Towards a Genealogy of Intellectual History

It is a cliché to say that intellectuals are barely tolerated in English culture. This cliché was subjected to extended scrutiny by Stefan Collini in his characteristically lively and witty *Absent Minds*, published in 2006. It is equally a cliché to say that intellectual history has struggled to achieve recognition in English academic culture and has enjoyed at best a marginal position. I want to try to contest that cliché in this evening’s lecture.

If there is an established genealogy of the history of ideas in the English-speaking world, it is that it was invented in the USA in the aftermath of the First World War: chiefly by the philosopher A.O. Lovejoy, who founded the History of Ideas Club at Johns Hopkins University in 1923 and later, in 1940, launched the *Journal of the History of Ideas*, which remains in many ways the pre-eminent journal in the field.¹ In England it long remained the pursuit of a few mostly foreign renegade philosophers, such as (most famously) Isaiah Berlin, who abandoned philosophy for the history of ideas in the aftermath of the Second World War. It did not become fully assimilated until the Cambridge school of the history of political thought took shape in the early 1960s, in the first place under the influence of Peter Laslett, who published a hugely important edition of Locke in 1960 and who taught an unusually talented group of undergraduates in 1961-2, including both John Dunn and Quentin Skinner, who proceeded to reshape the field in the course of the 1960s and 70s. That Cambridge school –Skinner above all - took issue with Lovejoy’s focus on the study of ‘unit ideas’, and adopted the term ‘intellectual history’ in place of the ‘history of ideas’. That term – intellectual history – has now become the more usual one in UK academic culture: at Sussex, for instance, where intellectual history became established as a specialism, and indeed an undergraduate programme, in the

University’s early days in the 1960s. The titles of two relatively recently founded journals – *Modern Intellectual History* (2004) and *Intellectual History Review* (1990) – have confirmed this usage. On the whole, practitioners of the sub-discipline in the UK prefer this term, arguing that it shifts the attention from unit ideas to intellectual activity. Here I shall use the terms more or less interchangeably, although I shall be discussing the history of the terms.

The inaugural lecture of a professor of intellectual history at the University of Manchester is an appropriate occasion to think about the place of this sub-discipline in British intellectual life and academic culture, for the Department of History here was home for over twenty years to Sir Lewis Namier, who famously asserted that ideologies were ‘mere flapdoodle’ – you might be more familiar with the term ‘epiphenomena’, but ‘flapdoodle’ renders it, as as been said, into the demotic of the eighteenth-century country gentleman.

Namier thought that the history of ideas was an alien presence in British academic life. Against Namier, I want to cite another continental European who made his academic home in Britain, the great ancient historian and historian of historiography, Arnaldo Momigliano. Momigliano recalled that when he was a student at the University of Turin in the 1920s, ‘the history of ideas was the speciality for which English historians were most famous’. As he noted, this reputation soon vanished, and by the time he arrived in Oxford in 1939 the history of ideas was regarded as an un-British activity. He blamed the change on Lewis Namier.

I’m not in the first place interested in establishing the blame for the extinction of this tradition of the history of ideas – if indeed it was extinguished. Instead, I want to use this opportunity to recreate that lost tradition that Momigliano encountered in his undergraduate reading in the 1920s. One reason for believing that he exaggerated Namier’s importance is that undergraduate reading may sometimes tend to reflect historiographical trends that are already past their peak, and I suspect that the English tradition of the history of ideas was already on the wane by the time he encountered it. The canonical figures whom he cites were all Victorians: ‘Grote

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and Lecky, Freeman, Bryce and Flint’ – all were dead (most of them long dead) by the time Momigliano graduated from Turin, as were the three others he mentions – Stephen, Bury, and Acton. So the tradition he identified was a Victorian tradition.

