

---

# Pro Rege

---

---

Volume 34 | Number 3

Article 5

---

March 2006

## Herbert Butterfield and the Interpretation of History (Book Review)

Harry Van Dyke

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro\\_rege](https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege)

---

### Recommended Citation

Van Dyke, Harry (2006) "Herbert Butterfield and the Interpretation of History (Book Review)," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 34: No. 3, 29 - 31.

Available at: [https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro\\_rege/vol34/iss3/5](https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol34/iss3/5)

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the University Publications at Digital Collections @ Dordt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Dordt. For more information, please contact [ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu](mailto:ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu).

# Book Review

---

*Herbert Butterfield and the Interpretation of History* by Keith C. Sewell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) 280 pp., including bibliographies and an index. ISBN 1-4039-3928-4. \$74.95. Reviewed by Harry Van Dyke, Professor of History Emeritus, Redeemer University College.

Professor Keith Sewell's bulky doctoral dissertation, now packaged in a manageable and attractive book of 12 lucid chapters, is an important study of a body of literature that must be considered intensely relevant for critical reflection on two areas of academic work: the science of history and the humanities in general. The book examines successive stages in the development of the thought of Butterfield in relation to fundamental issues in the historical discipline. Sir Herbert Butterfield (1900-1979) was a Christian historian teaching in Cambridge; his prolific output included such classics as *The Whig Interpretation of History*, *The Origins of Modern Science*, and *Christianity and History*. His English colleagues always took note of his publications, and on this continent he has been studied and commented on by such authors as C. T. McIntire, William A. Speck, and Kenneth W. Thompson.

Sewell has produced a sympathetic reconstruction of Butterfield's thought. This work is based on a painstaking analysis of the entire published Butterfield corpus, along with a judicious canvassing of the unpublished correspondence and manuscripts deposited with the Butterfield Papers in the Cambridge University Library. The reader can be certain that nothing essential has been left unexamined. In a carefully nuanced way, Sewell lays bare the unspoken motivations and hidden tensions in Butterfield's continual debates, both with himself and with a host of contemporary historians in the period between 1924-1979. In particular, the concept for which Butterfield is widely known, "technical history," is tracked down in his many writings, showing its initial purport, its gradual metamorphosis, and its final integration (however problematic) in the whole of Butterfield's thought. In a chronological-genetic approach that is comprehensive (if not to say exhaustive), Sewell traces the steps by which Butterfield, despite his championing of non-interpretative "technical" history, employed deep-seated presuppositions and, more significantly, the reasons that he did so each time. The problem with Butterfield—and here Sewell appears to agree with the conclusion of Louis J. Voskuil—is that he posited "a formal dualism between technical history and religious interpretation which tended to preclude consideration of their inner connection" (12). The lynchpin of Sewell's critique is contained in a single sentence: "Evidence is never *just seen*, as Butterfield tends on occasion to imply; it is always *seen as*" (215). The final conclusion of this study is that Butterfield, in spite of himself and in spite of his methodological principles, was never able to escape the use of presuppositions in doing his work as a historian (213).

Can anyone trained in the reformational thought stemming from Kuyper, Dooyeweerd, and others be sur-

prised by this conclusion? Long before the Sociology of Knowledge became a household word, Abraham Kuyper, in the great parliamentary debates of 1904, defended the inescapability of subjective interpretation and therefore the perfect validity of worldview-directed university studies, such as those given at the Free University, against the charge by Leyden professor Van der Vlugt that such studies were unacceptably "sectarian." And decades before Critical Theory occupied Western epistemologists, Herman Dooyeweerd launched his transcendental critique of theoretic thought against the charge that while humanist presuppositions in scientific work are rational, Christian presuppositions are "unscientific." And, to name one more, independently of postmodernism's literary theorists and their call for deconstructing texts, S. U. Zuidema specialized in unmasking "the hidden player on the keyboard of a thinker's philosophy." No, Sewell's conclusion does not surprise us. What does surprise us is that he has to add that, although Butterfield gradually went over to a more perspectival view of scientific knowledge, he never "explicitly retracted his earlier teaching on 'technical history' . . ." and never "successfully confronted the ineluctability of interpretation" (14, 213).

