Despite widespread recognition of his considerable knowledge, Acton’s value as a historian is disputed. The English historian Geoffrey Elton, for example, consigned Acton to “the honorable oblivion which that unproductive monument really deserves” and lamented how fellow Cambridge historian Herbert Butterfield wasted so much of his life trying to “make sense of a bogus enigma.”

Some of Acton’s own contemporaries had difficulty understanding him, as in the case of John Morley, who found him “fattily addicted to the oblique and the allusive.” The historian and Anglican bishop Mandell Creighton thought his writing was “enigmatical” and “terribly obscure.”

This was not always true. The greatest lucidity of expression and critical discernment can be found in Acton’s early work. Butterfield noticed that many of “his well-known essays, many of the things which have made him seem relevant to the present day…were written before he was thirty, though they seem to show a great maturity.” Russell Kirk similarly observed that the early Acton displayed the characteristics of “a youthful genius, incisive, imaginatively conservative, and a master of the essay.” However, mounting criticism from Catholic ecclesiastical authorities and fellow historians would affect the way he wrote. Clarity of expression would give way to a “crabbed,” “tor-
tuous,” and “contorted” style in later years, so that Acton could “get his knife into every joint without being felt.” It was a defensive style suited to a man who believed he was “absolutely alone” in his “essential ethical position.” Any successful study of Acton must consider his intellectual development, while simultaneously taking into account his increasingly cryptic writing style.

The first attempt to treat Acton’s political ideas in a comprehensive way was G. E. Fasnacht’s 1952 study titled *Acton’s Political Philosophy: An Analysis*. The reception was decidedly mixed. Denis Brogan wrote that a reader with no previous knowledge of Acton will be left “clueless” after reading Fasnacht’s book. “For this, Acton is, of course, largely to blame himself. He was not a systematic thinker, at any rate in his published works.” Kirk echoes Brogan in this respect: “Acton would not possess a political philosophy; his love of liberty was not buttressed by any strictly ordered system of thought; the very immensity of his learning deterred him from the endeavor.” Writing in *Sewanee Review*, Richard Weaver found Fasnacht’s book “woefully lacking in just what the reader is led to expect, a kind of analytical clarity,” partly because the author attempts to treat Acton theoretically without taking into account his career or the history of his ideas. Ironically, Fasnacht was unable to follow his own admonition: “It must...be remembered that Acton’s views were always developing.”

Now, a new study attempts to present Acton’s political ideas with greater precision. Rocco Pezzimenti, who teaches political science at the Guido Carli Free University in Rome, divides his book into two parts: the first is a biographical examination of the forces that formed Acton’s mind, while the second examines theoretically his political and historical work. Despite possessing some strengths, there is much summary and insufficient critical analysis. There are a number of errors of fact and interpretation that further mar the book. But the most serious flaw lies in the author’s method. Many developments—that is, changes—in Acton’s views are not acknowledged. When Pezzimenti does record a change in Acton’s opinion, his treatment of the whole as a consistent and uniform body of thought remains unaltered. His attempt to form unity out of contradiction only leads to confusion. To understand Acton’s intellectual trajectory, the reader must first understand his early political ideas.

**Acton’s Youthful Views**

In his twenties, Acton developed a doctrine of conscience that constituted the core of his political perspective. He believed it was necessary for the Christian to fulfill his obligations to God and this required political liberty. Freedom was necessarily a spiritual principle so that religion was the foundation of politics. Having been established on this basis, politics proceeds as a science independent of the Church and the latter must then be subject to the laws of political science just as it is bound by the laws of physical science. Governments must be judged on whether they secure freedom of conscience rather than whether they advance the temporal interests of the Church.