We can be certain that it doesn’t go back much further than the Victorian period, for in the mid-Victorian period there was an awareness of its novelty: ‘to most persons’, wrote Benjamin Jowett in 1866, ‘the very notion that ideas have a history is a new one’.³ ‘In the last century’, wrote John Morley in 1874, ‘men asked of a belief or a story, Is it true? We now ask, How did men come to take it for true?’⁴ Note the dates here – 1866 and 1874. This is more or less precisely the period I shall be focusing on in this lecture. [I think, incidentally, that we can trace this notion back earlier ... perhaps to Vico in the early eighteenth century – but Vico’s work really began to have an impact in the nineteenth century rather than the eighteenth. On the whole I think Morley was right to regard the vogue for thinking about ideas historically as a nineteenth-century phenomenon.] The key insight is the contingency of what people come to accept as true. It’s not unchanging over time; but neither is change over time to be taken as evidence that truth vanquishes error.

To highlight intellectual history as a central concern of mid/late Victorian historians may seem perverse. A host of scholars writing about the history of historiography have assured us that nineteenth-century historians took the nation-state as their central category (although the term itself seems to have been coined right at the end of the century, and first of all in the USA). The European Science Foundation has made a generous grant to support this proposition. No-one will deny that national (and nationalist) historical writing was an important feature of the intellectual landscape of the 19th century, nor that the history of modern states and their diplomatic and military interactions was a central preoccupation of nationalist historians. But I do want to suggest that the importance of this historiographical tradition has been enhanced (and exaggerated) because, historically, its adherents took the lead in the professionalization of the discipline. 'Professional' historical

⁴ Morley, On Compromise, p. 31.
methods meant methods of archival research, and the archives were the archives established by modern states. So there was a natural affinity between the modern state and the emergent historical profession - more so than between the modern state and history as an intellectual pursuit. Practitioners of intellectual history and of the older genre termed the history of civilization were numerous, but they were not the makers of the historical profession - their methods and sources were too literary in nature, and their subject-matter often shaded into that of philosophy or political science or theology. There were some Regius professors of history among the names mentioned by Momigliano - but Freeman and Acton were both appointed to these positions after establishing their reputations as private scholars. Both were advocates of the research ethic in universities, but neither could be described as a proponent of professionalization. Grote was a philosopher as much as an historian, and although he played a leading part in the foundation of University College, London, and served for a time as vice-chancellor of the University of London, he did not hold a mainstream academic post. Flint, the author of a still illuminating study of *The Philosophy of History in France and Germany* (date?), was a philosopher (Professor of Moral Philosophy at St Andrews and then of Divinity at Edinburgh), while Lecky was a private scholar - as was H.T. Buckle, who, tho' not mentioned by Momigliano, surely deserves a prominent place in this line-up (how many Victorian historical works outsold Buckle internationally?). Buckle's *History of Civilization* rested on the proposition that ideas - more specifically, knowledge - drove history.

The writers mentioned by Momigliano are in fact an eclectic group. Some are better classified as historians with a philosophical bent than as historians of ideas. One of them, E.A. Freeman, was a historian with a markedly unphilosophical bent, and it is unclear why he belongs in this company at all. The one who probably did more than any of the others to establish intellectual history was Leslie Stephen. It must be said that Stephen had other ambitions too - he set out to establish himself as a moral philosopher with such works as his *Science of Ethics* (1882). But it was certainly as an intellectual historian that he made his lasting reputation, through such works as his *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century* and *The English Utilitarians* — and, of course, through his role as founding editor of the
*Dictionary of National Biography*, to which he himself contributed 378 articles, including those on a host of leading figures in British philosophy, political thought, and literary history: Hobbes and Locke, Gibbon and Macaulay, Hume and Johnson, Smith and Malthus, Carlyle and Mill - practically all the major literary and intellectual figures between the mid-17th and mid-19th centuries, according to Stefan Collini.\(^5\) It was the *History of English Thought* that made his name as a practitioner of intellectual history. Although it was in the end wide in scope, Stephen’s book began as a study of the influence of deism, and it had an obvious precursor whose influence Stephen graciously acknowledged - Mark Pattison’s essay on 18c religious thought in *Essays and Reviews* (1860). That essay therefore has a strong claim to be regarded not only as an early English foray into the history of ideas, but also as a particularly influential one. Since Pattison reviewed Stephen’s book, not once but twice, the Pattison-Stephen nexus can be taken as the basis for an investigation of the logic of the history of ideas in the Victorian period. The third figure I propose to include in this lecture is the Irishman William Lecky, who made his name – when still in his twenties – with his *History of the Rise and Influence of the Spirit of Rationalism in Europe* (1865), a work inspired by Buckle’s *History of Civilization*. Pattison welcomed the book as ‘a very suggestive book and on my own subject’: specifically, it was ‘full of original views on the laws of Progress’.\(^6\)

