontario for their friendly and wise counsel over the years.

The debt of gratitude that I owe to my wife, Alida, is considerable. My work on Butterfield would not have been brought to its present stage without her patience and support. Her keen eye has saved me from some blunders and many infelicities. She has checked innumerable references with great care. Of course, any errors that remain are my own. I hope that this volume will help stimulate reflection on the history of historical thought in general, and the work of Herbert Butterfield in particular.

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Abbreviations

Used in endnotes and bibliographies

AHR	American Historical Review
BP	Butterfield Papers, Cambridge University Library, Department of Manuscripts
CHJ	*Cambridge Historical Journal*
CJ	*Cambridge Journal*
CNL	*Christian News-Letter*
CR	*The Cambridge Review*
DH	*The Diversity of History: Essays in Honour of Sir Herbert Butterfield.* Ed. J. H. Elliott and H. G. Koenigsberger. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul (1970)
DHI	*Dictionary in the History of Ideas* (New York, 1973)
DI	*Diplomatic Investigations.* Ed. Butterfield and Wight (1966)
FH	*Fides et Historia*
EHR	*English Historical Review*
H	*History* (New Series)
HJ	*Historical Journal*
HT	*History and Theory*
IA	*International Affairs*
JBS	*Journal of British Studies*
JHI	*Journal of the History of Ideas*
JMH	*Journal of Modern History*
L	*The Listener*
PBA	*Proceedings of the British Academy*
TLS	*Times Literary Supplement*
TRHS	*Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*
TT	*Time and Tide* (London)
WMQ	*William and Mary Quarterly*

Works by Herbert Butterfield as abbreviated in endnotes

CDW	*Christianity, Diplomacy and War* (1953)
CH	*Christianity and History* (1949)
DI	*Diplomatic Investigations* (1966)
EH	*The Englishman and His History* (1944)

GH	*George III and the Historians* (1957, revised 1959)
GIH	'God in History' (1952, as reprinted 1958)
GNP	*George III, Lord North and the People* (1949)
HN	*The Historical Novel* (1924)
ICTC	*International Conflict in the Twentieth Century* (1960)
LA	*Lord Acton* (1948)
MHP	*Man on his Past* (1955)
N	*Napoleon* (1939)
NH	'Napoleon and Hitler' (1941)
OH	*The Origins of History* (1981)
OMS	*The Origins of Modern Science* (1949, revised 1957)
PTN	*The Peace Tactics by Napoleon* (1929)
RIH	'The Role of the Individual in History' (1955).
SM	*The Statecraft of Machiavelli* (1940)
SMH	*The Study of Modern History* (1944)
UET	*The Universities and Education Today* (1962)
WCH	*Writings on Christianity and History* (1979)
WIH	*The Whig Interpretation of History* (1931)

Introduction

Herbert Butterfield was born at Oxenhope, Yorkshire, on 7 October 1900. He went up to Peterhouse, Cambridge, from the Keighley Trade Grammar School, in 1919. There he read for the Cambridge Historical Tripos under the tutorship of Paul Vellacott, a meticulous writer who published little.[1] The young Butterfield was drawn to romantic historical fiction and first approached history from a literary standpoint. Eventually, his essay 'Art is History Made Organic' attracted attention in Peterhouse. He was elected a Fellow in 1923 and won the 'La Bas' Prize for *The Historical Novel* (1924) in the same year. At least from 1923 onwards he was strongly influenced by Harold Temperley, the highly regarded Peterhouse diplomatic historian. A strong individualist, Butterfield could be sparing in acknowledging the influence of others. He was trained as a diplomatic historian and in this field greatly admired Temperley and G. P. Gooch.[2] Butterfield owed much to his father, Albert Butterfield, who encouraged his son to enter the Methodist ministry. In 1917 Herbert began lay preaching to Methodist congregations in Yorkshire and continued the practice in Cambridgeshire until 1936. On occasions he also taught at Wesley House in Cambridge.[3] Always opposed to fundamentalism, he was sympathetic to the positive features of English evangelicalism.[4] In the tradition of Wesley, Christianity for him was a religion of the heart. However, he matured at a time when English Protestantism had been profoundly influenced by nineteenth-century German higher critical scholarship. While the latter had tended to erode ancient dogmas, it was often combined with a strong historical and ethical emphasis. Although Butterfield stated that he was 'never actually possessed by the most extreme liberal teaching that had come to us from Germany', he did read Adolf Harnack in his late teens and was 'immensely stimulated' by his writing.[5] While he

abandoned the possibility of entering the Methodist ministry during his early years at Cambridge, he remained on the Cambridge Methodist circuit preaching list until his death. Although he spent most of his life in Cambridge, Butterfield never lost his love for Yorkshire or his distinctive Yorkshire accent.[6] He retained a strong county loyalty, and his work includes writing on such Yorkshire whig champions as George Savile, Marquess of Halifax, Christopher Wyvill and Lord Rockingham.[7] He edited the *Cambridge Historical Journal* from 1938 to 1952, and was elected Professor of Modern History at the University of Cambridge in 1943. In 1947 he became Chairman of the University's Committee for the Establishment of the Teaching of the History of Science.[8] He was Regius Professor from 1963 until his retirement in 1968. He became Master of Peterhouse in 1955. He was Vice-Chancellor of the University of Cambridge and President of the Historical Association from 1959 to 1961. From 1958 until his retirement he was Chairman of the British Committee on the Theory of International Politics. He was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1965. He received a knighthood in 1968, and a *Festschrift* edited by J. H. Elliott and H. G. Koenigsberger entitled *The Diversity of History* in 1970. He died on 23 July 1979.

