Chapter - 6

Conclusion.

I

We return once more to Halperin's "Eminent Victorians and History". Halperin's principal charge against Strachey is one of self contradiction. Strachey's Preface to Eminent Victorians advocated detachment but Strachey himself says Halperin lacks detachment; he is biased against all four Victorians whose eminence he seeks to subvert. Halperin's second contention is that Eminent Victorians will survive because Strachey's books "are entertaining to read". Otherwise (and this is the third important point Halperin makes) Eminent Victorians has failed to live up to Gerald Brenan's expectation that it will mark a transition between the old age and the new age in literature. On the contrary, Halperin thinks, Strachey's age is as remote to us as the age of Manning and Arnold seemed to him. It is not clear whether Halperin is merely referring to the temporal distance of six decades and more, or suggesting that Strachey's biography is not any part of the living tradition.

1. See above Ref. 2, Chapter I, Section I, p. 1.
The third contention does not hold good before Holroyd's argument. Holroyd thinks that Strachey launched his attack in _Eminent Victorians_ on the atmosphere of Victorianism and on Victorian biography. He thinks that "the reaction against the reaction against Lytton Strachey" has largely freed biography from the vein of hero-worship, and the Preface to _Eminent Victorians_ has acted as a powerful manifesto for twentieth-century biographers. The words of Strachey in the Preface that:

> Human beings are too important to be treated as mere symptoms of the past. They have a value which is independent of any temporal processes — which is eternal, and must be felt for its own sake — have since then enlarged the boundaries of biography, and its subject matter is now the whole range of human experience.

According to Holroyd, Strachey had a great influence on modern biography. Holroyd calls Dr. Johnson the father of modern biography and thinks that the healthy trends of this modern biography were "crucially infected by the blight of Victorianism". It was Strachey who revived it again. While Halperin decries _Eminent Victorians_ for not being history enough Holroyd praises it for not being merely history. To assess the three components of Halperin's conclusion we have to

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3. Ibid., p. 20.
examine at least some of the more recent biographies of
the four Victorians Strachey criticised in his book.
After that we have to place Strachey in relation to his
age, especially the Bloomsbury Group, to see how far he
contributes to the living tradition.
Shane Leslie's book on Manning was published just three years after Eminent Victorians. He accuses Purcell of writing the Life of the Cardinal without the aid of important papers. He thinks Purcell had been tempted to achieve literary fame at a single leap by publishing the correspondence between Manning and Monsignor Talbot in his book. The book was not well accepted. Yet Shane Leslie calls his own book a supplement of Purcell's. The facts that emerge out of Leslie's book match Strachey's. But, being an admirer of Manning, he tries to make him flawless. Monsignor Talbot remains the schemer. The relation between Manning and Newman does not appear bitter. He tries to explain the reason for their differences. Vincent Alan McClelland, writing much later, thinks Purcell's picture of Manning was based on only a fraction of the total documents available and therefore it was distorted. So, he thinks the new documentary evidence disproves a number of traditional attitudes.


But he also resorts to hagiography and lets down Newman and Talbot to prove Manning superior. He criticises Strachey's presentation of Manning as a ruthless schemer guided by personal ambition distorted and unhistorical.

Like Strachey Elspeth Huxley and F.B. Smith two recent biographers of Florence Nightingale make extensive use of Cook's *Life of Florence Nightingale*. Elspeth Huxley pictures the young Florence as a woman seeking freedom. On being inspired by de Bunsen and S.G. Howe she trained herself as a nurse at Kaiserswerth Hospital in Germany. Through Manning's recommendation she joined a private nursing home in France and it was his recommendation that she carried to Scutari. Unlike F.B. Smith who has no high opinion of Florence's organisational ability Elspeth Huxley feels that Florence knew exactly what she wanted to achieve. But even Huxley is at one with Strachey in thinking that Florence

8. Huxley, p. 27, 29.
Nightingale drove herself and others unmercifully especially the faithful Dr. Sutherland. She was loyal to friends but cruel to those who failed her. F.B. Smith is more critical than Elspeth Huxley and perhaps more debunking than Strachey himself. He writes that in Scutari Florence Nightingale was too undemocratic to dine together with the other nurses. Perhaps she even intercepted letters of complaints against her. Smith even challenges the myth of the Lady with the Lamp, stating that Florence broke her own rule because no woman was allowed to enter the men's ward at night and no lights were allowed. There is an implication that she deliberately ignored the rule to create an image for posterity. Smith charges her with habitual deceit but admits that the intrigues at Scutari were justified by the elimination of models. He states that Florence Nightingale's activity became a diversionary focus for radical critics against mismanagement by aristocrats. Strachey of course spares neither Florence nor her predecessors. Even when distorting facts he is less harsh than his successors. Smith asserts that the

11. Ibid., p. 164.
12. Smith, p. 58.
13. Ibid., p. 40.
crossing of the letters of Sidney Herbert and Florence Nightingale was not a detail inserted by Strachey; he was merely following Stanmore's hagiographical mistake. Strachey's error therefore helps rather than harms Florence Nightingale's reputation.