So: three main texts –


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\(^6\) Bodleian MS Pattison 130, f. 58, diary 17 and 26 May 1865.
1. **Demarcating the history of ideas**

Let me first of all anticipate a possible objection. Isn’t this canon of Victorian studies in the history of ideas a retrospective construction? Did these people think of themselves as historians of ideas? Did they identify the history of ideas or intellectual history as a distinct branch of study? They do not feature at all prominently in the one book which attempts to construct a history of intellectual history, namely Donald Kelley’s *The Descent of Ideas*. Kelley’s somewhat idiosyncratic account foregrounds the role of French thinkers of the Restoration, such as Victor Cousin, and presents intellectual history as an outgrowth of the history of philosophy.

My answer is that although the terminology was in the process of crystallizing, these authors were indeed self-conscious practitioners of the genre of intellectual history or the history of ideas.

The first point to make is a terminological one. Conceptual history is a key tool of the intellectual historian, so it is appropriate to enquire into the history of the term ‘intellectual history’. It was indeed in existence in the nineteenth century and was quite commonly used. A search of the electronic Periodical Contents Archive reveals 231 uses in nineteenth-century periodicals; about four times as many as ‘history of ideas’. So if either term was the established one in the nineteenth century, it was ‘intellectual history’. (There was a rival term – more or less a synonym – which we shall come across, namely the history of opinion: but it was rather less common than ‘intellectual history’.) It was not generally used to refer to a sub-discipline or specialist branch of knowledge. We don’t, for example, find anyone referred to as an ‘intellectual historian’ until the inter-war period. Sometimes it was used (auto)biographically, to refer to the mental history of an individual. This was the sense in which Godwin used the term in the 1790s – a very early usage; and it

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7 In the eighteenth century, by contrast, the term ‘intellectual history’ was practically unknown: see ECCO, which throws up one usage in the preface to Johnson’s *Dictionary*, one in Bisset’s *Life of Edmund Burke* (London, 1798), and one in Godwin’s *Enquiry concerning Political Justice*, 2nd edn (London, 1796), 1, 297.

8 This term might suggest something like the history of public opinion – i.e. something really quite distinct from the history of ideas. But close attention to its use makes it clear that this would be wrong.
continued to be used commonly in this sense – by John Stuart Mill in the 1830s, for example, although in his *System of Logic* and, much later, in his *Autobiography*, he preferred the term ‘mental history’. But from there the term expanded so that it became possible to speak of the intellectual history of a country or an age: as when the economist T.E. Cliffe Leslie wrote of Buckle’s ‘excellent chapters on the Intellectual History of France’, or when T.H. Huxley referred to the ‘intellectual history of England’ and to ‘the intellectual history of the middle ages’. This kind of usage became common from the 1860s, especially in periodicals such as Morley’s *Fortnightly Review* and James Knowles’s *The Nineteenth Century* – significantly, for these were both journals which, from somewhat different points of view, wrestled with the ‘crisis of belief’ of the late-ish Victorian period. This was a context, as I shall go on to argue, which was crucial in shaping this Victorian vogue for intellectual history. But I also think it was highly significant that the term ‘intellectual history’ originally had an (auto)biographical sense – the history of a mind – and that its ‘modern’ sense developed, by analogy, from that sense. Nineteenth-century practitioners of intellectual history very commonly saw the task of understanding the intellectual development of a society by analogy with the intellectual development of a human being.

