



**THE PRIME MINISTER AND HIS TROLLOPE
READING HAROLD MACMILLAN'S READING***

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Trying to discern the historical impact of reading is a bit like trying to examine the effect of violence on television. It is generally accepted that works of literature contain social worlds that either consciously or unconsciously reflect or comment on the social *milieux*, assumptions and expectations of their authors. Indeed, it might therefore be argued that they are amongst the best sources for recapturing some of the more abstract social constructs of the past: for instance, Anthony Trollope's discussion of what it meant to be a gentleman in 1860s England in one of Harold Macmillan's favourite novels, *The Last Chronicle of Barset* (8),¹ represents an attempt to render into print what was generally understood but rarely explicitly defined at the time. Similarly, other tropes are commonly used by historians to explore understandings of identity and social relations in past societies.

Textual analysis, however, whilst it might open out the world of the author, tells us little about the effects his or her words have upon their readers. Reading a text and creating meaning from it, at least in modern history, is generally an individual act. How the audience read particular works is therefore often—necessarily—assumed, rather than examined. Despite Jonathan Rose's recent work on working class elites, readers—as opposed to texts—remain a largely unknown quantity.²

Even literary biographies can be surprisingly sparing in their examination of literary influences. Again, the influence of reading is all too frequently assumed, rather than analysed. We are told about the morally uplifting intentions of erstwhile Sunday School teacher, Charlotte M. Yonge, but not whether that is what her

* An oral presentation of this text was made at the Annual Conference of the Social History Society, Maison de l'Université, Rouen University, 9 January 2004.

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1. "Much the best book of the series, and in many ways the best book Trollope wrote," Harold Macmillan's Diaries, Department of Western Manuscripts, Bodleian Library, Oxford [henceforward HMD], 28 February 1963, though interestingly, he does not seem always to have thought this. The figure in brackets represents the number of times Macmillan read a particular book 1950-66.

2. Jonathan ROSE, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001.

readers took from her stories.³ Similarly, we are told that G.A. Henty's attitudes to Britain, race and empire "which came across so clearly in his writings, influenced the generation of boys who read him."⁴ But how, that is the question? One thing is certain: Henty's readers were not the ones who built the empire, because that was already going on around them in the 1880s and 1890s and creating the reality Henty merely coloured in.⁵ The boys who then read Henty were, if anything, those like Harold Macmillan who instead went on to decolonise the empire in the 1950s and 1960s,⁶ by which time this particular author had long ceased to feature amongst his reading matter. This, of course, illustrates the pitfalls of treating reading, as so often is the case in biographies, as merely some kind of mysterious background force alongside schooling and religion, to be rapidly skated over in the opening pages. How much weight can be attached to juvenile reading, as opposed to assessing it in real time?

Reading and Political History

All of these issues about the role and influence of reading are certainly pertinent in the field of political history. There is no question that a politician's reading has been seen as some kind of factor in his or her views and attitudes. This has most notably been encapsulated in the various surveys of the reading habits of MPs following W.T. Stead's pioneering analysis in 1906.⁷ Indeed, according to one recent survey of this kind, some 80 per cent of MPs feel that reading has played a significant in shaping their political beliefs and actions.⁸

However, such analyses have their limitations, even if we leave aside Stead's prime ideological object of demonstrating reassuringly the broadly conventional nature of the reading habits of the early Labour Party. Stead and the successive

3. Mary CADOGAN & Patricia CRAIG, *You're a Brick Angela! The Girls' Story: 1839-1985*, 2nd ed., London: Gollancz, 1986, 15 ff.

4. Guy ARNOLD, *Hold Fast for England: G.A. Henty: Imperialist Boys' Writer*, London: Hamilton, 1980, preface. See also Mark NAIDIS, "G.A. Henty's Idea of India," *Victorian Studies* VII (1964), 50.

5. There has, at least, developed a lively debate about what then the empire-builders did read, with Edward Beasley recently discounting the claims of J.S. Mill and Charles Dilke in favour of de Tocqueville in his *Empire as the Triumph of Theory: Imperialism, Information and the Colonial Society of 1868*, London: Routledge, forthcoming.

6. "We equally enjoyed Henty, Rider Haggard and Conan Doyle," Harold MACMILLAN, *Winds of Change: 1914-1939*, London: Macmillan, 1966, 38. The only one of these authors Macmillan does not appear to have returned to in adulthood is Henty.

7. W.T. STEAD, "The Labour Party and the Books that Helped to Make It," *Review of Reviews*, 33 (1906), 568-582, analysed in detail in David E. MARTIN, "The Instruments of the People? The Parliamentary Labour Party in 1906" in David E. MARTIN & David RUBINSTEIN (eds), *Ideology and the Labour Movement: Essays Presented to John Saville*, London: Croom Helm, 1982, 125-146. Stead's approach has since been revisited in K.J.W ALEXANDER and Alexander HOBBS, "What Influences Labour MPs?," *New Society* (13 December 1962), 11-14; John HALL & Joan HIGGINS, "What Influences Today's Labour MPs?," *New Society* (2 December 1976), 457-459; John HALL, Joan HIGGINS & Tony REES, "What Influences Tory MPs?," *New Society* (9 December 1976), 505-507; Steve PLATT & Julie GALLAGHER, "From Bevan to the Bible," *New Statesman and Society* (30 September 1994), 22-24; Steve PLATT & Julie GALLAGHER, "Real Tories don't Read Books," *New Statesman and Society* (7 October 1994), 18-19; Duncan BRACK, "Grist to the Mill," *New Statesman and Society* (15 September 1995), 457-459. Incidentally, 6 per cent of Tory MPs claimed to have been influenced by Macmillan as an author in 1994, up from 5 per cent in 1976.

8. See Duncan BRACK, "What Influences Liberal Democrats," *Liberal Democrat History Group Newsletter* 8 (September 1995).

iterations of this survey since have been concerned with reading as a *formative* influence upon a *cohort*. The nature of that influence is rarely examined. Its methodology freezes a moment in time and forces its respondents to answer a decontextualised question about their literary influences. It allows some longitudinal comparisons between cohorts. But it tells us little about how reading and influence may vary over time and according to circumstance for individuals. Instead, as in those political biographies where the reading habits of the subject are briefly listed at the outset, their influence is assumed to be formative, somehow part of the bedrock upon which the rest of the life is based. Reading operates outside real time, on the basis of self-ascriptions which may or may not be valid, tell us little of how much of a particular author has been read, or when, let alone with what understanding of his or her words. Clearly, such an approach is of dubious value in assessing the significance of reading, either for the purpose of political biography, or for the broader purposes of Stead and his successors.

