

## A Regency Regius: The Historian Edward Nares

By JEREMY BLACK

In 1960 Merton College Library was presented with the manuscript autobiography of a former fellow, the historian Edward Nares.<sup>1</sup> The intention of this brief essay is to draw attention to this source and to comment briefly on Nares's academic career. Despite having been Regius Professor of History, Nares is an obscure figure who has been generally ignored. The deposit of his autobiography and the consideration of his works permit an assessment of him to be made.

Edward (1762–1841) was the third son of George Nares (1716–1786), a serjeant-at-law. His autobiography suggests that he was a precocious child, who owed his interest in books to his father's extensive library:

The first book I ever remember to have read with a view to useful information, was the history of England in 12<sup>mo</sup> writ I believe by Goldsmith in the form of Letters from a Nobleman to his son. This I not only read but abridg'd, and in a short time became so interested in the study of history, that the very next undertaking of the kind was to go through the whole of Rapin's History with Echards Continuation. This also I accomplished with no small rapidity – in all XXVIII Volumes Octavo. I never wanted encouragement from my father – he gave me both books and money to buy books, so that I soon got a little library of my own, and up in my own room, which gave me a power of studying by myself, and though I am still as averse as ever from all my school exercises that required any greater care than that of neat writing, and even felt them to be a shocking interruption, yet my desire of knowledge now became excessive and the family were frequently many hours in bed and asleep before I could prevail on myself to put out my candle. I had now all sorts of projects in my head; at one Time I began to write a history of England myself – at another I commenced a history of animals. . . . I began an epic poem, as soon as I had read Milton.

Nares left Westminster for Christ Church in 1779, and though his studies were interrupted by serious ill health he was able to take his B.A. in 1783. The next few years were spent in travel and the writing of humorous works, and, after one unsuccessful attempt, Nares was elected a fellow of Merton in 1788. Marrying Lady Charlotte Spencer, the daughter of the Duke of Marlborough, in 1797, Nares resigned his fellowship and was presented with the Kentish living of Biddenden which he held until his death. In the following years he wrote a number of theological works and became a noted apologist for the Church of England. Nares revealed a strong grasp of the value of history for this enterprise, and his robust conservatism illuminated by his religious faith provides an interesting example of the views of the Anglican clergy in this period. In a sermon preached in December 1797 on a day of public thanksgiving for a series of British naval victories, and dedicated to Elizabeth Viscountess Bateman, the wife of one of his patrons, Nares made a powerful case for the value of history:

<sup>1</sup> Merton College Library, E.2.41, 42. The volumes are neither paginated nor foliated. I am most grateful to Dr. Roger Highfield for drawing my attention to these volumes and for permitting me to transcribe them. Unless otherwise stated all quotations are from the autobiography.

From the first invention of letters, by means of which the history of past ages has been transmitted to us, and the actions of our forefathers preserved, it has ever been the wisdom of man, under all circumstances of public and general concern, to refer to these valuable records, as the faithful depositaries of past experience, and to deduce from thence, by Comparison of situations, whatever might conduce to his instruction, consolation, or hope. Thither the Statesman of the present day frequently recurs for the better conduct and support of the commonwealth. Thither the Philosopher directs his view to estimate the powers and energy of the human soul, and to form his judgment of its future capacity, by the testimony he obtains of past exertions. Thither the ambitious has recourse to learn how to compass the honours of this world; to enrol himself in the lists of fame, and rival the achievements of former generations. Thither also, in his turn, the religious man applies himself for more sober and rational information; and, bent upon tracing the finger of God in all concerns of importance to the good and welfare of man, is pleased to discover, in the course of human events, a direction marvellously conducive to the final purposes of Heaven, the constant and eternal will of God; and continually illustrative of his irresistible supremacy, his over-ruling providence, his might, majesty, and power!

Nares found history of value because it displayed the providential plan, and he contrasted the historical perspective with the destructive secular philosophy of present-mindedness:

the enemy begin their operations on the pretended principle of giving perfect freedom to the mind of man. I call it a pretended principle, not only because their subsequent actions have been entirely in contradiction to it, but because, in fact no principle, as the world at present stands, could be found more inimical to the real interests of human nature. For it is plain, that the first step to be taken in vindication of such a principle, is to discard all ancient opinions as prejudices; every form of government, however matured by age, is to be submitted afresh to the judgment and choice of the passing generation, and the Almighty to be worshipped (if at all) not according to the light vouchsafed to our fore-fathers, but as every short-lived inhabitant of the earth shall, in his wisdom, think proper and sufficient. . . . As long as those natural scourges, earthquakes, tempests, plagues, and pestilence, are known to be permitted to happen to the destruction of mankind in particular regions, we cannot doubt but that the most dreadful calamities are sometimes made the instruments of God's inscrutable purposes, and that, to correct and alarm the forwardness of man, the mercy of the great God does sometimes appear to be withheld. When the calamities of war therefore befall us, we are not irrational in considering these also as under the direction of God. Their being brought about by the agency of man, can never make them less natural with regard to the great Author of all things, certainly not less within the power of an almighty and omnipresent Being. The great point is to discover the heavenly purposes and these can only be fitly studied in the consequences.