The term ‘intellectual history’ was rarely used in book titles or subtitles – the first such example I have encountered is a study of Robert Grosseteste dating from 1899 – although one of the volumes on Europe in the Middle Ages in *Lardner’s Cabinet Cyclopaedia* (1834) aimed to explore ‘the intellectual history of the Anglo-Saxons’ and ‘the religious and intellectual history of England from the Norman Conquest to the accession of Henry VII’. But the main points I want to stress are: the term was widely used, in something resembling its modern sense; it was a much more familiar term than ‘history of ideas’; and, importantly, it developed out of its primary (auto)biographical sense. Incidentally, it is worth stressing – to counter what might

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10 ‘Europe during the Middle Ages’, *Fraser’s Magazine* 11 (1835), 28.
otherwise be an obvious guess – that it was not a foreign import. Its coinage in English preceded the German *Geistesgeschichte*, which was coined by Friedrich Schlegel in 1812; and the German term did not become common until it was popularized at the end of the nineteenth century by followers of Wilhelm Dilthey. In French, the term ‘histoire intellectuelle’ certainly existed, and in what I have called its biographical sense its most important usage is in the title of Balzac’s *Histoire Intellectuelle de Louis Lambert* (1832). But I haven’t found a French usage as far back as the 1790s, and I don’t think it was any more common in French than its counterpart in English ... probably rather less so.

Secondly, my protagonists all wrote manifestos, of a sort, in which they articulated their approach to intellectual history. Both Lecky and Stephen prefaced their books with substantial introductions in which they demarcated the distinctive province of the history of ideas. Pattison did much the same in the longer of his two reviews of Stephen. And he was perhaps the most self-conscious of all practitioners of the history of ideas. Already in 1838, as a young graduate remaining in Oxford to try to win a fellowship, we find him identifying ‘the history of opinion’ and the philosophy of history as two of his particular subjects of study.\(^{11}\) At about the same time he speculated that ‘an account of the alternate influence of Platonism and Aristotelianism’ would practically suffice to constitute ‘a past history of human opinion’.\(^{12}\) These interests long predated his engagement with Germany and German thought, which did not really begin until the 1850s. This resonant term, ‘the history of opinion’, was to become a much-used label for the genre of the history of ideas. John Morley, in particular, was to be notably fond of this term.

In the introduction to his *History of Rationalism* (1865), Lecky draws an important distinction between the province of the theologian and that of the ‘historian of opinions’. The theologian is concerned with the truth or falsehood of doctrines, whereas the historian should be concerned with ‘the causes of the rise and fall of doctrines which are to be found in the general intellectual condition of the

\(^{11}\) Diary for July 1838, Bodleian MS Pattison 6, ff. 4-5.

\(^{12}\) Bodleian MS Pattison 6, f. 6. He returned to the theme later in the year: MS Pattison 6, f. 36.
age'.\textsuperscript{13} The theologian, if concerned with the history of ideas at all, is concerned with 'a single department of mental phenomena', namely theology, or a specific branch thereof; whereas the historian of ideas or 'opinions' is concerned with the general intellectual climate of the age, and the interdependence of different branches of thought. Furthermore, the theologian is concerned with the logical coherence of a body of thought, whereas the historian is concerned with the (often non-logical) reasons for its appeal. In a similar vein, Pattison - apparently at the time he was reading Lecky - drafted an introduction to his abortive history of European learning. There he wrote that ‘it has been gradually becoming more evident that the history of Literature, Science, the Arts, Philosophy, cannot be treated apart from each other, or from that of general progress. These were not so many independent developments, but all alike due to the same general causes.'\textsuperscript{14}

There are two important points that emerge here:

a. Theology – especially dogmatic theology under the grip of ecclesiastical partisanship - is the body of thought against which intellectual history defines itself. Intellectual history was infused with a sceptical temper. That is true here, in Lecky - but it is even more true of the agnostic Stephen and the religious sceptic Pattison. Sometimes this anti-theological animus manifested itself in rationalist narratives in which humanity emancipated itself from the grip of superstition. That genre was most famously represented by Condorcet’s \textit{Sketch of a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind} (1794); but in the Victorian period, and in the English-speaking world, one of its most influential exponents was the chemist and polymath John William Draper, in his two-volume \textit{History of the Intellectual Development of Europe} (1863) – the first attempt, he claimed in the preface, to arrange ‘the evidence offered by the intellectual history of Europe in accordance with physiological principles’.\textsuperscript{15} It was Draper’s adumbration of his theory at the meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science in Oxford in 1860 that led to the

\textsuperscript{13} Later on [l.188] he refers to ‘the general intellectual condition of society’.