But then, analysing their subjects' reading habits rarely seems to be the purpose, even in those political biographies which mention them. Roy Jenkins makes much of the 20,000 or so works, of huge range, that Gladstone appears to have got through in the seventy years covered by his diaries.⁹ This is a figure which dwarves the 1,300 or so books Macmillan recorded having read in his diaries from 1950-1966.¹⁰ Apart from a reference to Gladstone having read much Irish history and other pertinent matter during the first Home Rule crisis of 1885 [Jenkins, *Gladstone*: 536], however, the impression conveyed is of a desire to illuminate the prodigiousness of the great man's reading, rather than examine its significance. We are told little about what Gladstone thought about what he read. Similarly, the prime purpose of the brief but very interesting chapter in Richard Thorpe's recent biography of Eden seems merely to have been to demonstrate that he was at least as well read as Macmillan.¹¹ In biographies of other well-read politicians, however, even their erudition may go unremarked. Macmillan remarks in his diaries that F.S. Oliver's *The Endless Adventure* (5) was one of Baldwin's favourite books [HMD, 3 December 1964], but only one of his biographers even mentions it, as "one of the few books that influenced Baldwin's lonely mind,"¹² a comment which does no justice either to the breadth or the nature of Baldwin's reading.¹³

Reading and Political Persona

Macmillan's biographers have not necessarily plumbed much deeper. After all, reading is not even mentioned in the index of Alistair Horne's official biography of

9. Roy JENKINS, *Gladstone*, London: Macmillan, 1995, 14.

10. Jenkins, however, records pamphlets in Gladstone's total. I have not included such ephemera in Macmillan's figure. Macmillan, of course, also very much envied the opportunities for reading Gladstone was afforded by the chance to spend never less than five months of the year at Hawarden during his premierships: see Richard Davenport-Hines, *The Macmillans*, London: Mandarin, 1993, 291.

11. D.R. THORPE, *Eden: The Life and Times of Anthony Eden: First Earl of Avon, 1897-1977*, London: Chatto & Windus, 2003, 329-332.

12. G.M. YOUNG, *Stanley Baldwin*, London: Hart-Davis, 1952, 180.

13. Roy JENKINS, *Mr Attlee: An Interim Biography*, London: Heinemann, 1948, 115, quotes Josiah Wedgewood's view that Attlee was better read than any MP except perhaps Baldwin or Sir John Simon, but neither he nor any of their other biographers have offered much analysis of the reading habits of these three figures.

Harold Macmillan,¹⁴ despite occasional references in the text. This is curious. Reading, after all, was Macmillan's favourite pastime, and even when extremely busy he still found time to read a phenomenal amount. To some extent this reflected a professional interest. He was, of course, eventually to become chairman of the eponymous publishing firm, a position which undoubtedly influenced some of his choice of reading! But it was also obviously his prime leisure interest. Furthermore, he had no television.¹⁵ Although he has been portrayed as the consummate actor-manager, a showman projecting a staged persona, this clearly was therefore not achieved through careful study of the art of televisual grooming, or even of an older medium such as the theatre, which he visited rarely and had no real grounding in. Nor does he appear to have made a habit of even watching his television performances. If anything shaped the image of "unflappability" which he acquired during his premiership, it was not his antipathy for the camera. For the source of the calm he managed to project, frequently at variance to how he actually felt, we have to look elsewhere.

That Macmillan's reading may have played a part in the shaping of this image will be argued below. But this is to look at reading again purely as formative in its role. Macmillan's diaries, however, enable us to examine his reading in a more detailed way. The mere fact that his reading and re-reading is so carefully chronicled tells us something of how important this activity was to him. It is impossible to tell how fully he agreed with Rousseau's view about the role of reading in the formation of consciousness,¹⁶ though he read the *Confessions*, in which this idea appears, three times in 1950-1966. What is apparent is that reading was fundamental to Macmillan's whole personality, to which he devoted both time and purposive energy throughout his career. For him, at least, it was not simply an optional extra, to unwind with at the end of a long day. Instead, reading was clearly a deliberate activity and could, on occasion become a major project. For instance, he noted in 1957, "I am having a real 'go' at R[obert]L[ouis]S[tevenson]. This is a good way really to get an understanding of an author" [HMD, 22 April 1957]. This, or working his way through Stendhal's *œuvre* in 1960, could be just as much an aim for Macmillan as the building of 300,000 houses. And when politics interferes too much with the time available for reading Macmillan is apt to record this regretfully. After his political retirement he was able gratefully to record "No Sunday papers! I feel a wonderful gain from not having to wallow through all that gossip and dirt—and the time saved allows one to read books" [HMD, 18 November 1963].

Such bookiness has been used to suggest that Macmillan possessed almost a split personality. Davenport-Hines has implied that books formed part of the ramparts of a False Self consciously erected to hid from terror of his mother and other successive demons [Davenport-Hines, 161, 273]. However, Macmillan the reader was not an "inner self," sheltering from the world. Rather, he *chose* to read, that is to say that reading was for him something he actively did, just as much as

14. Alistair HORNE, *Macmillan 1894-1956*, London: Macmillan, 1988; Alistair HORNE, *Macmillan: 1957-1986*, London: Macmillan, 1989.

15. During the 1966 election campaign he commented, "I have not looked at any T.V. Happily, we have not got the instrument at B.G. (except in the Servants Hall)," HMD, 30 March 1966.

16. "I do not know how I learned to read; I only remember my first readings and their effect on me: it was the time from which I date the uninterrupted consciousness of myself," Jean-Jacques ROUSSEAU, *Les Confessions*, Paris: Éditions Garnier Frères, 1964 [1782], 7. I am grateful to Steven E. Rowe for this reference.

his political activities. He was an active consumer of books, not a passive recipient of their words. For this reason any notion of a split in Macmillan between a public and private persona needs to be treated with care. Rather both politics and reading were both important to Macmillan, as no doubt were shooting, family, business and so on, as spheres in which he actively engaged, and which he did not trouble to hide. Indeed, politics and reading heavily intersected in his life, and were known to by his peers. Consider the way in which “some of the Socialists... sniggered at any literary turn of phrase or quotation” during Macmillan’s only Budget speech [HMD, 17 April 1956]. It might nevertheless be argued that his decision in 1959 not to break a holiday so as to retain his reputation for “unflappability” reflected the use of the private persona to bolster the public one [HMD, 24 May 1959], but this would be to create an artificial distinction not there in the diaries. The self-consciousness with which he made his decision reflected his awareness of the artificiality of an image foisted upon him.