This work is not a biography. Rather, it is a study of the apparent and actual relationship between the various concepts encountered in Butterfield's writings. His *œuvre* generally focused on the later eighteenth and earlier nineteenth centuries, the era of revolution and reaction, of grand rational theories and of romanticism. His publications contain much on the problems of historical research and the history of historiography.[9] A close reading reveals a lifelong indebtedness to Leopold von Ranke.[10] Butterfield's early output was animated by the romantic desire to recover the immediate particularity and concreteness of the human past. These writings exhibited the view that, in the discipline of history, the only explanation was narration. From this starting point he came to advocate eliminating all general or abstract ideas in the construction of historiographical narratives on the grounds that such intrusions were *ex post facto* interpretative distortions. This was a key thesis of his *Whig Interpretation of History* (1931). As an alternative to such general interpretations, Butterfield offered a supposedly non-interpretative or value-free historiography, which he later called 'technical history', although he sometimes used the terms 'academic' or 'scientific history'.[11] Butterfield based this call for a value-free historiography on his belief that because historiographical statements purportedly deal only with the particular, the concrete and the individual (that is, with life itself), they need not be based on, or ordered accord-

ing to, any value-laden general propositions (or, we might say, any interpretations of life) that purport to be of universal validity. Notwithstanding the clinical and dispassionate resonance of technical history, Butterfield also called for the use of 'sympathetic imagination' or 'imaginative sympathy'. This required the personal involvement of the historian in the mental and emotional act of 'walking alongside', or 'standing in the shoes' of, those in the past whose personalities and actions the historian is seeking to understand. This emphasis on personal experience is somewhat reminiscent of Wilhelm Dilthey's concepts of historical understanding (*Verstehen*) and lived experience (*Erlebnis*). However, although Dilthey's work enjoyed significant posthumous attention, there is no evidence that Butterfield's notions concerning sympathy and imagination were derived from Dilthey. In practice these terms reflected his appropriation of the techniques of the great romantic historical novelists.

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. The same may also be said about his view of man as a fallen and flawed creature. In this respect, 'technical history' notwithstanding, Butterfield may be numbered among those who, from late classical antiquity to the present age, have offered a Christian interpretation of human history. In this context, Butterfield's August 1951 address 'God in History' is important. Here Butterfield sought to bridge the apparent gulf between technical history and his personal interpretation based upon his belief in the operation of a providential order, with an unusually schematic account of historiographical discourse that posited three ways in which, or levels at which, history may be envisaged.[12] The first related to the specificity of past persons and events, and corresponded to technical history. The second was expository and discussed extended processes; it involved statements of a more general and retrospective type. It is the fruit of brooding over the facts,[13] being supposedly constructed exclusively out of the regularities exhibited by the particulars discovered by technical history. This second kind of history required and enriched what Butterfield came to term historical thinking. The third way or level was clearly an expression of fundamental religious belief. Here Butterfield repeatedly affirmed that God constantly and actively upholds a providential order, which he has ordained and without which

there could be no human history. Although this may be said to bring us into the realms of theory, Butterfield insisted that his theses on historical methodology 'would be unaffected by anything the philosopher could state to explain them or to explain them away'.[14] With many other historians he tended to depreciate philosophical debate on historical understanding and explanation.[15] Accordingly, although he repeatedly postulated his concept of technical history, he never presented a rigorous epistemological justification for his advocacy, or indeed the possibility, of the non-interpretative re-presentation of past events without even a tacit dependence on general ideas.

In Butterfield's time much discussion of the philosophy of history was characterised by a widely accepted distinction, as described by W. H. Walsh, between the speculative and the analytical philosophy of history.[16] Writers such as including Augustine, Bossuet, Vico, Kant, Schelling, Hegel, Comte, Buckle, Marx, Spengler and Toynbee, who offered a comprehensive interpretation of the meaning of human history, expressed the 'speculative' philosophy of history. Such writers offered interpretations of world history regarded by many as vitiated by their adherence to religious or philosophical starting points that inevitably distorted the subject matter in procrustean manner. Butterfield's work may be viewed in these terms, at least to the extent that it is based upon his prior Christian beliefs in a providential order and the fall of man. By contrast, the analytical philosophy of history sought to give a theoretical account of the investigative and explanatory procedures used by historians in the research and writing of history. The focus here was not on human events, *res gestae* (things done), but on the cognitive activity of studying and understanding human history, *historia rerum gestarum*. In spite of his adverse attitude towards philosophy and abstract thinking, much of Butterfield's writing on historiographical technique and method, although not philosophically rigorous, is paralleled in the more astringent analytical literature.