In depicting how Florence ousted competitors and assumed sole charge when going to Crimea, Smith uses Cook in more detail than Strachey did.

Zachary Cope asserts that Florence Nightingale deliberately tried not to recover from her own disease so that she could gain her ends. In Cope's opinion Florence suffered from neurosis, she had no other serious disease. Strachey writing forty years before Cope, does not use the term but the portrait of Florence that emerges from the pages of Eminent Victorians is at times that of a neurotic woman and proves Strachey's perceptiveness in reading his sources.

Williamson and Sanders writing on Thomas Arnold in

the mid-sixties and seventies respectively have occasion to challenge Strachey. In analysing Arnold's criticism of Poor Laws and compulsory charities, Williamson contradicts Strachey's views. If Arnold was against these reforms it was because they hardened richmen's feelings towards neighbours and obliterated the sense of brotherhood. Williamson also shows that Arnold was against war because it promoted despotism and intoxicated society. Both Williamson and Sanders praise Arnold's educational reforms especially his introduction of new subjects. Williamson asserts that Arnold perceived the defects of a system in which commercial schools run by untrained laymen thrived. Sanders points out that Arnold insisted on the students having their own opinion. He wanted them not simply to amass facts but to use their minds. Sanders, like Strachey, uses Stanley but emphasises facts that Strachey ignores. The picture of Arnold that emerges from Sanders' treatment is of a teacher who wanted to co-ordinate the intellectual and the spiritual, the ancient and the modern, insisting not only on Greek and Latin but also on the introduction of modern foreign languages and modern history. Arnold's enjoyment of history was wrongly ridiculed by Strachey. The headmaster seriously believed that


20. Ibid., p. 197.
the study of ancient history could shed light on problems of modern history.\textsuperscript{21} Sanders admits that Strachey is partially right in thinking that Arnold's outlook was muddled but opposes Strachey's over-insistence on the "puzzled look".\textsuperscript{22} Sanders is of the opinion that the nineteenth century was too complex an entity to allow any straight solution. Indeed he sees Coleridge and Thomas Arnold as champions of liberty in difficult times.\textsuperscript{23} To Arnold promotion of collective progress, general welfare and happiness mattered a good deal. He was opposed to the disregard of human needs by the aristocracy and the commercial classes. And yet it is easy to misunderstand him because he did not believe in equality of all social orders. Probably Strachey suffers from such a misunderstanding. Sanders uses Church's Oxford Movement to show that though Arnold opposed the Tractarians and considered the Cambridge Movement superior, many of his students went to Oxford and strengthened the Tractarian team. Arnold and Tractarians therefore must have had something in common. Williamson thinks that Arnold has been of more interest to the twentieth-century

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{21} Sanders, pp. 96-97.
\bibitem{22} Ibid., p. 93.
\bibitem{23} Ibid., p. 91.
\bibitem{24} Ibid., p. 113.
\bibitem{25} Ibid., p. 114.
\end{thebibliography}
readers than the three other eminent Victorians attacked by Strachey.

More recent biographers (to name Turnbull and Trench) of Gordon affirm many of the shortcomings noted and satirised by Strachey. While admitting that there was an embryo of genius in Gordon, Patrick Turnbull enumerates his faults:

- a tendency to twist, even disobey, orders,
- an obstinacy which at times could only be described as pig-headed, bigotry, impoliteness, an inability to control a violent temper.

This inventory could as well have been prepared by Strachey. Turnbull also states that the massacre of the people of Khartoum by the Mahdi’s army could have been avoided, but for Gordon’s zeal for martyrdom. Charles Chenevix Trench uses Bernard Allen to prove that Gordon was moderate in his use of alcohol and that Strachey had deliberately distorted Long in the satirical use of ‘b & s’. But even Trench admits that Cromer had charged Gordon with excessive drinking. According