Of course, no reader is representative of anyone but themselves, least of all someone like Macmillan. So demonstrating the centrality of reading to him is not the same as proving that this is a neglected facet of political biography in general. Macmillan can however, because of the existence of his diaries, be used to explore different ways in which reading can be applied to the assessment of political lives. For these record not only what he read but when, in conjunction with the other traffic of his life. They can be used to examine the validity of analysing a political figure’s reading, not merely as a set of formative background influences, but within context, in real time. It has, for instance, been argued that it was no coincidence that the first book Mayor Giuliani reached for when time permitted after 9/11 was Roy Jenkins’ recently published biography of Churchill.¹⁷ This suggests that reading, far from being a mere background influence, is part of the framework through which we continually try to understand events and the course of our lives. Of course, for some particularly from a Protestant perspective, reading, at least of the Bible, ought to intersect with our lives in just such a manner. Perhaps the reluctance of much modern political biography to take reading seriously reflects some kind of unconscious reaction against such a perspective. But to suggest that reading should be seen as part of the framework is not to claim that a particular text is *the* framework, a risk which some of the work on figures like Henty seems to run. All this paper seeks to do is to suggest that the role of reading in political biography needs to be re-evaluated, and it now turns to how this might be done in Macmillan’s case.

Harold Macmillan’s Reading

Macmillan’s reading in real time can be recaptured from the voluminous diaries he has left. Extensive diaries exist for the periods 1943-1945 and 1950-1966, and to a lesser extent for certain earlier years. Reading, however, is but infrequently recorded in the *War Diaries*,¹⁸ and so it is the latter years on which I intend to concentrate, during which Macmillan was politically at the height of his powers, culminating in seven years as Prime Minister in 1957-1963. He nevertheless managed to read

17. John RAMSDEN, *Man of the Century: Winston Churchill and His Legend since 1945*, London: HarperCollins, 2002, 586-587.

18. Harold MACMILLAN, *War Diaries: The Mediterranean, 1943-1945*, London: Macmillan, 1984.

extensively. When Foreign Secretary in 1955 he only read 55 books, but as Prime Minister he seems to have found more time for reading, peaking at 119 books in 1963. Whether he read all from cover to cover might be doubted. Certainly he often had several on the go at once,¹⁹ and frequently admitted to skimming some. Others he seems merely to have sampled. He could be somewhat selective in, for instance, choosing particular chapters from Macaulay’s essays. And there is also a suspicion that on occasion one book inclines him to dip into another, rather than that he found time to get through two biographies of Talleyrand on 10 January 1958! But that he does not always confirm in his diary that he had “finished” reading something does not prove that this was in fact generally the case.

Macmillan’s reading could appear eclectic. For instance, during his 1960 African tour he noted:

Since we left I have read
Guy Mannering (begun in England)
David Copperfield
The Woodlanders
Tess of the D’Urbervilles
A Wreath for Udomo (rather a good novel by a young African about
 Nkrumah and Ghana)
The Phenomenon of Man (by Pierre de Chardin—a remarkable book)
The Defeat of the Spanish Armada (by Garnett Mattingly—excellent).
 [HMD, 7 February 1960]

Some books were read and re-read. Reading *David Copperfield* (8) was “a treat” Macmillan regularly indulged himself with. Others he found even more enticing. In 1951 he noted, “I have finished all the Barchester series, ending with Last Chronicles of Barchester [sic]. This means that I have read all the clerical and all the political works again in the last few months, even weeks. This must stop. Trollope is a drug” [HMD, 26 July 1951]. In particular, he repeatedly returned to the Barset chronicles, though thereafter he seems to have managed to control his addiction to one reading every two to three years. The rest of the Trollope canon was read more sparingly, *He Knew He Was Right* (2) going unread until 1964. Nevertheless, the conventional wisdom clearly is correct, Macmillan undoubtedly read Trollope more than any other author, as can be seen by Table 1.

Table 1: Macmillan’s Most Read Authors (1950-1966)

Author	Number of books read	Author	Number of books read
Anthony Trollope	81	Marion Crawford	7
Sir Walter Scott	58	Keith Feiling	7
Henry James	45	Storm Jameson	7
Charles Dickens	43	J.E. Neale	7

19. “I find it restful to have several books going at the same time,” HMD, 11 June 1962.

Jane Austen	36	C.P. Snow	7
R.L. Stevenson	21	Stendhal	7
W.M. Thackeray	20	Leo Tolstoy	7
Sir Winston Churchill	16	G.M. Trevelyan	7
Rudyard Kipling	13	Horace Walpole	7
William Shakespeare	13	John Buchan	6
R.S. Surtees	12	Benjamin Disraeli	6
George Eliot	11	J.A. Froude	6
James Boswell	10	Graham Greene	6
Philip Guedalla	10	Charles Morgan	6
A.L. Rowse	9	John Morley	6
Joseph Conrad	9	F.S. Oliver	6
Pamela Hansford Johnson	8	Lord Rosebery	6

Such a list is, however, misleading. Henry James, for instance, was not truly amongst Macmillan's favourite authors, even though he could find his works addictive once embarked upon them. Instead, James's figure in Table 1 is greatly inflated by Macmillan's decision to read dutifully through the entirety of the Macmillan & Co collected works, all 35 volumes, in 1965. Similarly, virtually all the Stevenson was read in 1957. In other words, Table 1 tells us little about when these authors were read, or how regularly. It may not even indicate favourite authors. John Morley figures mainly because of Macmillan's habit of regularly re-reading Rousseau's *Confessions*, which he invariably followed by re-reading, and criticising, Morley's biography of Rousseau. Morley was read in conjunction with other figures who interested Macmillan, Rousseau and Gladstone, and not for his distinctive literary qualities. The waspish comments about Trevelyan similarly suggest that he was read for his matter, and not because of enthusiasm for his style.

Examining which books Macmillan read most often gives a rather different picture. Clearly, he had a number of old favourites. The diaries list 26 books which he read, over the period 1950-1966, at least five times. Most popular were *Pride and Prejudice* (9), *Emma* (9) and *The Antiquary* (9), closely followed by a mixture of other Austen, Trollope, Scott, Dickens and Thackeray. This has led some historians to paint a picture of a Macmillan of narrow literary tastes, endlessly recycling the same reading matter from the same stable of nineteenth-century

novelists.²⁰ Certainly, despite his publishing interests, which led him regularly to read new work by Macmillan authors, reading modern novels was, in contrast to Gladstone, “a thing I rarely do.”²¹ This was despite his enthusiastic comments about such different authors as Nadine Gordimer, Joseph Heller, John Wyndham and C.S. Forester (the last of whom he seems to have been prompted to read by Churchill [HMD, 20 July 1962, 12 September 1962]). The only modern novelist whose works Macmillan seems to have bothered to re-read in these years was Graham Greene, possibly because even second time around books like *Brighton Rock* he still found “an odd story” [HMD, 5 April 1964].