\textsuperscript{14} Bodleian MS Pattison 103 f. 3.

famous, and famously mythologized, confrontation between T.H. Huxley and Bishop Samuel Wilberforce.\textsuperscript{16} My three protagonists were more historically sophisticated and less triumphalist than Draper. But for all of them, the emergence of the historical study of ideas is connected with the emancipation of intellectual life from the grip of theological dogma. The historical triumph of a body of ideas is no proof of its logical superiority. Questions of historical causation are sharply demarcated from questions of truth and falsehood. Lecky, Pattison and Stephen all attached a great deal of importance to this distinction.

b. The history of ideas is typically concerned with the general intellectual climate rather than with particular bodies of ideas; it highlights the interdependence of different specialisms and indeed the assumptions shared by philosophical or theological opponents. So, for Lecky: 'The pressure of the general intellectual influences of the time determines the predispositions which ultimately regulate the details of belief; and though all men do not yield to that pressure with the same facility, all large bodies are at last controlled. ... Definite arguments are the symptoms and pretexts, but seldom the causes, of the change. ... Reasoning which in one age would make no impression whatever, in the next age is received with enthusiastic applause.' [p.vii]. Again: 'to those who would investigate the causes of existing opinions, the study of predispositions is much more important than the study of arguments' [p. xvi]. Key problem – what explains why beliefs which are fundamental assumptions in one age are peripheral in the next, even though they had never been refuted. Later on I’ll address more directly the question of why these writers formulated their central problem in this way – but one obvious comment suggests itself. All three of these writers were acutely aware of living in an age in which religious belief was being eroded – and less by direct assault than by shifting background assumptions. This clearly shaped the way in which they thought about history.

In the introduction to his *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century* a decade later, Leslie Stephen built on the insight that the history of ideas is much more than a dialectical account of the clash of great thinkers. Like Lecky, he sought to detach the general history of ideas from the specialist histories of particular branches of thought (in his case, the history of philosophy rather than of theology) - and to vindicate the importance of non-intellectual factors in shaping the progress of ideas. Thus:

> When we look beyond the narrow circle of illustrious philosophers, we are impressed with the conviction that other causes are at work besides those which are obvious to the logician. Doctrines vanish without a direct assault; they change in sympathy with a change in apparently remote departments of inquiry; superstitions, apparently suppressed, break out anew in slightly modified shapes; and we discover that a phase of thought, which we had imagined to involve a new departure, is but a superficial modification of an old order of ideas.' [I,3].

And again:

> The logical strength and weakness of the various creeds which were struggling for the mastery during the eighteenth century, goes some way to explain the course of the intellectual history; but no explanation can be complete which does not take into account the social conditions which determined their reception.[I, 19]

Both Stephen and Lecky insisted that there were important questions to be asked about why and where certain ideas find a reception - and that these were historical questions, which had little to do with the intrinsic importance or cogency of the ideas themselves.

One important point to draw out here is that the impetus for the emergence of intellectual history in the Victorian period evidently did not come from intellectualist assumptions about historical causation. I make this point because one explanation that is sometimes offered for the nineteenth-century ‘discovery’ of the history of ideas is that the French Revolution made a powerful case for the impact of ideas on political history – and counter-revolutionaries from Burke to Barruel certainly tried to trace the origins of the Revolution to the subversive ideas of the *philosophes*. But that explanation seems to assume that intellectual history is essentially about the causal agency of ideas. There certainly were some influential intellectualist accounts of history in the nineteenth century, such as those offered by Hegel and Comte; but
the practitioners I have identified all eschewed this kind of history. Their central problematic was to explain how and why ideas change, rather than in tracing how they shape ‘events’.