The principal debate within the analytical philosophy of history (as defined by Walsh) has taken place between the idealist and the positivist schools of thought. The term idealist is potentially misleading in the context of the later analytical philosophy of history, as its distinguishing features are more properly traced to the writings of Herder, Humboldt and Schleiermacher, rather than to the Kantian or Hegelian systems of philosophical idealism. It is the work of Ranke, at least in its pronounced anti-philosophical and anti-abstract temper, that has been generally held to exemplify the 'idealist' standpoint. Here, history as a discipline is concerned with unique and therefore unrepeatable past

human events. The task of the historian is to exercise imaginative sympathy so as to achieve an authentic insight into the minds, experiences, purposes and motivations of past agents in human history. This calls for an empathy with past persons by the historian, whose aim is to represent authentically past human states of affairs in their specific uniqueness. On this basis history is to be regarded as a discipline *sui generis* because its methodological procedures do not appear to conform to those of the natural sciences as defined by the then prevalent positivism. Although anticipated by von Humboldt and exemplified by von Ranke, a systematic philosophical articulation of this position only came at the end of the nineteenth century in the work of the south-west German school of Neo-Kantianism, of which Wilhelm Windelband and Heinrich Rickert remain the best known representatives. They and Dilthey were seeking to give a systematic account of the procedures that had constituted the methodological basis of the great development of historical studies since the latter part of the eighteenth century. However, the term *Historismus,* used to characterise so profound an historical consciousness, does not appear to have come into general use until after 1918. It was in this later period that Ernst Troeltsch discussed *Historismus* as a philosophical problem. As an historian of religion, Troeltsch was deeply concerned with the relativisation of all values implied in the elevation of the particularising and individualising attitude of *Historismus*. The latter saw all human aspiration and endeavour as wholly enclosed by and subject to the continuing historical process. The absence of any meta-historical standpoint demanded that each age be understood in its own terms. This method was seen as entailing a relativisation of all values. This could not be overcome by invoking eternal principles or the doctrines of natural law, as these too could be shown to have arisen historically.[17]

Meanwhile, in 1931, Butterfield concluded *The Whig Interpretation of History* (hereafter, *The Whig Interpretation*) with a strong criticism of Acton's insistence on the historiographical delivery of ultimate moral judgements.[18] This might appear to place Butterfield among the relativists. However, as some later writings made clearer, he considered historical relativism to be only a matter of methodological technique. This technique did not require the denial of the universal validity of moral principles as such[19] – it was a technique, not a worldview. Butterfield did not forsake Ranke for Burckhardt in the wake of the German catastrophe.[20] Meinecke did so, in response to *Historismus* having become associated with authoritarianism, nationalism and militarism, especially as intensified by the National Socialist glorification of 'blood and soil' and

irrationalist visions of the historical destiny of the German *Reich* and *Volk*. The modern neo-positivist critique of the idealist standpoint was articulated in this ideological and cultural environment. However, the term 'positivist' is also somewhat misleading here as it does not refer to Comte's *philosophie positive,* one of the speculative philosophies of history, but to the logical positivism of the Vienna Circle, which owed much to Hume's strong distinction between analytical and empirical statements and insisted that the meaning of a proposition constituted the mode of its verification. The neo-positivists of the Vienna Circle argued that to be genuinely coherent, all propositions were either true by definition or in principle capable of empirical verification. The circle's anti-idealist stance found little support in Germany, but was widely influential in English-speaking lands through the writings of A. J. Ayer, as well as *émigrés* such as Carl G. Hempel and Ernest Nagel.[21] The difficulties presented by the problem of induction encouraged Karl Popper to formulate his 'falsificationist' alternative. Most significantly for the analytical philosophy of history, the basic formulation of the verification theory of meaning made no allowance for the distinction between natural and human sciences. All the sciences were seen as united in a fundamentally common logic of explanation. Accordingly, the discipline of history could not claim to be authentically scientific if it required a logic of explanation divergent from that of the physical and life sciences that aspire to formulate general laws of universal validity. The neo-positivist critique of the idealist account of historical method was based on this postulate. Although in certain respects anticipated by Popper and Maurice Mandelbaum, the classic statement of the positivist theory of historical explanation was made by Carl G. Hempel in 'The Function of General Laws in History'.[22] The position articulated by Hempel became known as the 'covering law model of historical explanation'.[23] It dominated the agenda of 'analytical' philosophers of history after 1945 and generated a substantial literature for some three decades. In later papers Hempel was prepared to render his position more flexible than his original formulation seemed to imply, by admitting probabilistic and statistical statements in place of invariable universal laws. Nevertheless, the 'covering law model of historical explanation' still encountered great difficulties when confronted by the apparent uniqueness of historical events. The explanatory procedures actually used by historians appeared not to conform to Hempel's model. When formulated, the required general laws emerged as too commonplace or trite. When rendered more acute, they lost their general or universal character.