Some modern novels he clearly found distasteful. Despite its merits, Macmillan found Vincent Cronin’s *The Letter after Z* had “too much sex, in the sense of descriptions not of love but of coupling. If the Victorian novelists were too prudish, the Elizabethan are being too anatomical—almost medical—in their descriptions” [HMD, 23 July 1961]. The most notorious publication of these years, *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, does not merit a mention in the diaries. But consequently to describe Macmillan as sexless, as Ronald Hyam does,²² is perhaps to ignore the connection he clearly felt ought to exist between love and coupling that appeared to be broken in some modern novels. Adultery, though not his wife’s, is discussed dispassionately in his diaries. He read the adventures, amorous and otherwise, of *Tom Jones* twice in these years.²³ And he obviously responded to sensuous characters such as Becky Sharp in *Vanity Fair* (7), indeed to strong characters in general. One suspects he was more drawn to those in control of their passions than those who seemed to be merely indulging them, that is to sense more than sensibility.²⁴

Character indeed seems to have been more important to him than plot. Consider this comment on *Middlemarch* (2):

But it is very difficult to re-enter the atmosphere—the Evangelical movement; the philosophical or pseudo-philosophical jargon; the long and tedious sentences and all the rest. Yet many of the characters really do live. [HMD, 10 August 1956]

Or similarly on *Bleak House* (5):

Bleak House has some good characters and the “low life” is very good—Shaguly—Joe—etc. The story is absurd. Why shd Mr Tulkingham have wished to injure Lady Dedlock? All this is pure melodrama. [HMD, 5 January 1964]

That heavily plot-driven and distinctively English genre, the murder mystery, meanwhile made almost no appeal: he read very few detective stories in these years.²⁵ With the exception of *Rob Roy* (6), he does not seem to have particularly

20. Simon BALL, unpublished paper given at “Personality and Politics” conference, University of Manchester, 26-27 June 2002.

21. HMD, 14 April 1956. He told Lord Moran in 1959 that he did not have “time to read new books,” quoted in DAVENPORT-HINES, 291.

22. Ronald HYAM, *Empire and Sexuality*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990, 13.

23. He, however, felt that the film of the book “emphasises the coarseness and suppresses the elegances, the classical allusions, the prologues,” HMD, 29 February 1964.

24. Though he found the characters in *Sense and Sensibility* (5) relatively disappointing and the plot overly complex, HMD, 5 December 1962.

25. He found eighteenth century character-driven romances a much preferable form of escapism, HMD, 28 April 1951.

cared for adventure stories either [HMD, 8 April 1965]. Indeed, apart from Scott and Stevenson, he read such fiction seldom. *The 39 Steps*, which he seems to have read only because Pan Macmillan had just reissued it in 1964, he found “too long and too sententious” [HMD, 18 April 1964]. Most of the Buchan he read were biographies.

As this suggests, it was not just novels that Macmillan read and re-read. It is worth noting that, although he did read works such as *Moll Flanders* (1), his favourite Defoe was undoubtedly his *History of the Plague in London* (3). His most often read titles also included the diaries of Mrs Arbuthnot (5), or of Charles Greville (5). Money Penny and Buckle’s monumental *Life of Disraeli* (5) was an old favourite. So, after he acquired a set in 1954, was Gardiner’s equally monumental *History of England 1603-1642* (5). And, despite the critical comments he passed every time on its rather affected style, Philip Guedalla’s *Second Empire* (5) was also frequently re-read.

The image of Macmillan as addicted to a small range of novels from a similarly small group of novelists requires correction. It is not possible to be categorical about the genres of all the works Macmillan lists in his diaries since the entries are sometimes insufficiently detailed. However, leaving aside the small number which cannot be accurately allocated in this fashion, an attempt to rank Macmillan’s reading by genre is given in Table 2. Both this, and Table 1, of course, include items read on more than one occasion.

Table 2: Macmillan’s Most Read Genres (1950-1966)

Genre	Number of books read by HM
Novels	541
Biography	295
History	196
Autobiography/Memoirs	101
Letters/Papers	37
Short Stories	36
Diaries	32
Politics/Policy	31
Essays (miscellaneous)	20
Drama	17
Religion/Theology	12

Literary Criticism	9
Classical authors	9

It will be apparent from Table 2 that novels, though the largest category, in fact formed the minority of Macmillan's reading matter. What is more striking is the wide range of his interests, even if the occasional foray into fields such as anthropology is left out. Indeed, the religion category would arguably have been larger if the books Macmillan read and re-read on early Christianity had been allocated there, rather than to history.²⁶ On the other hand, if all the biographies, memoirs and diaries were allocated to history, then that would easily form the majority of his reading.

Macmillan's Reading of History

Nor should it be assumed that his historical tastes were narrow. It is true that most of the biographies, memoirs and diaries were political in nature. His interests also clearly centred particularly on British political history in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. However, despite the relative paucity of his reading in mediaeval history, his tastes were clearly more catholic than this might suggest. Roman and Renaissance history were sub-fields returned to with relative frequency, although after Britain he obviously most preferred to read the history of France.²⁷ He read little American or Russian history.

To judge from the frequency with which he read about her, the historical figure that fascinated him the most was probably Queen Elizabeth I. It is harder to assess whether he had a favourite historian. If so, it was probably Namier, followed by (Macmillan authors) Rowse and Wheeler-Bennett. Probably the single recently published history book that impressed him most, however, was Mattingly's *The Defeat of the Spanish Armada*, which he read on its appearance in 1960 and then twice more. Indeed, he was more inclined to read new histories and biographies than new novels. Generally speaking, however, he seems to have preferred more contemporaneous accounts to those of late twentieth century academic historians. For instance, he clearly read far more histories published in the nineteenth century (not least those published by Macmillan & Co) than those subsequently published about the nineteenth century, but not necessarily *qua* history. Froude he seems to have read not least as an antidote to Macaulay. As Macmillan noted of the latter's *Essays* (3), "The erudition is remarkable, in an age wh hardly bothered to go for original sources," but it is also "hopelessly prejudiced" [HMD, 5 August 1953]. Macaulay, in other words, was read for his own sake, rather than as history. Similarly, he notes of Froude that, "He may be a very biased historian, and for all I know a very inaccurate one—but it is very lively reading and full of interesting material. I like long quotations from contemporary sources" [HMD, 28 January 1954]. This last point is an important one. As he commented on reading Fowler's 1889 *Life of Peel* (1), "Being almost entirely composed of letters and documents, it is really fascinating to read. I much prefer the sources of history to the facile

26. He also read Bishop Robinson's controversial *Honest to God* on publication in 1963.

27. Whilst by no means a linguist to compare with Eden, he spoke French fluently.

comments of clever young men. From letters, memoranda, and other documents you can form your own judgment” [HMD, 3 September 1962].