Lecky and Stephen certainly did not believe that great minds ruled the world. On the contrary, they both sought instead to emphasize the background conditions that determined the reception of bodies of ideas at different times and in different places. Lecky put this vividly, in the introduction to his history of rationalism, where he argued that:

the commercial or municipal spirit exhibits certain habits of thought, certain modes of reasoning, certain repugnances and attractions, which make it invariably tend to one class of opinions. ... It is impossible to lay down a railway without creating an intellectual influence. It is probable that Watt and Stephenson will eventually modify the opinions of mankind almost as profoundly as Luther or Voltaire. [I, ix]

Pattison, in his review of Buckle, was critical of the assumption that the growth of knowledge governed the world: Pattison was more of a pessimist than Buckle, and feared that ‘passions’ were capable of obstructing the progress of enlightenment and knowledge. All societies hitherto, he thought, had been characterized by a tension between a small educated minority and ‘an overwhelming unenlightened mass’. Usually the role of the educated minority had been a leavening role, rather than a directive one. For Pattison the position of knowledge and learning in society was always a precarious one, always vulnerable to an eruption of ‘the sleeping volcano of passion’.  

Pattison's article on the 'Age of Reason', commissioned by John Morley for the *Fortnightly Review*, was a general discussion of the essential characteristics of eighteenth-century thought taking Stephen's book for its point of departure. He noticed the neologistic use of the word 'thought' to designate not a single thought or idea, and not the process of thinking, but the totality or overall shape of the thoughts of a person or a collectivity - 'French thought', 'eighteenth-century

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thought', even 'political thought' (Pattison himself, nearly two decades previously, had written of 'Tendencies of religious thought'). He identified the 'history of thought' as a distinct intellectual pursuit, to be distinguished from the history of philosophy in particular. Why? It is more comprehensive - because whereas 'philosophy is a special form of thinking, directed upon a very limited class of objects', and 'only a very few persons in each generation occupy themselves with philosophy', all people have 'thoughts of some kind', and 'thought' can be expressed in many modes - in art and science and poetry as well as in philosophy. [344-5]

Pattison went on to define the scope of the history of ideas in a way that almost implied that it wasn't so much one specialism among many, but rather the key to the historical process. The historian of ideas, he wrote, 'investigates the varied phenomena of expression in order to elicit from them the common thoughts which underlie all the phenomena' - i.e. he seeks to uncover the 'residuum of regulative ideas - the ideas which any given age has busied itself in developing, the ideas of which all its words or works have been but the efflux'. His task is 'to evaporate the facts until they leave behind only their metaphysical essence, to pass through the fleeting phenomena to their ideal causes'. [345]

Here the history of thought appears as a kind of ideal or philosophic history - so to speak, the essence of an infinite number of specialized histories. A history of thought, he wrote, implied the assumption that all branches of human activity are 'allied developments of some few governing thoughts'. Are all the varied doings and sayings of any generation an efflux of its leading ideas?", he asked. Pattison went on: 'If this theory is not tenable, a philosophy of history is not possible.' What he meant by a 'philosophy of history' here was closer to Hegel's sense than to the modern sense – i.e. he meant something like a general account of the historical process. If history is a 'piteous imbroglio ... where anything may happen, and where the most unlikely things are the most likely', then historical phenomena are incapable of being generalised. Against this view, Pattison maintained that history is a patterned process. The point of his article was chiefly to characterize the eighteenth century as a whole as 'the age of reason', and to explore the nature and extent of the nineteenth-century reaction. Pattison was by no means simply responding to or
commenting on Stephen’s book here, but was expounding ideas he had been working with for some time. In his contribution to *Essays and Reviews* he had characterized the period 1688-1750 as one dominated by the 'rationalist' principle. His central argument was that the rationalistic principle – the appeal to reason as the ultimate judge in matters of religion – was not the property of one party to the theological polemics of the age, but was a shared assumption that linked all parties. 'Rationalism was not an anti-Christian sect outside the Church making war against religion. It was a habit of thought ruling all minds, under the conditions of which all alike tried to make good the peculiar opinions they might happen to cherish. The Churchman differed from the Socinian, and the Socinian from the Deist, as to the number of articles in his creed; but all alike consented to test their belief by the rational evidence for it.'

