

# Leviathan of history

by A. J. P. TAYLOR

**LORD MACAULAY: THE HISTORY OF ENGLAND** Edited and abridged with an Introduction by Hugh Trevor-Roper (Penguin £1.95)

Above all Macaulay was a great writer. The casual reader who picks up a volume of Macaulay's History will be taken prisoner and unable to rest until he has finished the volume or preferably all five of them.

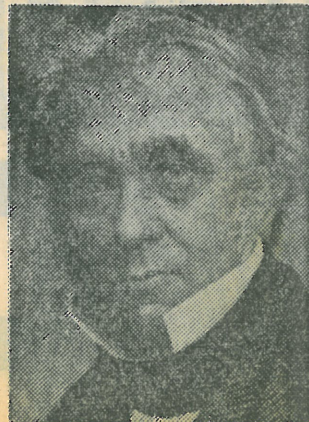
Perhaps I am hopeful. The fashion has turned against long books. There are some who can still surmount James Joyce's 'Ulysses' or even the interminable volumes of Marcel Proust. Few read Gibbon from beginning to end and even fewer, I fear, the five volumes of Macaulay. This neglect is, I think, lamentably mistaken. Macaulay may be superficial. He may be out of date. But in my opinion he remains the most readable of all historians. Macaulay offers every literary virtue from drama to comedy. His pictures of the bucolic squire and the impoverished cleric are unrivalled despite the critical scrutiny they have suffered from later writers. If his characters were often neither as heroic nor as wicked as he presented them, they ought to have been.

How shall we lure readers back to Macaulay? Hugh Trevor-Roper has provided a gallant answer by cutting the History down from five substantial volumes to one paper-

back. Here indeed are some of the finest passages and the most irresistible. But of course the result is a series of isolated delights, not Macaulay's History. Macaulay was a supreme master of narrative and his book is narrative history from beginning to end with some entertaining interruptions. Without this continuity the majesty of the History is lost.

However we have a consolation in return. Hugh Trevor-Roper has provided an introduction of over thirty pages, in which he displays his own incomparable gifts as a writer of historical essays. There has never been a finer presentation of Macaulay or a wiser analysis of his achievements—and of his failings. I am not always in agreement with the Regius Professor. There is rather too much psycho-history, ranging from Macaulay's uneasy relations with his father to his unusual relations with his sisters.

Trevor-Roper is inclined to depreciate the Whig interpretation of history. I still see its merits. After all, our political forerunners stumbled on a system of government the least imperfect that has been known. We still benefit from their inheritance. We still enjoy ordered liberty. The authority of the state is still limited though not as much as it should be. Macaulay erred, I think, when he added to the Whig interpretation the great delusion of his age, which was until the other day the great delusion of ours: belief in limitless progress and in the possibility, indeed



Macaulay: 'Most readable of all historians.'

the inevitability, of limitless improvement, both moral and material. Nevertheless we should remain grateful to the Glorious Revolution and to him whom Macaulay called with some hyperbole William the Deliverer.

I am grateful to Trevor-Roper for bringing readers back to Macaulay. Above all I am grateful to Macaulay. After some hesitation I am prepared to adapt Johnson's phrase about 'Paradise Lost' and to say of Macaulay's work that it is not the greatest of histories only because it is not the first.

**A Walk Around the Lakes** by Hunter Davies (Weidenfeld £6.95)—Readers of Mr Davies's 'Walk Along the Wall' will know to expect much more than the title suggests. He escorts you this time on a Boswellian talk-and-walk, peopling the lakes and fells with all the local noteworthies, alive or recalled, and your own visits and memories will be all the richer for it. A good book, worthy of its kinship with both Wordsworth the poet and Wainwright the fell wanderer.

WHEN Macaulay visited the Zoo soon after the appearance of the first two volumes of his History, one young lady was heard to exclaim to another, 'Is that Mr Macaulay? Never mind the hippopotamus.'

Macaulay was too agile to be a hippopotamus but he was certainly a leviathan of history. His early run of historical essays was prodigious. He intended to write the history of England from the Glorious Revolution to the Great Reform Bill and covered only the reign of William III before he died. Even the surviving five volumes are more than life size.

Macaulay had many faults. He was not profound. He was grossly unfair to such different characters as John Churchill and William Penn. He had a complacent preference for the present over the past and his enthusiasm reached its height when he contemplated Torquay. Despite his famous third chapter, depicting English society in 1685, his consuming interest was in aristocratic politics and a present-day sociologist would shake his head at the way in which Macaulay composed his picture.

But he had also many virtues. He was immensely learned, able to draw illustrations from the time of ancient Rome to the latest event of the day before. He was one of the first modern historians to use original sources. He had learnt from Sir Walter Scott that the present was different from the past though he did not always observe his own rule.