But although Macmillan clearly liked to enter the milieu of historical figures through their writings, he nevertheless plainly had certain preferences in his approach to history. A comment when he read Arnold Toynbee’s *The Study of History* (1) in 1961 is suggestive. Whilst Macmillan generally found this too lush and too repetitive, he nevertheless observed that, “It is soothing, in a curious way, to learn about so many civilizations wh have ‘risen and fallen’” [HMD, 8 July 1961]. Since he had just listed seven problems he was currently struggling with, all of which he seemed to consider more or less insuperable, this could be seen as a fatalistic observation, of a piece with his gloomy reflection on reading a *Life of Spencer Perceval* (1) shortly after his resignation; “Shall we all be as forgotten in 100 years as this rather dim P.M. Even assassination cd not make him a compelling figure” [HMD, 12 February 1964]. Perhaps this was indeed to some extent the case after 1961, as problems multiplied and age took its toll. However, the rise and fall of civilizations was always something of a theme in his reading. He read Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* three times in these years. The rise and fall of imperial Spain also seems to have been an interest in which, one senses from his comments on Motley’s pro-Protestant account of the Dutch Republic, his sympathies were not unengaged.

But then, he had himself experienced what he clearly felt rather like the collapse of a civilization in 1914, and with age appears to have become increasingly conscious of this fact. Re-reading Meredith’s *Victoria* (1) in 1962 reminded him of “the old dead world, into which I had just begun to live and move before it crashed” [HMD, 5 January 1962]. By then a consciousness of decline, both of Britain in general and his ministry in particular, together with an awareness of the nemesis threatened by the Bomb, was increasingly acute. It is worth noting, however, though he had read H.C. Allen’s *The Anglo-Saxon Predicament* (1), he does not always seem to have shared Allen’s (and de Gaulle’s rather different) conceit of an Anglo-Saxon civilization. Half-American as he was, Macmillan respected and admired the USA, but he could also be very sceptical of it, not least in “civilizational” terms. As he despondently recorded during the 1955 Geneva negotiations:

The world is bound to be dominated by the new barbarians, in the West and in the East. Let us, if we can, be the Greeks of this new Roman Empire. (I think the French believe that the Russians and Americans must eventually coalesce. They are already so alike! This is just what Nehru said. Even Sir Ivone K remarked how difficult it is to tell apart the American and Russian thugs, who act as body-guards to their respective Emperors). [HMD, 22 July 1955]

As I have pointed out elsewhere, those historians who see Macmillan as anxious in the 1950s to embed the US in Europe are almost diametrically wrong.²⁸ He saw the US as different, and would not necessarily have shared Huntington’s view of an undifferentiated Western civilization.²⁹ When Douglas Fairbanks gave

28. Peter CATTERALL, “Harold Macmillan and Europe, 1950-56: The Cold War, the American Context and the British Approach to European Integration,” *Cercles*, 5 (2002), 93-108, <www.cercles.com/n5/catterall.pdf>.

29. Samuel P. HUNTINGTON, *The Clash of Civilizations: And the Remaking of the World Order*, London: Simon & Schuster, 1997.

him a copy of Stillman and Pfaff's *The New Politics* (1) in 1961, he found its theme of the rise of new power blocs in Europe, Asia and Africa "ill written, but stimulating" [HMD, 31 August 1961]. Given the way in which he uses the trope of "civilization" in respect of events in Congo after 1960, one might doubt, however, how far by then he believed the last of these was likely. One suspects a scepticism about the export potential of European civilization. Unlike de Gaulle, with his rather Gallocentric view of European civilization, he however clearly saw Britain as part of that culture. Preserving it was a major theme of his post-war political career, though not necessarily through the articulation of political structures.

Macmillan's Reading of Biography

The other major theme of Macmillan's historical reading was his tendency to read history through the prism of biography. As he commented on Scott's *Tales from a Grandfather*: "It is a pleasant form of literature—easy to read, with good stories and the kind of history I like—no economic motive,—all battles and romantic stories of great heroic figures or traitorous villains."³⁰ This, however, perhaps gives a slightly misleading impression of Macmillan's taste in biography. He did not, in fact, care for "romantic" biographies, such as Emil Ludwig's *Napoleon* (2). Nor was his reading all battles and romantic stories. He in fact read few military memoirs. His favourite diarists were rarely those who had been, like himself, at the centre of political life. Rather, he favoured political gossips like Mrs Arbuthnot, those who observed and recorded the famous with witty prejudice. This suggests a certain detachment, and a taste for seeing great figures from the past through the eyes of contemporaries, rather than a penchant for hero-worship. He read, for instance, as much of Lady as of Lord Palmerston. Hagiographies were condemned, particularly if they failed to contain any interesting contemporary material. But nor did he care for a Lytton Strachey approach.³¹ Macaulay did appeal, but only, it would appear, because of the magnificence of his style and prejudice. Otherwise Macmillan seems to have preferred biographies in which the subject speaks for him or herself as much as possible, through their contemporary papers or letters, rather than being placed within some interpretative framework by the author. Consider the following comment:

I have read this week [a] life of Earl Grey (of the Reform Bill) by George Trevelyan. A good, but very prejudiced book. Written in 1919, it is curious to see how pro-Russian and anti-Turk it is. But it is finely written, with great dramatic skill. I cannot think that the casual reader of this book would realise that the correspondence between Lord Grey and the Princess de Lieven fills three volumes. She is too lightly dismissed; she must have played a great part in his life. [HMD, 4 April 1952]

Biographers run the risk both of essentialising their subjects and of imposing their prejudices upon them. Macmillan, however, was clearly aware of that. He did not divide the world into heroes and villains, whatever may have happened in *Tales from a Grandfather*. For instance, he soon thought better of his initial condemnation of Duff Cooper's sympathetic biography of Douglas Haig, not least

30. HMD, 4 June 1951. However, unlike most of Scott's works, Macmillan had never read this before and never read it again during these years.

31. "Angry Strachey does not 'wear well.' It seems pretty thin stuff today," HMD, 2 September 1956.

because of awareness of the context of intrigue in which Haig had to operate [HMD, 6 May 1963, 7 May 1963].

Individuals lay at the heart of Macmillan's reading of history, that much is clear from his penchant for biography. Part of Guedalla's attraction, indeed, was no doubt that "he was always more interested in men than movements."³² This does not, however, mark Macmillan out as a subscriber to some sort of "great man" theory. His interest lay if anything more with those who struggled to achieve power, such as Disraeli, than with those who enjoyed its untrammelled exercise. What seems to have intrigued him is how those figures who fascinated him overcame their difficulties, thus his reading about Elizabeth I often focused upon the trials of her childhood, or her relationships with powerful suitors. How, in other words, they were able to achieve things despite, rather than because of circumstances. Perhaps this was part of the attraction of novels like *History of Pendennis* (7), in which Thackeray offered, not an exciting plot, but instead the depiction of "a young man resisting and affected by temptation."³³ Those whose egos instead got in the way of achievement Macmillan did not admire, considering that, without this fatal flaw in Woodrow Wilson's character, the "U.S. wd have been in the League, and the whole history of the next generation might have been different" [HMD, 29 March 1963].