Nares came to the reassuring conclusion that British victories proved divine support.<sup>2</sup> While at Biddenden he maintained his links with Oxford. In 1805 the Bampton lectures provided him with the 'opportunity of combating the most plausible objections of modern infidels to our holy religion.' Two years later he was chosen to preach one of two sermons before the University on the duty of translating the Bible into living oriental languages, and he was then appointed a select preacher at Oxford for 1808 and 1809, a post he was forced to relinquish due to problems created by the distance from his home. In 1813 the Mastership of Balliol and the Regius Chair of Modern History became vacant and Nares wrote to the Prime Minister, Lord Liverpool, an old friend from Blenheim, to ask if he might be promoted to an Oxford post. The reply was an offer of the History chair, 'upon the understanding that you will read a course of lectures annually, or every alternate year, as the leading members of the University may think most advisable. I feel it of some importance at the present moment that this lecture should be revived, and I am confident that, with your habit of study and of writing, you can have no difficulty in accomplishing this purpose, particularly when it is considered how many excellent works have been published on the Continent in the course of the last few years, which serve as books of reference for any information which may be desired on this subject.'

<sup>2</sup> E. Nares, *A Sermon, Preached at the Parish Church of Shobdon, in the County of Hereford, December 19, 1797, Being The Day Appointed for a Public Thanksgiving*. . . (no place, 1798), 1-2, 4-5, 7-8, 18.

When Nares discovered the new regulations that governed the chair he nearly resigned it. He was obliged to pay, out of his professorial salary of £400, the salaries of two teachers of modern languages, to deliver a public lecture every term and a course of at least twenty lectures during the year. He was dissuaded from resigning on the assurance of ecclesiastical preferment, the reward of his predecessor – an assurance that was not to be fulfilled. Although modern history was a new subject for Nares his first course on it, delivered in the spring of 1816 to a class of 124, was well received. Nares delivered 22 lectures in all, covering medieval and modern history up to 1763. The first lecture investigated the connection of modern with ancient history, the last was devoted to ‘studies connected with *Modern History*, more particularly necessary to those who may have *public duties* to discharge, in consequence of their birth, profession, or special appointment’.<sup>3</sup> Nares was less happy with his Terminal Lecture, delivered that June:

I am persuaded nothing could be devised more irksome and degrading to a Professor zealous to discharge his duties, than these short single lectures. I have always thought so, but my own experience convinces me more than ever of their absurdity as a matter of compulsion, provided the Professor has opportunities of doing his duty otherwise. He must naturally wish to reserve everything of importance for his regular class, nor is it easy to select a subject which may suit a casual audience. The University may reasonably claim a certain number of lectures, but I think it should be left to the discretion of the Professor to determine, as he may happen or not to get a class, whether he should devote his time entirely to the objects of that class, or deliver public lectures also in the schools. The Vice-Chancellor, two or three heads of colleges, and about twelve other persons constituted my audience.

Anticipating correctly a poor audience for his 1817 lectures on modern history, Nares decided to offer twelve lectures on political economy also, a subject

which the University had been censur'd for neglecting, and which was particularly mention'd in the warrant of my appointment.

When I first read my warrant, I well remember feeling ashamed of my ignorance of this curious science. I conceiv'd that it would be impossible for me to acquire in due time such a knowledge of its elements as to venture to lecture upon it. But I was determined to conquer the difficulty, if it could be done by mere reading. Like all other literary novelties it soon became extremely interesting to me. I devoured book upon book, indoors and out of doors as heretofore, notwithstanding the damage I might be doing to my eyes. But it was a hard task to make others at all sensible of what I was about, and the immense amount of knowledge I had to acquire in the course of but a few months. A thousand engagements would occasionally interfere. A casual visitor would sometimes rob me of a whole morning; and, being a family man, I could not extricate myself from some annual parties without making a parade of study, which I had ever carefully avoided, and the need for which others could not be expected to understand.

However, in spite of these interruptions, I completed my task entirely to my own satisfaction, and left home with an intention of instructing the University in such subjects as *The Wealth of Nations*, *Trade and Commerce*, *Foreign Exchange*, *Taxation*, *Funding System*, including the operation of a *Sinking Fund*, *Population*, *Poor Laws*, etc. I found that, like myself, almost every member of the University actually needed instruction. I found political economy had hitherto engaged none of their attention. I enquired at the shops for books which had excited the greatest interest in the political world, which were totally unknown at Oxford.