Butterfield's initial formulation of his concept of "technical history" resembled a view of scholarship or a philosophy of science known as "naïve realism." Sewell shows, however, that in his own actual work as a practicing historian, this erudite scholar was anything but naïve! Butterfield had a profound understanding of human nature and the complexity of the historical process, and his historical writings are richly textured, didactic and evocative, allusive and suggestive. Yet over the years his pronouncements on theory and methodology wove a tangled web. The present analysis deftly handles the twists and turns in Butterfield's emerging overall conception. Faced with the perennial questions about history and culture, he struggled to do them justice but repeatedly got himself entangled in inconsistencies and partial retractions expressed in vague, obscure, at times tortuous prose.

It appears that Butterfield felt obliged to protect the integrity of historical science against the ideological onslaughts on the discipline by Marxists and other utilitarian propagandists. Sewell devotes all of Chapter 8 to this issue. In Butterfield's eyes, interpretation often lapses into misrepresenting, distorting, and oversimplifying historical reality. Hence it must be barred from academic history.

In taking this stance Butterfield was for a while deceived by a particular reading, common in the English-speaking world for close to a century, of Leopold von Ranke. Ranke's celebrated method was understood to mean that

respectable scientific history must limit itself to establishing naked facts and discrete events for the sake of arriving at “pure science” free from overarching interpretations extraneous to the evidence. Sewell notes that Butterfield imputes to Ranke “an almost Baconian notion of factuality” (168; see also 114). Could it be, I have often wondered, that this Baconianism, together with the Occamist emphasis on discreteness independent of general categories, became part of a long-standing English intellectual tradition? And could it be that Butterfield accordingly entertained an undue respect for the rise of modern science? Nothing startled me as much, and in the end convinced me as little, as the statement in his book on the subject that the Scientific Revolution “outshines everything since the rise of Christianity and reduces the Renaissance and Reformation to the rank of mere episodes” (vii).

Butterfield’s approach matured as he began to recognize Ranke’s emphasis on collective tendencies and universal patterns and learned to incorporate these, however haltingly and falteringly, in his theorizing about proper methodology (not that he had not practiced this broader vision in his own historical writings all along). A distinct merit of this study is that we are shown in what sense Butterfield’s professional practice as a historian was much better—far richer—than his theory warranted. As Sewell remarks, Butterfield was a subtle thinker but not a very systematic one. The beauty of his pilgrimage through the thorny paths of historiographical theory is that time and again shaky theoretical expositions were offset by tacit self-corrections and increasingly more satisfactory elaborations, in line with his own historical writings, of what historians are doing and should be doing.

The story of this struggle, covering half a century, is fascinating. Butterfield got caught in a tangle, carefully unraveled by Sewell, because he was a better historian than a philosopher and a better believer than an academic conformist. The tangle arose, Sewell explains in a merciful understatement, “out of his Christian, but conceptually inadequate, response to positions that he did not share and perhaps uncritical appropriation of epistemological assumptions and methodological precepts that were not wholly compatible with his Christian worldview” (14). Butterfield’s inability to ignore the presence of a divine order in the historical process—a providential order woven into the very fabric of history—and his unwillingness to suppress his view of man as a fallen and flawed creature, simply did not allow him to confine himself to a value-free, non-interpretative zone insulated against “subjective interpretation,” which transcends empirically verifiable facts, i.e. to confine himself to the restricted kind of narrative prescribed by “technical history” as he had first defined it. As a result, the kind of history he wrote as the years went by became more and more what Sewell calls “expository historiography” (see Chapter 5). This is a kind of history-writing that does not shy away from general concepts, patterns of interpretation, long-term consequences, and even moral judgments.