Much of this criticism was generated and influenced by the expanding body of literature discussing the work of the English philosopher, archaeologist and historian R. G. Collingwood. In his posthumous *The Idea of History* (1946) Collingwood set forth a view of historical method that paralleled, but was not identical with, the operation of *Verstehen* as discussed by Dilthey. Collingwood argued that the significance of a past event is grasped by knowing the thought that constituted the basis or intention of that action. The historian looks not so much at past events but achieves a correct understanding of them by looking, as it were, *through* them to the mental intention of their initiators and participants. In this view there is and can be no human history without human thought, and in this sense all history is the history of thought. Among the philosophers, William H. Walsh sought to draw upon the strengths of both idealist and positivist positions in developing his important concept of 'colligatory concepts'.[24] The debate deepened as consideration turned to the explanatory procedures actually employed in the course of historiography. This became more apparent after the 1962 New York University Institute of Philosophy Conference, and highly refined in Hayden White's concern for the 'deep structure' of historiographical narratives. Perhaps the latter would have been more relevant for the present study if he had addressed the fundamental question of religious perspective rather than having discussed the issue principally in terms of literary metaphors. The 1960s also witnessed a growing interest in the nature and place of interpretation, especially as the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer became more widely known. Moreover, writers such as Haskell Fain and Peter Munz challenged the coherence of the distinction between speculative and analytical philosophies of history.[25] These developments found a stimulating parallel in the history of science widely associated with the 'paradigm change' concept articulated by Thomas S. Kuhn at Oxford in 1961. Predictably, this standpoint was criticised by Popper, but was well received by Michael Polanyi. Kuhn's work inspired and shaped discussion in ways that historicised the then traditional picture of the methods of both the natural and human sciences.[26] Nevertheless, as originally formulated, the idealist–positivist controversy remained unresolved. The two positions reflected a number of long-standing distinctions in the western intellectual tradition. Where positivists have advocated versions of rationalism, the idealists were experiential, calling for an empathetic identification with the human past. The former stressed the universal, the latter the particular. Positivists have inclined towards a correspondence, idealists towards a coherence theory of truth. Where

positivists stressed objectivity, idealists embraced 'subjective' involvement. Similarly, positivism may incline towards forms of determinism, while idealism stresses human volition. The so-called positivist was generally disposed towards progress, society and reason, the so-called idealist to tradition, the individual and experience. Significantly, these dichotomies were not always characteristic of all members of the respective schools of thought, and this we may take as indicating that the two positions are not as mutually exclusive as has been assumed. Nevertheless, the two standpoints remain expressive of the conflict between mechanistic views of nature and a belief in the freedom of the human personality that has dominated much of western thought at least from the eighteenth century onwards.[27]

The more recently established distinction between modernity and postmodernity might be seen as an extension of this long-standing dichotomy, with the latter functioning as a more contemporary mode of relativising *Historismus*. Although generally siding with idealists against positivists in mid-century, the deeply empirical standpoint of English historiography guarantees that it will continue to resist the critique of all narratives so conspicuous in the literature of postmodernism. The evidently subjective character of much postmodern historical writing might seem to confirm as valid the traditional English avoidance of speculative views of history. Throughout the twentieth century many followed John B. Bury's 1903 reading of Ranke's expression *'wie es eigentlich gewesen'*[28] as aspiring to a non-interpretative form of statement that would achieve for historiography the same 'objectivity' that was once considered to be the mark of the physical sciences.[29] This 'scientific' view has generally prevailed over the 'literary' alternative offered by G. M. Trevelyan. The work of F. W. Maitland especially came to be seen as exemplifying this ideal, a development closely related to the 'professionalisation' of the discipline. The English historiographical tradition, awed by the reputation and achievements of men such as Ranke and Maitland, remained oriented to the particularistic and individualising side of *Historismus* for much of the twentieth century. Apart from Arnold Toynbee and Catholics such as Christopher Dawson, the only major exception to this trend has been the rise of a British school of Marxist historiography. The firmly ideological, and sometimes polemical, character of such historiography tended to discredit it, at least in the eyes of more traditional historians.[30] As might be expected, the response of English historians to the debates on the 'covering law model of historical explanation' varied between disregard and annoyance. Among the minority who discussed the matter at any

length, the debate was seen as misrepresentative of, and irrelevant to, the actual practice of historical research. Nevertheless, some of the implications of the debate on the 'covering law model of historical explanation' emerged within the ambit of the debate among English historians on the relationship between history as a discipline, said to be *sui generis,* and the social sciences, with their universalising and generalising character. In this debate, historians committed to progressivism and inclined towards the political left, such as E. H. Carr and M. M. Postan, awarded a major place to the methods of the social sciences. By contrast, historians of a more conservative temper, such as Alan Bullock and Geoffrey Elton, openly stated their objections to such developments. The strong criticisms levelled against R. H. Tawney may also be viewed in this light.[31] Moreover, the widespread rejection of the assertion that historiographical accounts are necessarily based on general presuppositions was reinforced in this period by the mounting and severe criticism to which Toynbee's work was being subjected by Pieter Geyl and other professional historians.[32]