At the heart of his method as a historian was to probe beneath surface controversies to isolate the underlying shared assumptions that structured the intellectual life of an entire period. The sciences might constitute a partial exception to this, he conceded, insofar as they proceeded progressively as one generation of scientists built on the findings of the preceding generation. But the starting-point for the intellectual historian, or historian of thought, was that the ‘thought’ of an age possessed a unity. Hence rationalism, in the eighteenth century, was ‘a method rather than a doctrine; an unconscious assumption rather than a principle from which they reason’. 18 Or, as Leslie Stephen would put it in his study of the English Utilitarians, ‘There is a certain unity even in the general thought of any given period. Contradictory views imply common ground.’ 19

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18 Pattison, ‘Tendencies of religious thought’, 55. See also the undated manuscript, probably from 1865, in which Pattison depicts ‘European progress as one homogeneous growth’, and enquires into the ‘general causes which simultaneously affect all branches of knowledge’. Bodleian MS Pattison 103, f. 3.

2. **J.S. Mill and the Logic of Intellectual History**

Lecky, Stephen and Pattison all aspired to demarcate the history of ideas from specialist histories of particular branches of study, and they did so by suggesting that the historian of ideas sought to explain the characteristic beliefs and opinions of an age with reference to shared assumptions. They also sought to explain how one age gave way to another - and they did so, typically, not by invoking the influence of great thinkers, but by identifying subtle shifts in underlying assumptions. That was, typically, what they understood by such widely repeated phrases as 'the laws of the progress of mind'. The **Zeitgeist** was a characteristically 19c obsession, of course, but I think it is still important to explain why the notion of the underlying assumptions of an age exercised such dominion over practitioners of the nascent study of intellectual history.

To answer this question, I need to invoke a very different kind of text: John Stuart Mill’s *System of Logic* (1843) and in particular Book VI, in which he explored the logic of the social or, as he called them, the 'moral' sciences. There Mill provided an important, though qualified, account of the necessarily historical character of the social or moral sciences: in Alan Ryan's words, ‘an intriguing mixture of continental historicism and English scepticism’.

Like the historicists, he had a strong sense of the interconnectedness of the diverse social phenomena in a given state of society, and an equally strong sense that the predominant agent of social progress was ‘the state of the speculative faculties of mankind’, from which he concluded that the key to the law of human progress must lie in ‘the law of the successive transformations of human opinions’.

Compare this with Pattison’s aspiration, in *Essays and Reviews*, ‘to apply the laws of thought, and of the succession of opinion, to the course of English theology’, and you can see, I hope, why I regard these two texts as having more in common than either author, perhaps, would have recognized.

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Mill's *Logic* became a standard text in the universities and made a huge contribution to furnishing the minds of graduates of Stephen's generation in particular. As Stephen remarked, 'The young men who graduated in 1850 and the following ten years found their philosophical teaching in Mill's *Logic*, and only a few daring heretics were beginning to pick holes in his system.'\(^{23}\) Pattison belonged to an earlier generation, but he had just become tutor of his college when the *Logic* was published, and it inevitably informed the philosophical aspects of his teaching. He had a close acquaintance with Mill's work and reviewed both the *Logic* (in its fourth edition) and the *Principles of Political Economy*. In his review of the *Logic* he noted that whereas Mill was not yet recognized by the examiners, 'he is universally read by the students of philosophy.'\(^{24}\)

Why invoke Mill to explain the Victorian fascination for the history of ideas? Mill himself wrote no intellectual history, except insofar as his *Autobiography* was an intellectual history of his time as well as a history of his own mind. But he drew a fundamental distinction, following Comte, between the laws of social statics and the laws of social dynamics - between the laws that explain how particular social systems work, and the laws that explain longer-term historical change, i.e. how one social system gives way to another. Social dynamics is the more fundamental branch of social science, but - in modern society at least - it is also the more elusive. The reason was that modern society is such an organic, interdependent whole, that it is impossible to give an adequate account of - for example - the laws of political change in isolation from social change as a whole:

But the consensus is so complete (especially in modern history), that in the filiation of one generation and another, it is the whole which produces the whole, rather than any part a part. Little progress, therefore, can be made in establishing the filiation, directly from laws of human nature, without having first ascertained the immediate or derivative laws according to which social statics generate one another as society advances; the *axiomata media* of General Sociology.' [924]

\(^{23}\) Annan, 1st edn, p. 141.