29. Trench, p. 95.
to Trench Gordon was unsuited to the post of Ripon's Private Secretary, and that he himself had agreed that his mission in Sudan was to be a reporting mission only; in fact he had himself drafted the instructions with Wolseley. Turnbull also writes that there was no ambiguity in the instructions when Gordon was selected by Granville for the Egyptian mission. Trench however finds no records of any Cabinet decision on the despatch of Gordon to Khartoum. This seems to support the view (shared by both Strachey and Trench) that the British Government's handling of the Sudan situation was fumbling and hesitant. Gordon did not improve matters when he wrote in his early reports from Sudan that the situation was fine. Turnbull assigns this misreading of the Sudan situation to Gordon's "Victorian snobbery, combined with a tendency to wishful thinking, ..." This snobbery made him under-estimate his enemy. Taken together Turnbull and Trench seem to justify most of Strachey's major points of attack against Gordon and against the indecision of the Liberals. Though Trench asserts that

30. Ibid., p. 163.
33. Trench, p. 201.
34. Turnbull, p. 110.
militant Christianity did not originally inspire Gordon. He admits that it became important after his return from China.  

35. Trench, p. 96.
The Victorian biographers had abandoned Boswellism while Strachey brought it back. His revolt against Victorian biography was part of a criticism of Victorianism in which he was influenced by his Cambridge friends while also influencing them. After the Cambridge years, he was a prominent member of the Bloomsbury group which included Virginia, Vanessa and Thoby Stephen, Leonard Woolf, Desmond Mac Carthy and his wife, Maynard Keynes, Roger Fry, Clive Bell, Duncan Grant and E.M. Forster. Starting before the First World War, they continued as a group through the twenties and thirties when they became widely known. These friends belonged to different disciplines. There were writers, painters, civil servants, philosophers and an economist in the group. Raymond Williams thinks that the different positions which the Bloomsbury Group assembled, and which they disseminated covered the proper contents of the mind of a modern, educated, civilized individual. These assembled positions made powerful interventions towards the creation of economic, political, and social conditions within which, freed from war and depression and prejudice, individuals could be free to be and to become civilized.36

Though it was a heterogeneous group they were bound together by certain common ideals. Leonard Woolf reflected in old age that they were intellectuals with "a passion for friendship, a passion for literature and music, a passion for what we called the truth". He said that the world was filled with old people who were as moribund as Victoria. These friends were in revolt against a lingering past. They were influenced by G.E. Moore's philosophy. Leonard Woolf said that Moore suddenly removed from their eyes the obscuring accumulation of scales, cobwebs and curtains, revealing for the first time to them "the nature of truth and reality, of good and evil and character and conduct ...". This revelation of the true nature of character and conduct brought them into conflict with the Victorian age. They found the people hypocritical. Strachey attacks the hypocrisy which Manning along with the other Victorians represented by passing themselves off as being pious and moral. They talked noble sentiments but lived otherwise. Yet Strachey upholds the Victorian tradition of a true simple life which Newman represented.


In keeping with the Bloomsbury tradition Strachey attacks the religious orthodoxy of the Victorians in the three essays in *Eminent Victorians*. He leads a crusade against the Victorian acceptance of authority. He refuses to accept that a priest like Manning should lead the people in the field of religion. Yet he is not reluctant to recognize Newman's greatness and the true religion he stood for. He attacks Arnold's extraordinary religious fervour in trying to make his boys good Christians at the expense of their learning. He attacks Gordon's religious fanaticism. Gordon allowed the religious tendencies within him to become the dominating factor in his life. Florence Nightingale escaped the attack on her religious beliefs by having a conception of God which was "certainly not orthodox". Bloomsbury sympathized with pacifism and were against poverty, ignorance, imperialism and militarism. The First World War had disillusioned and disenchanted men. Heroism was no longer valued nor desired. To die in war was no longer considered great. In fact Britain's own imperialistic adventures were criticised. So when Bloomsbury spoke against these, the British public was ready to listen to them. Strachey attacks the policy of British imperialism in the essay on Gordon. Notably the title of the essay is different from those of the

three other essays. His purpose was not to write a short biography of this eminent Victorian; he was analysing the end of Gordon and assessing the responsibility of officials in hastening that end as well as Gordon's own responsibility. Gordon was at first in favour of expansion rather than the withdrawal policy in Sudan but towards the end he becomes an unwilling tool in the hands of the imperialists. Due to the inefficiency of the officials who were at the helm of the state the Gordon expedition becomes bungled. While these men got mixed up in disputes among themselves in the ministry Gordon waited in vain for reinforcements. He was left in the lurch. It is ironical that while he was hoping that troops would arrive in time to save him, the Government was actually on the verge of breaking up due to great difference of opinion and there was hardly any concern for his safety. Gordon was abandoned for the time being.