Butterfield cannot be easily placed within these contending schools of opinion. He was once called 'a Jacobin in a top hat'.[33] Never a Marxist, he saw the best Marxist historiography as making an important contribution to historical understanding. Although an opponent of 'vast intermediate systems', he never associated himself with the general condemnation of Toynbee.[34] Also, while an advocate of an austere academic history, he nevertheless strongly suspected that professionalism was leading to a depreciation of the historical imagination. He could deliver unprofessional perorations in praise of providence.[35] His technical history and sympathetic imagination, especially when coupled with his antipathy towards abstract theory, might be seen as indicating a clear orientation towards the idealist position, his dismissive attitude to Collingwood notwithstanding.[36] However, as his work on international relations indicated, his 'expository historiography' was directed towards the historiographical expression of valid generalisations on the course of human history. His repeated references to providence suggest the speculative philosophies of history offered by Augustine and Bossuet. Although the foci (levels, ways) suggested by Butterfield may compare loosely to a variety of standpoints adopted by writers on the philosophy of history, any temptation to systematise his thinking philosophically should be treated with caution. As a thinker, Butterfield was subtle, but unsystematic. To organise his thinking into rigid philosophical categories would do violence to his ideas and misrepresent the temper of his discussions. To avoid this pitfall,

this study maintains a close interaction with the Butterfield texts and its analysis avoids categories alien to his thinking. This approach is especially appropriate in Butterfield's case, as his methodological debates were mainly internal, and often conducted without direct reference to others.

The wide discrepancies in the literature on Butterfield by colleagues, reviewers and commentators are not therefore to be solely attributed to these writers' own differing perspectives. They also reflect the disparate, and apparently dissonant, viewpoints contained within Butterfield's writings. This is especially so in the case of their opinions on technical history; on the place of providence in his thinking; and concerning 'Augustinian' views of man. For example, John Clive clearly understood that technical history aimed to provide a truly 'unprejudiced' account of the past.[37] On this basis Esmond Wright saw *The Peace Tactics of Napoleon* (1929) and *George the Third, Lord North and the People* (1949), as 'splendid pieces of technical history'.[38] By contrast, P. G. Lucas lamented that Butterfield's value-free technical history, with its 'vacuous and meaningless ideal of non-participant neutrality', could 'still be propagated in the middle of the twentieth century'.[39] E. H. Carr saw Butterfield as contrasting technical history with 'an esoteric or providential history with which the rest of us need not concern ourselves'. For Carr, who appreciated the place of interpretative presuppositions, the essential distinction was between facts as inevitably interpreted and a historiography based upon metaphysics. Rejecting the latter, he saw technical history as an 'odd epithet' for 'the only kind of history that you or I are ever likely to write, or [Butterfield] himself has ever written'.[40] Karl Löwith referred to Butterfield as 'a wise historian and a Christian', but declined to refer to him as a 'Christian historian'.[41] Nevertheless, Hugh Kearney could hail him as 'almost unique among modern historians in having a Christian philosophy of history'.[42] W. Stanford Reid questioned the extent to which Butterfield's standpoint can be regarded as fully or sufficiently Christian.[43] Adam Watson correctly saw him as rejecting diverse interpretations of history, because 'in all of them the theory or interpretation ... came first. They were *a priori* intuitions.' By contrast, he writes, 'Butterfield was concerned to start with the facts ... seen in their context; and where the facts were inadequate or seemed unrepresentative the answer was more detailed research. Then you needed to brood over the facts, and see what generalisations distilled themselves from them.'[44] Yet the mere assertion of this position does not establish the possibility of seeing the facts and brooding in a way supposedly independent of any interpretative standpoint. Moreover, Watson argued that Butterfield's open-mindedness

'was made possible for him by his belief in a Christ whose Kingdom is not of this world' and saw his Christianity as permitting him 'to be absolutely neutral about mundane events'. On this basis, we might conclude that for all the supposed value-free neutrality of technical history, it was in reality a restricted form of statement within, and based upon, his Christian interpretation of history. After all, both biographically and as a matter of ultimate commitment, Butterfield was a Christian *before* he was a historian.[45] It is therefore possible to discern in him features of both the so-called 'analytical' and 'speculative' philosophies of history. As Wright put it, alongside 'the impeccable technical historian there was another Butterfield' – the Christian believer and lay preacher.[46] Moreover, John Clive stated: 'The theme of how the Christian historian ought to view the secular realm had always been particularly close to Butterfield's mind and heart, since it was a very personal one, reflecting his own life and experience.'[47] Michael Hobart confirmed that the conjoining of 'thoughts about history and religion' was 'the core of his intellectual concern'.[48] W. R. Matthews went one step further and stated that 'the knowledge of history and faith live together in his mind'.[49]

Those views that stress the integration of Butterfield's Christian beliefs and his scholarship are more accurate when it comes to his actual historiographical output. By contrast, those that stress a disjunction between his scholarship and beliefs correctly reflect certain of the hard-and-fast distinctions made in Butterfield's writings on research and historiographical methodology. Accordingly, William A. Speck argued that 'If Sir Herbert draws a sharp line of demarcation between academic history and Christian interpretation, he nonetheless shows how the working historian can still take religious preconceptions to his task, how he can use them to define and conduct that task'.[50] Such statements would seem to be calculated to leave the reader wondering. A line of demarcation is drawn and then immediately crossed. If technical history is in some sense Christian, how can it be value-free at the same time? Understandably, H. P. Rickman concluded that Butterfield obscured his own 'distinction between historical account and superimposed interpretation'.[51] On this point William A. Speck has argued that Butterfield 'chooses to ignore the obvious ambiguity of secular historiography as a "Christian instrument"'.[52] Most pertinently, W. Stanford Reid has seen in him a failure to appreciate 'the crucial significance of the historian's presuppositions'.[53] With greater diagnostic precision, Louis J. Voskuil has argued that 'by making a distinction between technical history and one's interpretation of the results', Butterfield ends up