Macmillan clearly preferred characters of a different sort. Anthony Sampson accordingly argued that his was a split personality—not in the way Davenport-Hines claimed—but between the gownsman and the swordsman, both types based on his reading, with Sampson seeing the latter as giving rise to "a romanticism which was dangerous, so that when he finally became Prime Minister, he seemed to be living the title role in someone else's biography."³⁴ The image of the gownsman and the swordsman was certainly amongst Macmillan's favourites. And of the two he probably preferred to see himself as the latter. This is why he identified with Lloyd George, "the man who would get things done," [Macmillan, *Winds of Change*, 96]³⁵ rather than Asquith. Even the tiring Prime Minister of 1963 still felt he had to urge ministers onwards.³⁶ No doubt this was also a factor in Macmillan's view of Butler that "He has no strength of character or purpose and for this reason shd not be P.M." [HMD, 19 October 1963].

As already mentioned, however, it was not of swordsmen that Macmillan tended to read. The romances he read were comic, not heroic. Not for him romantic biographies of Napoleon I, but instead Guedalla's puncturing of the pretensions of the "tragic comedians of the Second Empire."³⁷ And instead of swashbuckling swordsmen like *Ivanhoe* (1), Macmillan preferred *The Antiquary*, a comedy of Scottish country life with virtually no action, an unimportant plot and fantastically drawn comic characters. Indeed, throughout his reading there would appear to be a

32. L.G. WICKHAM-LEGG & E.T. WILLIAMS (eds), *Dictionary of National Biography 1941-1950*, London: Oxford University Press, 1959, 332.

33. W.M. THACKERAY, *History of Pendennis*, London, Macmillan, 1901 [1848], preface.

34. Anthony SAMPSON, *Macmillan: A Study in Ambiguity*, London: Allen Lane, 1967, 260.

35. He read Lloyd George's *War Memoirs* three times in 1950-1966.

36. "Without continual drive and effort it is almost impossible to get anything done. If ministers wd think more about pushing their Permanent Secretaries than (like Stalky) about their 'careers,' we would make more progress," HMD, 13 September 1963. The reference is to Rudyard Kipling's *Stalky and Co.*

37. Philip GUEDALLA, *The Second Empire*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1928 [1922], preface.

marked preference for comedy, though a comedy of wit and character, rather than of situation.

Macmillan might have been gifted the mock-heroic persona of “Supermac” by the left-wing cartoonist Vicky, with malicious intent that went awry. This does not mean, *pace* Sampson, that he had any illusions that he was actually playing that role. He was acutely conscious of the limited room for manoeuvre his government had in most spheres of operations, though his taste of comedy no doubt helped him to approach these difficulties with a sense of ironic detachment, and to appreciate the lampooning he received from the satirical revue, *Beyond the Fringe* [HMD, 9 October 1961, 24 October 1962]. Even his reading of Peel in 1961-1962 (discussed below) could be seen as emblematic of this. It was de Gaulle, rather than himself, he associated with Napoleon III, and Sampson’s inference that Macmillan, like Walter Mitty or the erstwhile emperor, was hiding behind some paper façade seems somewhat overstated.

Given this penchant for comedy it is not surprising that, with the exception of *Romeo and Juliet* (1), he tended to read Shakespeare’s history plays rather than the tragedies. *Hamlet* may have stirred Churchill’s more egotistical soul, and nourished a taste for drama so in keeping with his role during the Second World War. Macmillan in his reading preferred those who did not “flap.” Tragedy is a word he used occasionally, most notably in connection with Disraeli’s long wait for power. In the same entry he condemns Derby’s diffidence for prolonging the wait [HMD, 11 August 1951]. But the tragedy lay in the course of events, and not in the individual. Generally, Macmillan seems to have believed in suffering in silence rather than soliloquising histrionics. Consider the following diary entry:

Our wedding day. Sent telegram to Dorothy, who left for Scotland yesterday.

Read a little book called “*Solitary Confinement*”—by Christopher Burney. This has been republished by M&Co (it was originally published some years ago). It is certainly of classic quality. It is an account of 526 days solitary confinement in a French prison, the author having been an English agent dropped into France and captured by the Gestapo. It really is a wonderful little book. [HMD, 21 April 1961]

The only times he seems ever to have contemplated playing the tragic hero and bringing the stage crashing around him was during his battles against Butler for funds for his housing programme in the early 1950s. Even then his threats of resignation were tactical. Like one of his favourite subjects for biography, Talleyrand, he lived to intrigue another day.

Biography, in other words, for Macmillan dealt with how individuals met the challenges of the contingent. Maudlin Victorian attempts to draw morals from exemplary lives he seems to have found as unattractive, and much less entertaining than Macaulay’s pontifical certainties. Individual observations and even eccentricities he could find intriguing. “Heroism” or self-indulgent grandstanding—another trait he condemned in Butler [HMD, 6 June 1954]—much less so. So, in 1959 he proudly recorded, “Mr Gladstone used to call his last Cabinet ‘the Blubbing Cabinet.’ This is a ‘Manly Cabinet.’” [HMD, 20 July 1959]. By this he contrasted the petty jealousies that marred the Liberal governments of 1892-1895, which he had recently read about in the diaries of Sir Algernon West, with the Cabinet decision to stand foursquare with the Colonial Secretary over Nyasaland.

The British political system, in any case, at least on his reading of it, is no place for such grandstanding. It had to be worked, by figures like Walpole, or Macmillan. In commenting in 1961 on de Gaulle's advantage of a compliant press and parliament Macmillan mingled contempt and envy, always forgetting the ever present threat of assassination which came with it. Macmillan's reading did not really help him to prepare to confront someone like de Gaulle. He complained:

While he has extraordinary dignity and charm [...] he does not apparently listen to argument. I mean this almost literally. Not only is he not convinced; he actually does not listen. He merely repeats over and over again what he has said before. And the doctrine—almost dogma—is based on intuition, not ratiocination. He talks of Europe, and means France. The France of Louis XIV (as regards its religion, boundaries and power) of Napoleon (as regards the fanatical loyalty of its Army). He allows a little of Napoleon III, as regards the management of a so-called Parliament. [HMD, 29 November 1961]

Macmillan's erudition, though it gave him some insights into de Gaulle's mind, did not however provide him with the tools to change it. He did try, but maybe reading *Mémoires de Guerre* once was not enough.

Reading for Relaxation?

Clearly, reading for Macmillan provided him with an intellectual structure within which to view the world. This, however, was not some inflexible framework. Reading was contingent, it operated in different contexts. The fact that Macmillan often re-read books allows us to compare his changing opinions of them. In some cases his views change radically. For instance, Sir Edward Grey's *25 Years* (2) rapidly goes from "fascinating" to "poor stuff" [HMD, 29 July 1959; 19 September 1964]. His attitude to Asquith goes through similar shifts. Reading sympathetically when in office is obviously very different from reading critically for one's memoirs.