In all the four essays Strachey attacks the Victorian phenomenon of hero-worship. He finds the age lacking in a rational attitude by their blind worship of Florence Nightingale as the Lady with the Lamp. The Victorians took her as a model for imitation. While doing so they did not care to evaluate her qualities. Strachey frees her from the unreal sentiments that surrounded her. By probing into the depths of her mind
he at first seems to be desecrating a popular idol. But as he progresses, he succeeds in making her more interesting, real and human. His praise for her service is genuine. He also succeeds in exposing the Victorian society's insufficiency in using women's talent. In this connection we have to consider Raymond William's interpretation that under the apparent stability of the Victorian society deep crises were brewing in the social, political, cultural and intellectual fields. The Bloomsbury Group felt they had to overcome these crises. Though the members of the Bloomsbury Group belonged to the upper middle class families and had significant connections with the upper levels of colonial administrations, they could not accept the traditions of their fathers. They voiced a social protest against their own class. They brought their intelligence and education to bear on the 'vast system of cant and hypocrisy' sustained by many of the institutions — 'monarchy, the stock exchange' — which were elsewhere included as the fields of success of this same 'aristocracy of intellect'.

Moreover the presence of highly intelligent and intellectual women, within these families and their exclusion from the male institutions made matters worse. As the Bloomsbury Group was against sexual discrimination they broke this barrier, and set women on the same footing as men. For this reason Strachey

40. Raymond Williams, p. 162.
hailed Florence Nightingale's role in the Crimean War. She was this type of an intelligent and intellectual woman in an upper middle class family with no work to do. She craved for a place in the men's world and had to earn one with great difficulty. Strachey also throws some light upon the inefficiency and insufficiency of the men who in the mid-Victorian England were in charge of the war office or in charge of conducting the Crimean War.

The earnestness for which the Victorians were honoured in their own times was ridiculed by Bloomsbury some years later. Through the essay Dr. Arnold Strachey attacks the moral earnestness which was the predominant characteristic of the headmaster's mind. Though the atmosphere of Bloomsbury was considered, extremely aristocratic and intellectual their attitude towards morality was not orthodox. They were candid and said to each other clearly what they thought, and felt. Naturally Dr. Arnold became the target of attack when he wanted the Rugby boys to discard easy-going frivolous, attitude in their moral lives and lead lives with a high and serious purpose.

Bloomsbury believed that reason plus education would make both ladies and gentlemen enlightened like themselves. The more these 'civilized individuals', grew in number the

41. Ibid., p. 165.
evils that were present in the society would become fewer and society would take a turn for the better. They were in revolt against the parental influence. As children of Victorian parents they were subjected to strict upbringing, they had less freedom of thought and action. As they grew up they felt a time had come for a re-examination of human emotions. They found themselves living in the springtime of a conscious revolt against the social, political, religious, moral, intellectual and artistic institutions, beliefs and standards of their fathers and grandfathers. They were out to construct something new; they were in the van of the builders of a new society that was "free, rational, civilized, pursuing truth and beauty." Quentin Bell thinks that Bloomsbury's most characteristic offering was Eminent Victorians. He calls it a tract for the times.

42. Ibid., p. 153.
Nicolson predicted a bleak future for biography if it tried to discard the literary form in favour of presenting facts only. Edel, Shelston, Nadel and Holroyd have all come to the conclusion after examining the modern biographies that Nicolson's fear was needless. The trend in modern biography is towards making it perfect in literary qualities. Biography has become more of a fiction than history. This trend was begun by Strachey. In a modern biography the biographer is free to give psychological interpretation to the actions of the subject. Instead of recording just facts, the modern biographer is free to alter them to make the subject appear more consistent with his image. Nadel writes that the biographer goes beyond his material to maintain an intuitive sense of his subject but for this he has to manipulate data. Lytton Strachey initiates this practice. He either gives a liberal interpretation of facts or at times he refuses to include facts if he feels that it will alter his conception. Nadel thinks it is an oversimplification and misunderstanding to associate biography with journalists and historians. The biographer:

In his need to find a structure, point of view, method of characterization and descriptive

44. Nicolson, pp. 154-155.
technique, ... is akin more to the creative writer than the historian. 45

Among others he names Strachey as one of the pioneers of this kind of biography. Simson has also upheld the quality of form in Strachey's work. He says Strachey distorted history for the sake of form. These writers are not concerned with Strachey the historian. History in biography is made subordinate to form. Holroyd thinks that history and biography are different 46

... history deals with mankind, biography with man. The historian, in other words, concentrates on what is common to all men; the biographer is concerned with what differentiates one man, or woman, from another. 46

Holroyd quotes Emerson and Disraeli who think that biography is superior to history. To Disraeli biography is life without theory. If biography should contain only facts, it will lose its charm.