positing 'a formal dualism between technical history and religious interpretation' which tended to preclude consideration of their inner connection.[54] Martin Wight would be inclined to agree, arguing that, in practice, 'it has proved difficult to separate principles from technique, and that prophecy keeps on seeping through into [his] academic history', 'the distinction' eventually 'breaking down'. Wight entertained strong doubts concerning this supposedly 'neutral' form of historiography, and in a most perceptive review suggested that Butterfield's practice of technical history 'presupposes Christian conceptions of truth and personality' and that the concept itself was not without 'perfectionist' overtones.[55] However, Wight himself did not explore the inner connection between technical history and providence in Butterfield. Ernest Nagel was somewhat less acute, but still close to the heart of the problem, when he concluded, after considering Butterfield's 'technical historian' in relation to his 'providential interpretation' of history, that he 'takes away with one hand what was previously offered by the other'.[56]

Contrary to those who saw Butterfield as an advocate of professional neutrality and objectivity, and against those who have discerned an inner contradiction in his thinking, C. Thomas McIntire has argued that Butterfield 'does not want to, nor does he actually, keep his personal religion separate from his professional history', and that his 'work as a historian is dependent upon and shaped by his Christian ideas and beliefs'.[57] However, the view that Butterfield's work is indeed permeated throughout by his Christian ideas and beliefs inevitably raises the question of the status of his supposedly value-free technical history. McIntire did not respond to this question directly, but stressed Butterfield's own emphasis on how little can be historically established by direct reference to the evidence. This observation is correct as far as it goes, but it does not take into consideration the allegedly non-interpretative character of technical history. Kenneth W. Thompson referred to critics who 'have maintained that Butterfield, especially when he enters the realm of general history, smuggles into his interpretations the Christian points of emphasis and doctrine that he excludes from his more technical writings in narrative history, where he is more cautious in his assessments of individual leaders'.[58] Thompson apparently had in view Harold T. Parker's estimation that: 'In his portrayals of individual historical characters engaged in concrete happenings, Butterfield appears remarkably free from personal bias. But in his reflections on general history, he violates his precept of self-emptying and smuggles into his account those Christian emphases he wishes to extract.'[59]

All historiography presumes at least an implicit anthropology. David Knowles, John Derry, Kenneth W. Thompson, Adam Watson and others have recognised Butterfield's 'Augustinian' view of man.[60] Similarly, Denis Brogan emphasised the importance of Butterfield's understanding of sin for his view of history.[61]

However, it is not clear how statements based on such a view of man can meet the apparently non-interpretative requirements of technical history. This problem brings forward the crucial question of what Butterfield meant by 'interpretation'. Michael Hobart concluded that the 'twist ... which provides the major difficulty in Butterfield' is that he 'moves from the question of what man does [in history] to the one of what man is' in terms of his own religious standpoint. Having answered this question, he 'then places man back into history', thereby voiding any claim to be employing a purely historical technique by placing past human affairs 'into an established religious framework'.[62] Thompson appears to confirm this assessment in saying that for Butterfield, 'historical studies and theology cohere and reenforce one another, for both have their centre in a concern for human personalities'.[63] The crucial role of presuppositions was confirmed in 1956–60, when Butterfield strongly criticised Lewis B. Namier and others [64] on matters initially related to the significance ascribed to different categories of evidence, but which ultimately were the historiographical outworking of their different views on human nature.[65] It was *after* this controversy that Butterfield acknowledged to Ved Mehta that religious and philosophical views concerning human nature might indeed influence even the 'technical historian'. Moreover, it may be argued that Butterfield's 'thinking-cap' metaphor, and his utilisation of other terminology that pointed to a perspectival view of scientific knowledge, as previously employed in *The Origins of Modern Science* (1949), had already implicitly undermined his own concept of a non-interpretative 'technical history'.[66] It was this 'thinking-cap' thesis that was later so powerfully developed by Kuhn.[67] More recent discussion of Butterfield has sought to account for and resolve the discontinuity between the contra-anachronism of *The Whig Interpretation*, and the 'present mindedness' of *The Origins of Modern Science* (1949, rev. 1957).[68] These contributions to the literature on Butterfield have clearly pointed to the central issues in Butterfield's thought, but have sometimes been too dependent on the principal books and prone to neglect the less accessible articles, reviews and occasional lectures. Overall, it is possible to detect in Butterfield's *œuvre* a long-term transition from advocating technical history to the more deliberate practice of what I term

'expository historiography'. This may well account for Kenneth Thompson's view that Butterfield (probably in later years) 'inveighed against mere "technical history" which falls short of a subtle comprehension of the past'. Such statements may be understood as protests against poor examples of technical history, but they may also be taken as registering a profounder dissatisfaction.[69] Although Butterfield never explicitly retracted his earlier teaching on 'technical history' as a non-interpretative form of historiographical statement, nor did he defend or amplify the idea in such terms in his later writings. Maurice Cowling, writing after Butterfield's death, argued that if Butterfield's understanding of the Christian religion presented in *Christianity and History* (1949) was correct, then he had 'neglected to observe that ... his conclusion should have been not that "technical historical study has its place" but that "technical historical study" insulated from religion or culture is an impossibility'.[70]