I became exceedingly interested in this part of my undertaking. I was quite sensible that in a place where so many young men were receiving their education who were likely to become members of the Legislature, the study of political economy ought to receive the utmost encouragement. I determined to express my mind upon the subject in my Terminal Lecture before the Vice-Chancellor, which was to be read by appointment on the 12th, and I prepared myself accordingly. But I reckoned without my host! On that very day the Prince Regent arranged to receive an address from the University, and when I had to appear in the schools, the Vice-Chancellor, Proctors, and almost every distinguished member of the University were in London. A Pro-Vice-Chancellor certainly did attend, the Master of Pembroke (Dr. Hall), but on his entrance there was not a single person in the school but myself. A few came in after a time (some eight or nine) and to these I read the lecture, which I had specially prepared as an introduction to a novel course.

<sup>3</sup> E. Nares, *Syllabus of a Course of Lectures in Modern History* (1816).

But I had further impediments to encounter. I had arranged to begin my course on Political Economy the next evening, Thursday, but though much disposition seemed excited to attend me, no day or hour could be found to suit everybody. Many would put their names down if it could be a morning lecture, while others could only attend an evening one. It must not be read on Tuesdays, Thursdays, or Saturdays, for fear of interfering with the Professors of Divinity, and Monday evening would not suit the subscribers to the musick room, etc. Every change I made of the day and hour caused only greater confusion. I had the satisfaction, certainly of finding that numbers would attend, if they could; but every arrangement I could make seemed to exclude many. I fixed at last to read them on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays at 7 p.m., and procured a class of thirty-seven, consisting of a few noblemen and some of the most eminent tutors. The undergraduates were too much occupied in preparing for their public examinations to attend any of the professors. This is certainly carried too far. Heads of colleges have acknowledged it to be so, and undergraduates have told me that it is too much like school, to the exclusion of all general knowledge. I had great reason to be gratified by the effect of my lectures on those who attend, and shall ever regard the time spent on them as well bestowed. A few years after this a distinct Professorship of Political Economy was founded, and I could not therefore proceed with the subject.

Nares devoted some of his time to writing. In 1822 he published a continuation of Tytler's *Elements of a General History*, bringing it up to the death of George III in 1820. Nares's volume was principally devoted to the history of Britain and Europe in the 18th century. He was in no doubt of the civilizing mission of Europe, 'Civilized Europe is the only part of the world that can claim the credit of almost all that has been done towards the advancement of knowledge since the commencement of the eighteenth century, and only a few parts after all of civilized Europe itself.'<sup>4</sup> In 1828 Nares's major historical work, his biography of Burghley, appeared, containing, as the title noted, 'an Historical View of the Times in which he lived . . . with extracts from his private and official correspondence, and other papers, now first published from the originals.' The book was based on extensive manuscript research and was dedicated to the Marquesses of Salisbury and Exeter, Burghley's descendants, in response to their assistance. In the preface Nares mentioned the mass of manuscript material he had had to tackle, and stated his aims:

. . . the Author, being long convinced that one of the chief characteristics of good writing is perspicuity, especially in regard to matters of fact, he has aimed at nothing higher, than to render his own ideas perfectly intelligible, and he hopes they have never been so confused, as to make his language appear very perplexed or very obscure. He has certainly never gone out of his way, to round a period or appear rhetorical, to the sacrifice, perhaps, either of sense or truth. Upon some points, indeed, he may be found to have transgressed the more precise rules of writing. . . . As to the Author's own principles, a consideration of some weight, in a work where controversial topics were in no manner to be avoided, he is ready to declare that he has not sought to qualify himself for an historian in the negative manner prescribed in a motto prefixed to the Memoirs of Horace Walpole; 'Pour être bon historien, il ne faudroit être d'aucune religion, d'aucune pais, d'aucune profession, d'aucune parti.' Believing such negations to be no securities against dangerous prejudices, but perhaps quite the contrary, he acknowledges that he prides himself upon being an Englishman; an English Protestant; a Church of England man; a Divine. And he is the more ready to say so, that if he himself should be found to have written under the influence of too strong prejudices, the reader may not be hastily betrayed into wrong conclusions. As a controversialist, if necessarily obliged to consider himself as such, he sincerely hopes, he shall be acquitted of all uncharitable sentiments, he has, as fairly as he could, sought only to combat misrepresentations by counter-statements; to set aside false imputations by discoveries of truth, and to defend his own principles, against those of others, by a compassion and appreciation of fruits and consequences.