In this process of articulating and constantly reformulating his views, Butterfield at one point used the metaphor of “thinking caps”—three distinct mental approaches or vantage points that the historian may adopt as the narrative

requires: factual, interpretative, or confessional. These too, however, did not prove to be the felicitous constructs that could finally resolve the inner tensions in his basic conception. In fact, he was forced to redefine his constructs several times in a vain attempt to safeguard the historian’s prime role as he persisted in seeing it, namely to collect facts with an open mind free of any “superimposed interpretation.” In this connection, Sewell cautions that McIntire’s generous interpretation of Butterfield is in need of emendation (12, 204). Sewell also seems to appreciate Hayden White’s analysis of the explanatory patterns employed by historians, but he adds, wryly and wisely, “Perhaps the latter would have been more relevant for the present study if he had addressed the fundamental question of religious perspective rather than having discussed the issue principally in terms of literary metaphors” (7). In another delightful aside, Sewell records that while Thomas Kuhn explicitly credited Butterfield and his “thinking-cap” thesis for his own discovery of ruling paradigms in the history of natural science (13, 163), Butterfield himself in turn credited his inspiration for the idea to the indeterminacy principle in physics as expounded by Werner Heisenberg during a visit to Cambridge (161 n. 49).

As we follow Sewell’s tracing of the many metamorphoses undergone by Butterfield’s conception, we do well to bear in mind that this great British historian was the product of the classic system in vogue in the British university: you write weekly papers for your tutor, for you learn as you write and you write in order to learn. The typical English don has taken a page from John Calvin, a man steeped in the pedagogy of Renaissance Humanism who wrote at the bottom of his preface to the *Institutes*, quoting St. Augustine, “I confess that I am one of those who write as they grow in knowledge and who grow in knowledge as they write.” With some people this work habit, for better or worse, results in an enormous output of texts. McIntire has described the vastness of Butterfield’s literary remains. But the obvious fact that manuscripts are not always ripe for publication became clear in the critical reception accorded Butterfield’s posthumous book *The Origins of History*, edited by his long-time friend Adam Watson.

Sewell’s book reads well, but I deplore the absence of subheadings within each chapter, which can be so helpful for the reader to keep his bearings. Equally deplorable, to my taste, is the absence of all annotation at the foot of the page: we have to settle for thirty-five continuous pages of endnotes (217-251); one would think that modern electronic typesetting has made this awkward convention unnecessary.

The strengths of this study are obvious, and I hasten to enumerate them. The work subjects Butterfield to an impartial yet critical evaluation, teasing out the basic intentions of the man without pinning him down on a procrustean bed of apriori theoretical distinctions. Butterfield is treated as a scholar of integrity yet with serious philosophical blindspots. Particularly illuminating of the questions at issue are the many interactions with other historians of which Sewell cites copious portions; we are given intriguing glimpses into the world of British historians of the twentieth century, from Acton, Temperley, and Gooch to Trevelyan, Namier, and Carr, and we can read their reac-

tions to Butterfield and to one another about him, both in the public press and in private correspondence. Another decided strength is that Butterfield is allowed to speak for himself in lengthy quotations from his many works. Granted, a plethora of direct quotations is usually frowned upon and can be tiresome; in this case, however, one is dealing with a study in historical writing, and I would agree with Sewell that one needs to see just what Butterfield actually wrote (9f., 15). Nothing illustrates Butterfield's thought processes and his "second thoughts" and "reconsiderations" better than *ipsisima verba*.

The appended Bibliographies are a gold mine. The one that lists works by Butterfield supersedes the extensive ones by Partington (1963) and Hinton (1972) and the categorical ones by McIntire (1979) and Thompson (1980).

A final strength, surely, is the avoidance of technical jargon. Any intelligent reader of this study can follow what the professional historians are talking about. Accordingly, the book will be of enduring value to historians interested in the foundational questions of their discipline—and how could they not be interested in them?—as well as to philosophers and theoreticians of history. It will also be found exceedingly insightful by students of historiography and political theory. Its subject matter will remain topical because historiographical debates tend to have a long life span. Butterfield has been out of fashion for some time, but now that the inroads of postmodernism have come to a halt and are beginning to recede, Butterfield is due for renewed attention. My expectation is that *Herbert Butterfield and the Interpretation of History* will long remain a stimulating and instructive guide.