Absolutism was the greatest obstacle to the rule of conscience and therefore to the Church. Both autocratic and democratic states demanded total loyalty and obedience from their subjects. In Acton’s view, a just state would prevent tyranny by defending minority rights, protecting and encouraging intermediary institutions in society, and promoting principles of federalism by dividing political power among different branches of government. He believed these were Catholic political principles, yet they could be found most completely in the political life and institutions of Protestant England. It was under the guidance of his German tutor, the
distinguished Catholic historian Ignaz von Döllinger, that Acton developed an admiration for Burke, whose speeches he famously called "the law and the prophets." His Burkean views led him to oppose revolution and to fear democracy. Josef Altholz’s warning, that these views of "the young Acton differed in many respects from the Acton of later years," was not heeded by Pezzimenti.

An examination of Acton’s attitude towards Burke can help illustrate his transformation from the conservative Whig in his youth to the doctrinaire Liberal of his later years. Pezzimenti properly registers Acton’s indebtedness to Burke, whose "political ideas...were most congenial to Catholicism." Later, we find out that Acton considered Burke’s judgment of history defective because his ethical system was based on "expediency." Pezzimenti observes that "Burke was viewed in various ways by Acton during the course of the years." But he does not chart the ideological course of Acton’s "various" opinions of Burke. Differences in interpretation of historical events, like the 1688 Revolution and the French Revolution, or philosophical disputes as in the attempt to reconcile the principle of sovereignty and nation, constituted those differences. While these instances are justly noted, the extent of the break is not discussed, nor are the political implications fully explored.

When he returned to England in 1858 to start his career in journalism, after completing his studies under Döllinger, "Acton was a little more conservative at this time than later in life," writes Butterfield. Indeed, four years earlier, the young Acton wrote to Orestes Brownson that "there is no science nobler than the one which has no name in literature, than the science of Burke and Maistre, and Donoso Cortés." It was the later Burke who appealed to Acton during this period, especially his speeches from 1790 to 1795. To Richard Simpson, who would become his co-editor at the Rambler, Acton wrote that Burke represented "a purely Catholic view of political principles and of history." He was "the wisest, the most sincere, and the most disinterested of all the advocates of the Catholic cause." In one of Acton’s earliest letters to Gladstone, he explained that the political purpose of his second journal, the Home and Foreign Review, was "to maintain that old Whig system of which Burke is the great exponent."

His early essays on "Cavour" and "Nationality" in which he attacks Italian nationalism in defense of the papal states reflect his conservative formation. Similarly, in "The Protestant Theory of Persecution," Acton was prepared to argue that Catholic acts of oppression were more justified than Protestant ones because the latter group introduced a revolutionary system of state despotism. Indeed, he was an ethical relativist in historical interpretation, rather than the ideological moralist of later years, when he criticized the historian Godwin Smith for discussing "the morality of men and actions far oftener than history...either requires or tolerates." Acton maintained that the Church could not place trust in "the results of the political development of the last three centuries," and in his 1858 attack on Macaulay for promoting the notion of "perpetual progress."

In 1857, at the age of twenty-three, Acton had warned Pope Pius IX to be wary of Gladstone. By the mid-1860s, however, Acton began to view Gladstone with the same high esteem as Burke, only the Burke of an earlier, more liberal, period, 1770 to 1780. Years later, at Cambridge, he would write to Gladstone: "Some day, I shall say to a pupil: Read Burke night and day. He is our best political writer, and the deepest of all Whigs—and he will answer: Dear me! I thought he broke up the party, carried it over to the Tories, admired the despotism of the Bourbons, and trained no end of men towards Conservatism? I shall have
to answer: So he did. Both sayings are true.” As a defender of expediency over morality in politics, Burke “loved to evade the arbitration of principle. He was prolific of arguments which were admirable but not decisive.” In 1888, to Gladstone’s daughter Mary, Acton wrote in jest—but only partly—that he “would have hanged Mr. Burke on the same gallows as Robespierre.”