Yet while such observations point to what appears to be a basic inconsistency in Butterfield's thought, they do not account for it. Butterfield never fully resolved the tensions he experienced between a scholarly technical history and his Christian understanding of the historical process reflecting a divinely ordered providence. This state of affairs, when combined with the evident state of confusion in the literature on Butterfield, calls for a comprehensive examination of the Butterfield *œuvre*. Adrian Wilson and T. G. Ashplant are on record as stating that 'a sympathetic reconstruction of Butterfield's thought would be highly desirable'.[71] The present study attempts such a reconstruction. It pays special attention to Butterfield's view of the status of interpretations, his concepts of technical history, expository history writing and beliefs concerning providence and human nature. I will argue that Butterfield's *formulation* of his concept of technical history was inconsistent with his Christian beliefs and actual historiographical practice. It arose out of his Christian, but conceptually inadequate, response to positions that he did not share and perhaps uncritical appropriation of epistemological assumptions and methodological precepts that were not wholly compatible with his Christian worldview. I will seek to show that the problems within and between Butterfield's various formulations are most satisfactorily resolved in terms of further reflection on the implications of his religious beliefs.[72]

As a lecturer, Butterfield acquired a reputation as a compelling speaker. Many of his publications were first given as lectures and addresses. Many are best read aloud. However, according to one student, he could be 'very difficult to understand', while another saw him as 'a friendly

sparrow with an eagle's mind'.[73] E. Harris Harbison has stated that Butterfield had 'the gift of style' and wrote with 'literary artistry'.[74] His style was often richly allusive and pictorially suggestive, but almost always devoid of technical terms. This presents problems for a critical assessment of his thinking. Patrick Gardiner expressed frustration with his obscure similes and hypostatisation.[75] John Kenyon saw him as specialising 'in elegant, teasing essays'. These could be 'full of ideas', yet 'tortuously expressed' with an 'intense, elusive style'. He was the 'master' of a 'tortuous prose' in which 'each paragraph, instead of balancing the one before, seems to cancel it out'.[76] Noel Annan has written of a 'Delphic ambiguity' capable of baffling even his more 'attentive readers'.[77] A close examination of his publications makes clear that key concepts in a passage are often not confined to one or two sentences, but may lie embedded in and threaded through the text of one or more paragraphs. Therefore, and in order to accommodate this study to Butterfield's style, it has sometimes been necessary to provide extended quotations in order to present his thought in its continuity. I have analysed the entire published Butterfield corpus. The unpublished Butterfield correspondence has also been consulted, along with other unpublished manuscripts and typescripts held in the Cambridge University Library. Although some unpublished drafts have been examined, the published texts have been regarded as definitive. I have not had access to any Butterfield diaries. In the 'Conclusions' to this study I seek to resolve the central problem in Butterfield's work, and outline the significance of the offered resolution for the historiographical task generally.

1
The Romantic Imagination

As a youth Butterfield absorbed the self-educational literature acquired by his father, as well as detective stories and 'innumerable sentimental novels' such as those of Alexandre Dumas. His father's Methodism was consistent with an emotive romantic disposition. His first aspiration was to be a writer. In Herbert this came to expression in a love of Beethoven, old York and the moors.[1] However, Butterfield's secondary school was not congenial to one harbouring literary intentions. It was an institution founded by industrialists and intended for those seeking a future in manufacturing. The emphasis was on mathematics and the natural sciences, not the humanities. Contrary to this tradition, Butterfield aspired to the study of the classics, even as his headmaster urged the merits of mathematics. The turning point came when his headmaster proposed history as a compromise . The young man's initial response was unenthusiastic and confirms that his aversion to dry-as-dust history was that of a young romantic, pre-dating his arrival at Cambridge.[2] Much of Butterfield's subsequent methodological writing was concerned with relating his basically romantic approach to the requirements of both academic history and his religious standpoint.

Although Butterfield was attracted to Peterhouse by Temperley's 'fame as a teacher', his initial contact with him was less than promising. He recalled that Temperley reacted adversely to Butterfield's having read an out-of-date text book, 'screwed up his face in the way that he was accustomed to doing when he wanted to show maximum disapproval and contempt', and that he had 'clearly resolved not to be saddled with so stupid a pupil. He sent me to a teacher outside college who was ... accustomed to nursing inferior students.' It was for this teacher that Butterfield produced the essay on 'Art is History made Organic'. This impressed Temperley and other dons so much that he was soon

thereafter spoken of as a future Fellow. Temperley now took Butterfield over as his pupil. Butterfield's work for Temperley culminated in *The Peace Tactics of Napoleon 1806–1808* (1929) (hereafter *The Peace Tactics*).[3]