The starting-point of social science must therefore be historical: it must aim to establish the empirical laws that determine how one state of society is transformed into the next. And for Mill, that process of transformation - 'the law of human progress' - was, at root, intellectual: 'the order of human progression in all respects will mainly depend on the order of progression in the intellectual convictions of mankind, that is, on the law of the successive transformations of human opinions'. The key assumption here is derived from Auguste Comte: intellectual progress is an ordered process, in that we cannot achieve the ‘positive’ or scientific state without having first passed through the theological and the metaphysical.

At one level, what Pattison, Lecky, and Stephen were doing was to take up Mill's challenge to determine that law of the progress of opinion. This is what Pattison wrote in his contribution to *Essays and Reviews*:

> There is a law of continuity in the progress of theology which, whatever we may wish, is never broken off. In tracing the filiation of consecutive systems, we cannot afford to overlook any link in the chain, any age, except one in which religious opinion did not exist. Certainly we, in this our time, if we would understand our own position in the Church, and that of the Church in the age, if we would hold any clue through the maze of religious pretension which surrounds us, cannot neglect those immediate agencies in the production of the present, which had their origin towards the beginning of the eighteenth century.  

I think this passage helps us to understand how Pattison understood Mill’s ‘law of the successive transformations of human opinions’. His central conviction was that intellectual history was an ordered process, which followed a pattern of incremental growth. It was, in other words, ‘progressive’, in the (non-evaluative) sense in which Mill used the term – ‘that in each successive age the principal phenomena of society are different from what they were in the age preceding, and still more different from any previous age’. That was not to deny the phenomena of ‘reactions’ in intellectual history – the revolt of the 19th century against the 18th.

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for example; for in reacting against the beliefs of the past generation, the new
generation was nevertheless decisively shaped by those beliefs.

I hope it might now be becoming clear why I suggested earlier that the
(auto)biographical sense of ‘intellectual history’ continued to shape the way in which
these Victorian historians understood intellectual history or the history of ideas.
First, the aspiration to capture the whole mental world of a society was analogous to
the attempt to grasp the whole mental world of an individual – and in the one case
as in the other, no experience could, in principle, be regarded as irrelevant to that
quest. To grasp the shared assumptions around which the intellectual life of an age
revolved was akin to encapsulating the intellectual identity of an individual –
something that both Pattison and Mill did in their own autobiographies. But that –
the genre of the autobiography as history of ideas – is another story.

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In this lecture I have considered three Victorians who wrote on the history of
ideas or 'opinion' or thought. What I have tried to establish is that these three
writers at least saw themselves as engaging in the writing of a determinate genre or
sub-discipline called ‘intellectual history’, and they would have recognized the term,
whether or not it was their own preferred expression. I have also shown that the
project of intellectual history, as pursued by these writers, could be read as an
attempt to rise to at least part of the challenge thrown down by Mill in his System of
Logic - to write to kind of history that could serve as the basis for a science of
society. I certainly do not intend to say that that was its only inspiration. Pattison, it
seems to me, saw intellectual history as a method of self-culture: understanding how
the problems that confront us have been handled by thinkers who have gone before,
and how, indeed, the way we pose these problems is necessarily shaped by the
history of thought, was an integral part of mental cultivation.

Why have I used the term ‘genealogy’ in the title of this lecture. I have not
sought to offer a Nietzschean or a Foucaultian account of intellectual history,
although the term ‘genealogy’ is commonly associated with those two writers. But I
preferred the term ‘genealogy’ to ‘origins’ because I don’t see continuity between these Victorian practitioners of intellectual history and their counterparts today. The idea of isolating distinct ‘states of society’, in particular, has little resonance today. But the genealogical method espoused by Nietzsche and Foucault eschews developmental or progressive accounts of history in favour of an emphasis on contingency, and that is the sense of the word I want to highlight here. I’m not saying: this is the origin of intellectual history as it is practised today. Instead I have tried to highlight some of the specific uses of intellectual history among those who could be said to have invented this new field in Victorian Britain.