**Two Actons:**

**Burkean Whig, Liberal Ideologue**

Pezzimenti has more success recording the disagreements between Acton and John Henry Newman than he does identifying and explaining the contradictions between the young Acton and the old. For Acton, he says, “progress could never be a mechanical fact, but was the result of humanity’s moral effort.” This quotation actually refers to a 1858 *Rambler* book review written by Richard Simpson. Even if we concede that Acton and Simpson were of one mind, which some historians have suggested, this is still the view of the young Acton. Further evidence is offered in reference to Acton’s 1861 essay on the American Civil War, in which the most admirable system of government—federalism—is shown to be defective and therefore an argument against inevitable progress. Yet we are told in a separate chapter that Acton believed there to be “no political concept which can appeal to Divine Providence and which at the same time stands in the way of progress.” Indeed, this older Acton “was completely soaked in that faith in progress which animated the greater part of European culture in his times.”

This lack of attention to intellectual change can be further illustrated in the muddled treatment of Acton’s support for the Confederacy during the Civil War. Acton’s position is the “most questionable” of all his published reports on foreign events, in contrast to his treatment of European affairs which happen to be “most consistent with his thinking.” We read the predictable complaint that he “never took up a position against slavery.” This can be said of Acton in 1861, the year he expressed his opposition to the abolitionists for exhibiting “the same abstract, ideal absolutism, which is equally hostile with the Catholic and with the English spirit. Their democratic system poisons everything it touches.” Popular sovereignty trumps constitutional self-government “without consideration of policy or expediency.” Taking a middle course, Acton acknowledged that “Christian liberty is essentially incompatible with slavery” but “the Apostles never condemned slavery even within the Christian fold.” In 1863 Acton reiterated that the Church never opposed slavery in principle and that the institution of slavery in which “certain definite rights are lost” was less objectionable than a state of political absolutism, such as Northern mass democracy, where “no rights are assured to the subject.”

Having established Acton’s “questionable” pro-Southern position, presumably because he favored slavery, Pezzimenti says in another chapter that Acton was “naturally opposed to slavery.” To support this statement, we find a reference to an 1895 lecture where Acton offers “the progressive elimination of slavery” as evidence of moral progress working through history. Acton’s view of the war is briefly discussed in yet another chapter, but there is no attempt to explain how Acton justified his position on slavery at that time or how he seemed to become more critical of the institution later in life. Evidence suggesting a development in Acton’s view of slavery can be found in an 1866 lecture, where he states that slavery was “wickedly defended” by one side and “wickedly removed” by the other. “In almost every nation and every clime the time has come for the extinction of servitude.” Acton began to emancipate himself from Burke by choosing political
moralism over political expediency. Gertrude Himmelfarb noticed this early indication of his future conversion, and observed that it would take several more years before political moralism completely dominated his critical judgment.13

Irrepressible Acton
Classical liberals like Friedrich Hayek and more traditional conservatives like Stephen J. Tonsor have found Acton to be an attractive figure worthy of study and praise.14 However, care must be used when approaching Acton since there is much in him conservatives would find distasteful. For conservative Catholics, this is even more true. Pezzimenti makes sympathetic claims about Acton’s relationship to the Church that turn out to be false. For instance, it is indefensible to argue that once the first Vatican Council in 1870 promulgated papal infallibility, which Acton actively tried to prevent, he “sought to demonstrate its spiritual value with regard to questions of faith, in order to defend it from the attacks of the liberal world, and in order to continue a dialogue with the authorities of the Church.” Acton’s 1874 letters to the London Times in response to Gladstone’s misguided tracts against the decrees reveal his true mind. If Acton defended the decrees, he did so in a backhanded fashion. Acton wrote that the dangers Gladstone predicted would come in the wake of the Council—requiring Catholics to follow papal dictates in temporal matters against the obligations of citizenship—had been taking place for centuries and involved the committing of murder, even by saints and popes. “If you pursue the inquiry further, you will find graver matter than all you have enumerated,” wrote Acton. You can not “continue a dialogue” with Church authorities by provoking a considerable public controversy that the author concedes did not “please the hierarchy.”

So it is a particularly egregious error to claim that “to avoid revealing the repres-
that is offered to support the latter claim, which refers to Cardinal Gasquet’s 1906 collection of Acton’s correspondence, refers to a letter that does not advocate democracy but separation of Church and state—quite a different matter.