In his third year Butterfield was taught by Paul Vellacott. Much later Butterfield suggested that Vellacott, who 'prided himself' on never having 'set foot ... north of the Trent', saw him as 'a ruffian from Yorkshire' and 'an uncouth Methodist local preacher'. Nevertheless, Butterfield found Vellacott 'a more obviously sympathetic person' and much 'less daunting than the mighty Temperley'. Vellacott loved 'all forms of artistry' and emphasised that 'the writing of history had to be essentially an art, and that a great deal of the actual stuff of history had to be human understanding'. Butterfield concurred and informed Vellacott that he hoped to 'be able to establish the fashion for producing shorter and more concentrated books'. A true aesthete, Vellacott was severe on all matters of form and taste. Butterfield recalled how he 'hauled me over the coals for ending a sentence with a preposition. I thought him over-insistent about this, and resolved that I would both end a whole book with a preposition and get him to admit that it was all right.'[4] Butterfield fulfilled this resolution with his first book, *The Historical Novel* (1924). It reflected Vellacott's encouragement of literary historiography and was

> an attempt to discover what contribution ... the sheer imaginative endeavour of the literary man could make to the actual recovery of the past. And this involved an attempt to show to what degree the [historical] fiction-writers ... gained their success by relating events to pre-existing conditions, getting rid of the kind of anachronism which is produced when unpractised readers see ... [earlier] ... events ... in the context of ... [later] conditions.[5]

This concern with anachronism came to full expression in Butterfield's later work, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (1931) (hereafter, *The Whig Interpretation*). In *The Historical Novel* he explored the relationship between, on the one hand, the historical novel as a literary genre, finding its fictional setting in an imaginatively invoked representation of the human past, and, on the other, the study of that past from the standpoint of history as a scholarly discipline calling for rigorous and detailed research. The distinctive integrity of both was recognised and explored. He did not repudiate either the historical novel or historical research in the name of the other. Historical fiction was seen as especially significant for the historian. It requires a certain 'work of

resurrection', effected by the imagination, and achieving for author and readers an authentic mental representation of the past. Imagination is significant for the historian as it functions as 'the gateway to the past'. This same imagination is required by novelist and historian alike, for not only is the most naive view of the past always 'synthesised by the imagination', but a disciplined use of the same imagination is also required in the writing and reading of scholarly historiography. This is because the latter cannot 'catch the moment precisely' and therefore readers must, of necessity, 'complete history' in their own 'supposition'.[6]

The argument of *The Historical Novel* pivots on a key distinction between (a) the physical and social sciences, which are all involved in making abstractions from the full empirical reality that we ordinarily experience and observe, and (b) history writing and historical fiction, which are seen as not calling for abstract theorising but for a full identification with the non-abstract immediacy of our ordinary experience of life. All the physical and social sciences address the past in some sense:

> The facts of the past, the stuff out of which men write their Histories, are used for many things besides the manufacture of history. The economist, the politician, the musician, the ecclesiastic – in fact, specialists of all sorts, have their own use for the facts that make up history; they make themselves more expert in their special departments by studying the historical side of those departments, but they are not historians any more than is the architect who tries to make himself a better architect by finding out how houses used to be ventilated.[7]

Moreover, because the sciences involve analysis by means of theoretical abstraction, they lose contact with the actuality of non-theoretical human experience:

> The politician, the economist, the philosopher and the psychologist are all students of mankind in a way, and can claim that their studies are human studies; but they can only start with human nature, and they soon run into theorems and formulas and lose themselves in their own categories, and so are swept away from contact with flesh and blood.[8]

Here it is implied that the scientific disciplines labour under a certain intrinsic disadvantage by virtue of their tendency towards theoretical

abstraction. In contrast, Butterfield prized both the novelist and the historian on the grounds that they avoid all such abstractions, albeit for distinct reasons.[9] It is the sciences, and other disciplines employing methods of theoretical abstraction, that formulate generalisations and on this basis offer interpretations of history concerning the past.

> The theorist makes his generalisations out of the facts of the past, and talks about the laws that govern the movements of history and the things that determine progress and the goal to which human development is moving – but he is not a historian any more than a priest talking about Providence is a historian, although both these deal with interpretations of history. They are simply philosophers trying to interpret man's experience of life to man.[10]

Butterfield's reservations concerning the historiographical use of general statements arose because interpretations of history were abstract and theoretical, rather than concrete and descriptive, in character. He saw such general abstract and theoretical propositions as unrelated to the historian's task, which was to re-present past concrete realities. He did not seem to appreciate that his own methodological reflections included many general statements concerning the requirements and character of historical understanding. He contented himself with general assertions that the historian operates in terms of pictures, descriptions and narratives of past life as such, not in terms of theories and general propositions.

> [The historian studies] the past not because it has connections with the present that can be worked out, not because it holds a moral for to-day, but precisely because it is a strange land, precisely because it is past, and can never happen again; and he seeks to paint life as a whole – not man on his economic side, or man as a political animal, but man in all his adventures in living. Specialists and theorists may ... make generalisations, but as for the romantic historian, his is the mad human longing to see and to know people, to feel with them ... and to understand their ways, their humours, their loves and fears.[11]

Like the historian, the novelist has a passion for the past for its own sake and has no need of any abstract or theoretical standpoint. Both are concerned with human experience, and not with theories or philosophies about human experience. Both are set over against the sciences in their quest for actuality and rejection of general propositions. Both are viewed as arising from the same impulse, the urge to establish and