Nares used his account of Tudor England to defend the establishment of the Church of England, 'Catholic Christianity restored.'<sup>5</sup> The appearance of this monumental biography, a work that was to be reviewed critically by Macaulay, was ironic, as in the late 1820s

<sup>4</sup> E. Nares, *Continuation* (1822), 417.

<sup>5</sup> E. Nares, *Burghley* (1828), I, xx-xxii, 3.

Nares's aspirations were centred on a change of employment. In 1827 he failed to gain the Margaret Chair of Divinity and in 1830 his application to the Prime Minister, the Duke of Wellington, for a new post was unsuccessful:

It was not what I wanted to *have* which made me so anxious, it was rather what I wanted to *have not*. I was extremely anxious to get rid of my Professorship before I fell into disgrace at Oxford. I was getting too old to read lectures to boys, and I had to reflect that I was occupying a post which many resident members of the University might desire, but which I could not resign without loss, and I had good reason to be apprehensive of any diminution of income. . .

Nares's last work, *Man as known to us Theologically and Geologically* was published in 1834. Seeking to reconcile theology and geology, Nares was determined to ensure that the discoveries of the latter did not invalidate the historical framework of the former. In his autobiography he explained

as Moses is the first historian of our race, and as Christianity avowedly has its foundation in what he relates of the origin of *man*, I wished at all events to make the latter secure, by proving *historically* that whatever might be said or *conjectured* concerning the fabric of this earthly globe, no serious contradiction has been started as to the history of *man*. But I thought I had a good opportunity of proceeding further, for geologists themselves seemed to have been brought by their own researches, to the conclusion that whatever might be the age of the earth, *man* was *comparatively* of recent introduction, and that our race might, therefore, still be no older than the Mosaic records proclaimed.

I wanted to bring theology and geology into some accord. I perceived that geology was getting to be fashionable that, spite of the precautions of well-intentioned geologists themselves, the credit of Moses as an inspired writer would soon come to be slighted; and I discovered, at the same time, among theologians such ignorance of geology that, in attacking the latter too rudely, and depending too much upon Hebrew criticism, they would give an advantage to the adverse party by rather strengthening their prejudices. I, therefore, wished to show that it could not have been through anything short of inspiration, that Moses wrote the account he has given of the beginning of our race, capable, as may yet be shown, of regular *historical* proof, through other sources and by other channels. I also wished to show that even geology bore some testimony to the same truths; but if it did not, yet that theology could still hold its ground as to all the evidence concerning *man* on which Christianity is based.

As long as I see no reason to distrust those records that have assured me of this great and exhilarating truth, that 'As in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive,' I confess I hold the conjectures of the geologists as to past transactions very cheap indeed. I dispute none of their discoveries, but I question many of the conclusions they are disposed to draw from them, and think them mistaken in a variety of ways.

The following year, 1835, Nares gave his last course of lectures. They were not free from difficulties:

I found many appointments already fixed by other professors and lecturers, that there was no opening for me before the month of March, and then I was told I could only lecture twice a week. I arranged, therefore, to begin on the 3rd March. I found only six names entered to attend my lectures, but I was resolved to proceed. Accordingly at the hour notified I proceeded to the new public lecture room, but found it occupied by the Professor of Moral Philosophy, only two of my own class being in attendance. The Registrar, whose apartment was under the lecture room, very civilly gave it up to me, and there, amid a confusion of tables, chairs, books, and papers, I read my first and most important lecture to the only two auditors at leisure to attend me. It is no joke to be living alone for weeks at an hotel one hundred miles from home (paying for a substitute *there* during the whole time) and not to be able to get through one's business at a quicker rate than two hours a week. When, therefore, at the second lecture I met my *full* class of six, I ventured to ask whether it might be possible for us to proceed at the rate of three hours a week. To this they all assented, and I offered at the same time to make any alterations in the days and hours that might render their attendance more certain and convenient; but, such was the number of interfering engagements, that I do not think we all met together three days during my stay. This was no new experience.

In his last years Nares was increasingly affected by poor health, and his links with Oxford became tenuous, as he spent most of his time in his parish. This brief survey of his career suggests that he is an individual worthy of some attention. The neglect he has suffered from owes much to his espousal of causes that swiftly became unfashionable: the Anglican position in British society, the value of theological studies and the need to see intellectual developments through their perspective, the interests of the clerical intelligentsia and, in particular, of its leading branch, the Oxford dons. However, as a key to approaching a significant aspect of the intellectual and academic life of early nineteenth-century Oxford, the career of Edward Nares offers much of value. It is to be hoped that it and his autobiography receive the attention that they deserve.

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