The author has done a great deal of work trying to make sense of Acton. It is clearly a step above Fasnacht thanks to the inclusion of relevant biographical information. Even so, it still suffers from some of the same defects found in Fasnacht. Without taking into account the changes in Acton, any attempt to explain his ideas will ultimately fail. When the additional errors in fact and interpretation are taken into account, readers new to Acton would do well to consult more reliable studies, such as those by Butterfield, Owen Chadwick, Josef Altholz, Hugh MacDougall, and even Roland Hill’s imperfect but serviceable recent biography, for greater clarity on the subject.

Conclusion

What are we to make of Lord Acton? Pezzimenti offers a sympathetic portrayal that defends Acton against all his contemporary critics with the possible exception of Newman. Yet even here, Acton largely overcomes Newman’s objections to become a prophetic champion of liberty in the Church and society. There are certainly attractive aspects to Acton’s program. In the Church, the faithful should welcome advances in scholarship and in the working out of apparent conflicts between religion and science in a way that respects the authority of both realms. Similarly, English Catholics could have benefited from Acton’s desire to raise the level of intellectual training among the laity so as to develop the tools needed to address temporal matters without relying on Church officials for direction. Acton tried to keep his liberalism and his Catholicism in balance and some have argued, as Pezzimenti does, that he never actually took up theological views that could be considered heterodox. He was a powerful voice for political and intellectual freedom at a time when liberty needed advocates and his early writing reveals an insight into human affairs that is remarkable for a man of his age and remains valuable even in our own day.

Yet Acton’s behavior became increasingly objectionable as he aged. He put aside church matters to indulge the trends and fashions of this generation. His enthusiasms often clouded his judgment. Despite his good intentions, he concocted a recipe for failure when he exposed the educational deficiencies of a defensive Catholic minority to a hostile Protestant public, while insisting his co-religionists adopt German intellectual innovations. He exhibited an excessive faith in the power of “scientific” history to discover the truth of all things which often led him to use his sometimes faulty knowledge to judge religious questions, as in the case of the Vatican Council. Acton once told G. M. Trevelyan that the Jesuits were responsible for the assassination of Pellegrino Rossi, the last prime minister of the papal states. A specialist in Italian unification, Trevelyan was intrigued with the revelation, but his search for supporting evidence was entirely in vain.

His moralizing about historical figures and events isolated him from historians of his day and ours; even Döllinger thought his views excessive. He described himself to Mary Gladstone as a “narrow doctrinaire” who hid his ideology “under a thin disguise of levity.” Acton’s narrow-mindedness led him to say to Creighton that “great men are almost always bad men.” His growing attraction to the notion of inevitable moral progress that so permeated the nineteenth century has shown itself to be unhistorical in the twentieth. He never seemed to question whether political freedom really was a prerequisite for spiritual freedom. If Acton’s liberalism was mere liberality of
spirit, there would be few objections. But with Acton, there is baggage, and one must be mindful of which bag one carries.

8. Letter to Gladstone, 1896; quoted in Fasnacht, 8.

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**Creating Meaningful Cities**

*Victor Deupi*


**The Idea Behind** David Mayernik’s *Timeless Cities*—that the urban realm is the touchstone of human achievement and cultural memory, and that it deserves our greatest attention—is not only a wake-up call for contemporary architects, planners and engineers, but also for politicians, developers and civic activists, in fact everyone involved in city building and growth management. But why should this challenge be of any special interest today? Certainly for the majority of professional architects and planners, the idea of restoring our cities and providing a more humane and harmonious face to the natural and built environment has been a central concern for some time. And, despite the continued increase in conventional suburban development and unregulated growth (“sprawl”), many cities and towns throughout America are showing dramatic signs of growth and regeneration. Cities are in fashion again. But is that enough? Moreover, shouldn’t our aspirations for contemporary culture seek to imitate if not surpass the greatest accomplishments of the past? Like Rudolf Wittkower’s classic *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism* (1949), which sought to raise the standard of modern building by asking architects to recon-