How Macmillan read something was thus affected both by when he read it, and what he read it for. His reading was sometimes random or on impulse or even, on rare occasions, on the recommendations of others. However, even when stranded at Chequers with no books of his own, he clearly used some kind of criterion to select what to read, be it as basic as checking which books were published by the family firm.

The only purpose Macmillan's reading serves in Alistair Horne's biography is "to switch off" during the Suez Crisis. Horne was struck by how much Macmillan read during this difficult time [Horne, Macmillan 1894-1956, 410-411]. However, Macmillan of course read a lot *all* the time. There are, nevertheless, clearly instances of Macmillan reading particular books because they help him to unwind. In September 1962 he notes that "Severe crisis—political, or personal, makes Scott a necessity" [HMD, 22 September 1962]. After returning from a particularly gruelling Kennedy summit at Christmas 1961 he read "Thackeray's *The Newcomes* as a treat—for I can read it lazily, dozing and dreaming, reading, writing" [HMD, 23 December 1961]. Yet Macmillan's reading during Suez is generally not like this. At the start of the crisis he had already embarked on reading his way through George Eliot, a project on which he doggedly continued. Shortly after that, prompted in part by reading her *Romola* (2), he began to re-read Villari's *Life of Machiavelli* (3), though what bearing that had on his behaviour during the

subsequent crucial weeks in which he succeeded to the Premiership is, in the absence of contemporary diary entries, impossible to say. Of course, one could read his admission that “I try to read an hour or two every day, however late. Otherwise, one wd go mad” [HMD, 20 September 1956] as a response to the pressures of the Suez Crisis. But the fact is that this was true all the time, and not just in 1956.

To some extent this may reflect a tendency to insomnia. As he put it in 1962, “I cannot sleep, so I read” [HMD, 12 September 1962]. However, generally Macmillan seems to have been a good sleeper. Nevertheless, when tired he would tend, though not invariably, to turn to old favourites. But he would, of course, read anyway. Indeed, on occasion he seems to be reading one book as a relaxation from another! [HMD, Easter Sunday 1953]. The plain fact would seem to be that he read, first and foremost, simply because he enjoyed doing so.

What he does not seem to do is read in order to “switch off.” He will occasionally read an old favourite for “a treat.” But this does not necessarily constitute reading as escapism, or if it does, what is meant by escapism needs to be explored. Consider this diary entry:

Read Henry James—*The Awkward Age*. How remote all this world seems now! And how strange all these refinements and romances of human behaviour! But rather restful, because so artificial. [HMD, 6 February 1954]

In contrast, his response to C.P. Snow’s *The New Man* (1) was “I don’t want to read a work about the atomic bomb” [HMD, 14 May 1954]. Macmillan did not need to remind himself about the trials and tribulations of the cold war world, and certainly not in May 1954 when debates about the Bomb were causing so much trouble in Cabinet.³⁸ Instead, James, Austen and so on represented closed and comforting worlds. They were comforting or, as Macmillan tended to express it, “soothing”, in a number of different ways. Entering their worlds was not just an escape, it also provided a detachment from which Macmillan could appraise the problems of his political life. In other words, they were also a way in which he tried to gain perspective on his problems. For instance,

Read Lord Morley’s *Recollections* volume 1. I find these 19th century memoirs soothing. They had just as many difficulties and crises as we do. But they did not live in the terrible world produced by 2 wars, with its frightful losses and the prospect of a third. Moreover, they had solid comforts—esp servants! [HMD, 23 July 1959]

It was by way of the contrast they offered to the fragile world of the cold war and the Bomb, that the closed, stable and genteel worlds of Jane Austen or Anthony Trollope were comforting.

It could also be, of course, that they comforted because of the particular worlds they conjured up. Macmillan was clearly most comfortable with novels set amidst the country gentry, such as those of Bartschire. He ignored those nineteenth century novelists who dealt with other *milieux*, such as Mrs Gaskell. Similar preferences seem to operate in his reading of Dickens. Despite his enthusiasm for most of the works of this writer, he only read *Oliver Twist* once in these years, for

38. In contrast he was later impressed by Nevil Shute’s bleak *On the Beach*, HMD, 7 November 1957.

the first time since he was a boy. It was the portrayal of county society, rather than the brick-makers of Hogglestock, which he admired in Trollope:

his uncanny knowledge (or intuition) of all these different groups—Bishops, curates, doctors, squires, MPs, grandees, club-men. He never makes a mistake, of detail or of taste. And the story is beautifully told. Of course, it's a sign of old age and mental laziness to re-read books one knows so well. But I am ageing, and I do deserve a bit of mental relaxation. [HMD, 10 August 1961]

No doubt Macmillan would have preferred to avoid the grimmer realities of nineteenth-century life in his fiction for much the same reason that he wished to avoid reading about the Bomb, at least for the purposes of relaxation. Yet these preferences do also seem to reflect a side of his character. Like his pleasure at the Haddingtons' Ball at Syon House in 1951—it was “fun to see all the remaining tiaras, necklaces, etc out of the banks for one night!” [HMD, 2 July 1951]—they were a welcome contrast with the drabness of post-war austerity. But this difference was not merely material. As he wrote of the Barchester chronicles, “It is such a wonderful change from modern life; so wise and tolerant and witty” [HMD, 20 July 1951]. And in his appreciation of them he no doubt would have agreed with Trollope's comment in his autobiography that “the highest merit which a novel can have consists in perfect delineation of character.”³⁹ It was in the articulation of their characters that the appeal of these works to Macmillan above all lay. And, as with his biographical reading, he often seemed to be drawn to characters struggling to overcome force of circumstances. His appraisal of Mr Crawley, the hapless curate of *The Last Chronicle of Barset*, for instance, undergoes interesting changes. In 1954 the character is a little wearisome. By 1962, as Prime Minister, Macmillan seems to have a finer appreciation of the difficulties of maintaining one's dignity in a position of penury [HMD, 26 February 1954; 30 July 1962].

Reading for Political Ends?

Generally speaking, however, his elevation to the Premiership seems to have had little effect on Macmillan's reading habits. Indeed, he rarely seems to have read books for directly political purposes at any point in his career. He did occasionally read works on contemporary politics in the USSR. However, many of the Politics/Policy books recorded in Table 2 were read *after* he left office. He did read a little contemporary political biography, about figures such as Eisenhower, Diefenbaker, de Gaulle or Khrushchev. However, he instead prepared for his trip to visit Khrushchev in 1959 by reading a biography of Peter the Great.