Halperin thinks otherwise. His emphasis is on history. He calls Strachey an undependable historian. Strachey was guided by Bloomsbury's idea about "significant form" and by its disinterestedness in politics. Halperin's comment is that it is a serious flaw in an historian to be uninterested in politics. Hence Eminent Victorians did not manage to become history. With

45. Nadel, p. 11.
46. "History and Biography", p. 17.
the exception of General Gordon there is little else that Strachey got right in *Eminent Victorians*. Strachey's biographies are artistic creations; like novels they are only true to themselves and to what the artist sees. By trying to make his characters psychologically alive by probing deep into their inner selves he neglects the exterior reality. But Halberin is also not to be taken too seriously when he says Strachey distorted facts. It at once brings to mind that Simson said Strachey was not a debunker, he touched upon all the important issues of the time. Moreover, Strachey supplies a list of all the books he used while writing his lives. Had he misused them he would not have had the courage to name them. Lives of Manning, Florence Nightingale, Thomas Arnold and Gordon by recent biographers have appeared after Strachey's biography. They have all followed the myths created by Strachey; the sole exception is McClelland's hagiography of Manning. The biographies are all based on Strachey's book. From these later biographies we come to know some of the persons in greater detail and at times the attacks on them by modern biographers are even more violent. Strachey is indeed accused of being either mild in his attack or of having overlooked certain facts. So we cannot blame Strachey of being unfair to his subjects or of excesses. It is only the strong feeling burning within him
that found expression in his writing. That "feeling", in turn, was a product of the Bloomsbury view of "civilised individuals".

Strachey's use of his sources is not impartial. *Eminent Victorians* is not only an attack on the four eminent characters he deals with; it is also an attack upon his source books. He states his dislike for these Victorian biographies in his preface to *Eminent Victorians*. But he keeps in reserve his praise for Sir Edward Cook's *Life of Florence Nightingale* which he appends at the end of his Preface. He calls it excellent and an "exception to the current commodity". The other sources simply supply him with information while he, with his Bloomsbury background looks upon these sources as a modern would, supplying psychological interpretations to the actions as, he says, he understands them.

This interpretation of actions according to one's understanding is not anti-historical, neither should it be considered a fault nor a distortion of fact. One cannot be faulted if one writes history from a particular point of view. In Herbert Butterfield's" view it is not a crime to have presuppositions while writing history. This is exactly what Strachey does.

47. See above Ref. 24, Chapter I, Section II, p. 11.
Biographies cannot depend mainly on myths and eulogies, they must consult history. It is an accepted fact now that biography in order to earn readability must have good form and must contain reliable facts. Apart from literary value it definitely has an historical value. All biographers in the process of writing the lives of their subjects use history and all historians while writing history and biographies. So one cannot underestimate the importance of history in a biography. Modern biographers are not giving importance to history, their emphasis is mainly on form. The success of Eminent Victorians is not wholly based on form as Nadel claims; nor is Halperin's charge that Strachey has ignored history correct. Strachey does not ignore history. We find proof of this when we compare the myths that he has created with the myths of his sources. His myths are source-based. Nadel, Simson and Halperin have all overlooked this point in Strachey.

The very nature of biography demands multiple lives of the same individual. This does not mean that the facts will begin to differ in each biography of the same individual. It is through alternate plot structure that each biographer gives a different story of the same life. In this connection Nadel writes:

The need to rewrite a life when previous biographies exist is actually the recovery of
one's freedom for in the act of rewriting the biographer learns that he is not a passive victim of history or circumstance but is free to redefine them and rediscover new ways to tell the story. 48

We at once find that in rewriting the lives of the same subjects later biographers are forming the same pictures as Strachey. They use the sources mentioned by Strachey. Even when they supply new information, the interpretations are not new. Their interpretations tally with Strachey's; Elspeth Huxley, Sanders, Turnbull and Trench acknowledge their debt to Strachey. Strachey's interpretations of his sources persist in later biographers because Eminent Victorians is the point of departure from Victorian hagiography and closer to the modern historian's critical evaluation of the past. "One reason for its colossal success was the discovery that our household Gods were human after all". 49 This not only makes the biographies readable but also paves the way for a new view of historical personalities and history itself, a view persisting to this day.

Strachey's use of his sources, even his tendentious distortions, become understandable, therefore, within the framework of the Bloomsbury 'revolt' and its permanent contribution to English literature.


49. Quentin Bell, p. 80.