Contemporary concerns nevertheless clearly did, on occasion, shape Macmillan's choice of reading. It is no coincidence that the fall of the Peel government featured heavily in his reading in 1961-1962, a period during which Macmillan feared he might be about to again split the Conservative Party, only this time over Europe rather than the Corn Laws. However, his purpose seems to have been as much for comfort as well as for analogy, concluding on surveying his detractors that “none of these I have mentioned can be Disraeli to my Peel” [HMD, 19 May 1961]. Similarly, as his thoughts turned to resignation, he found it helpful

39. Quoted in Stephen GILL's “Introduction” in *The Last Chronicle of Barset*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981, xi.

to revisit how this had been handled 40 years previously by re-reading Blake's biography of Bonar Law [HMD, 16 August 1963]. More often, however, his choice of literature was inspired by some other book he had just been reading, reflecting the autonomy of his reading habits. Gerald Sparrow's book on modern Turkey seems to have been one of the few he read in order to understand current affairs [HMD, 22 September 1962], and even then it was so as to grasp better why Zorlu and Menderes had been condemned to death, not in order to prepare himself to negotiate with them over Cyprus a few years previously. Macmillan's reading, even in contemporary politics, tended to be reflective rather than didactic. Arguably the one exception to this was when he deliberately re-read *Bleak House* in preparation for his only Budget speech in 1956, so as to use the Crippsian image of Mrs Pardiggle, "who gave allowances (pocket money) to her children and then 'boned' it back from them as contributions to her charities," as an example of the policy he wished to avoid [HMD, 8 April 1956].

Macmillan did not read to learn about history, but to inform himself of it. He was, however, occasionally struck by some kind of parallel with contemporary events as a result of his reading. Re-reading Asquith's biography in 1962 prompted him to compare the 1916 fall of the Coalition with Macmillan's own recent "Night of the Long Knives", though he concluded that,

in my experience at any rate, there is nothing like the number of people involved or the atmosphere of intrigue. This is partly due to the practice of Cabinet minutes and agenda; partly to the end of country-house weekends (where these plots were mostly hatched) [HMD, 8 October 1962].

Sometimes his reading also directly suggested a context in which to view current affairs. For instance, he found General Spears' account of the Fall of France in 1940, "a terrible and cruel book, but very well written and as exciting as a romance. No doubt the present French hesitations, contradictions, and vacillations arise from shame" [HMD, 1 January 1955]. Re-reading Wheeler-Bennett's *Nemesis of Power* (2) could also heighten anxieties about the prospects for democracy in post-war Germany [HMD, 24 March 1963]. Similarly, in 1952, he drew an analogy between the great Whig magnates of the past and the trade union barons of the present [HMD, 8 March 1952]. But, as above, these examples are reflective. There is no evidence that they directly affected Macmillan's political behaviour. His reading, in these contexts, seems to have provided a means for crystallising his views rather than serving some kind of direct political end.

Macmillan and Whig History

Macmillan's reading and his politics did not interact directly, but doctrinally. This was not through the reading of political theory, a genre he seems to have completely avoided. Economics, similarly, may have been a major interest when he started in publishing in the 1920s [Horne, *Macmillan 1894-1956*, 63], but he read hardly any in these years, and what little he did all came from the pen of Roy Harrod. Rather, this interaction appears through his reading of history, and particularly his reactions against Whig history.

One of his biographers has declared that “Historically, his sympathies are unmistakably with the Whigs.”⁴⁰ Certainly he read extensively about them, but then they are difficult to avoid for anyone reading eighteenth and nineteenth century political biographies. Undoubtedly, Macmillan did find some of them fascinating. How else can we account for his reading and re-reading accounts of Sir Robert Walpole? But what he seems to have found fascinating was Walpole’s skills in political management, rather than any kind of ideological attraction. It is hard to square his supposed Whiggish sympathies with his sarcastic comment on Trevelyan’s *George III and Charles James Fox* (1), “Very readable, but of course very prejudiced. It is the pure milk of whiggery” [HMD, 11 February 1953].

What Macmillan meant by this becomes clearer when considering his reading of Macaulay. He frequently (mis)quotes Melbourne’s observation “I wish I was as cocksure of anything as Tom Macaulay is of everything.” When he reads his way through a newly acquired set of Bagehot in 1955 he concludes in similar vein; “all so confident and often so wrong [...]. Liberalism had fine things about it, but it was too sanctimonious and too patronising” [HMD, 7 January 1955]. Not least, it led to the self-righteous nannying and controls of the Socialists Macmillan faced across the Chamber. The omniscient style of Guedalla, which he had thought so clever in his Liberal-inclined youth, also began to grate. Not least, the narrow prejudices of Whig history had, he felt, obscured other views. History was thus turned from a debate into a pageant. It was not Macmillan who saw history as a procession of heroes and villains, but rather the Whigs. Feiling and Bryant were therefore praised as welcome Tory ripostes to the “daubs and caricatures” of the Whig historians [HMD, 5 September 1965]. Whatever his youthful enthusiasms may have been, his reading in these years, emphasising as it did the play of circumstances rather than grand narrative, the role of character rather than ego, and the rejection of certainties seems to place him unquestionably in a Tory rather than a Whig tradition.

Conclusions

Two extreme interpretations of the relationship between the reader and the text could be adumbrated. In one, in so far as the reader is acknowledged at all, he or she is seen very much as a *tabula rasa*, waiting to receive the social understandings of the author. At the other extreme, texts are seen as products, and in order for them to sell they have to reflect the worldview of their intended audience. It is not particularly surprising that this interpretation particularly operates with reference to texts such as newspapers.

Neither of these remotely capture Macmillan’s approach to reading. Reading was a key part of who he was, and what he did. It was not merely a form of relaxation. Nor was it subordinate or auxiliary to his political life. It informed his political life, but just as much his political career could inform his reading, drawing him to biographies of Gladstone with renewed interest and insight after he had himself attained the Premiership. These, however, were not read to any particular political end, and nor were the vast majority of other books Macmillan got through in these years. Reading was an end in itself. Indeed, re-reading books to some extent

40. George HUTCHINSON, *The Last Edwardian at No. 10: An Impression of Harold Macmillan*, London: Quartet, 1980, 18.

was simply an exercise in intellectual curiosity, to see if and how far his views had changed.

Furthermore, he did not believe that reading carried lessons, and would have seen such an attitude as a crude version of the positivism of John Morley he regarded as so absurdly outdated [HMD, 26 March 1955]. Reading gave him a framework and perspective within which to view contemporary events. But he did not read specifically to that purpose. Rather, reading was a reflective process, which might help to crystallise his thoughts, but rarely to shape them.

The quality of writing certainly mattered, as might be expected for a publisher, and for this he was willing to forgive Macaulay much. A badly written book which nevertheless contained interesting material, or lively characters was however clearly far more acceptable than a well-written story which was not worth writing. And the characters he was most drawn to were those who strove to master the events and circumstances they found themselves confronting, perhaps much as he saw himself in these years.