

# Like the Tigers of Old Time

POWERFUL INSTITUTIONS OFTEN COERCE THE WRITER OF HISTORY

Davis Bitton

**A**LTHOUGH censorship in the simple sense is something we do not take kindly to in our society, we are familiar enough with attempts to censor books, magazines, movies, and television. Too much sex and violence is the usual concern. Conservative-minded people tend to be fearful of the influence of license, or pornography, in society in general, seeing it as both a cause and symptom of the erosion of our society's moral standards. But history? Why should the guardians of standards be concerned about history? Why should they disapprove of certain kinds of historical writing and do everything in their power to foster others? Yet this is precisely what has happened. A kind of writing that on the face of it deals with the past, with things that are dead and gone, somehow touches a tender nerve. I have chosen to examine three different areas in which the writing of history has aroused apprehension on the part of institutional leaders. History, that sweet muse dedicated to instruction and truth, was to a degree bound and gagged, if not forced to read a script prepared by her captors.

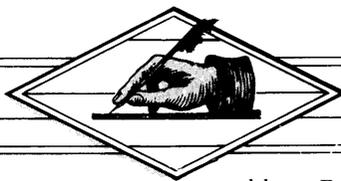
**L**ET us start with England in the sixteenth century—the age of the Tudors. Part of the intellectual foment of this century was a renewal of attention to the past. This could take the form of histories of the world, or of ancient Greece and Rome, of early Britain, of the Norman Conquest, of events in the fifteenth century, or of many other subjects. These may seem far enough removed from the Tudor present to be

irrelevant and unthreatening to those in power at the time of writing. But such was not the case.

As background, we must remember that there had been a long struggle between the houses of Lancaster and York before, finally in 1485, Henry Tudor had ascended the throne as Henry VII. Anxious to see that the history of the preceding period was handled in a way that would not threaten the legitimacy of the Tudors, Henry imported an Italian by the name of Polydore Vergil, who chronicled the reigns of English kings in a way that was clearly acceptable to his master. One of the stereotypes that was considered essential, for example, was to portray Richard III, the last Yorkist king, as a kind of monster, a bogeyman. This process was continued throughout the century, while the Tudor kings took on all the virtues imaginable. He who pays the piper calls the tune.

When Shakespeare wrote his history plays, in the latter part of the reign of Elizabeth I, he of course continued the Richard-III-as-monster theme. In *Richard II* a deposition scene was included. To leave out the deposition of Richard II would be like leaving out the resignation of Richard Nixon from a history of his presidency. But the queen, uneasy at the possibility that a deposition scene might suggest something that the playgoers would not otherwise think of, let her concerns be known. The scene was cut from all printings in her lifetime.

An earnest young historian named John Hayward, trained as a lawyer and what we would call a history buff, decided to reconstruct the details of Richard II's deposition. Accompanied by a fulsome dedication to the



queen's close friend and adviser, the Earl of Essex, Hayward's book appeared in 1599. The queen was not

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amused. The dedication, which might have been taken as an implicit endorsement by the crown, was ordered removed. A second edition without the dedication appeared; it was gathered up and burned. Then Hayward was brought in for interrogation by none other than Sir Edward Coke. The notes of the stormy questioning survive. Hayward had described a bad ruler, a corrupt council, discontented nobles, and the mass of common people "groining" under heavy taxation. The cure for these ills was the deposition of the king. When Hayward protested that he was simply being true to the historical record, Coke declared that Hayward had intended "the application of it to this tyme." All of Hayward's denials were to no avail; after a second interrogation he was taken to the tower and kept incarcerated until after the queen's death. The Privy Council did not stop by dealing with this one writer: it issued an order that no works on English history be published without express approval.

One scholar, the great annalist William Camden, gained access to many of the official documents. But he knew what was wanted and did not press his luck. "Things manifest and evident I have not concealed; Things doubtfull I have interpreted favourably; Things secret and abstruse I have not pried into."

Suspicion of what the historians might do continued under James I. Like his predecessor, James was very careful about allowing access to the archives. The result was sickening adulation, as found, for example, in one historian who praised James's "Chastitie, Patience, Pietie, Mercie and Judgement, Wisedome, Learning, Bountie, Peace and Munificence." Samuel Daniel promised that he would be very careful with any sources he used; he would "tread as tenderly on the graves of his magnificent Progenitors, as possibly I can." James was still suspicious, and when a group of scholars tried to reorganize a Society of Antiquaries, even though they intended to refrain from discussing religion or matters of state, James growled his displeasure. Before the second meeting, according to Henry Spelman, "we had notice that his Majesty took a little Mislike of our Society." They met no more.

Sir Walter Raleigh's great *History of the World* dealt with ancient times, barely reaching the Christian era. It might be thought that it was far enough removed to cause no

problem. But Raleigh's intention, according to his critics, was to "tax the vices of those that are yet living, in their persons that are long since dead." He protested his innocence, saying that "if there be any, that, finding themselves spotted like the tigers of old time, shall find fault with me for painting them over anew, they shall therein accuse themselves justly, and me falsely."

He did not choose to write about events closer to the present, Raleigh said, for "whosoever, in writing a modern history, shall follow truth too near the heels, it may happily strike out his teeth." But, as he and others discovered, it was the perception of the Establishment that mattered; if history was perceived to be embarrassing or threatening, or suggestive of problems, or too closely parallel to present conditions, or in any way discomfoting, it was to be discouraged.

The ways to prevent the publication of unwelcome history in Tudor England included patronage of the favored kind of history, refusal of access to archival materials, demands that offensive passages be deleted, removal from the bookstores, insistence that books be cleared by a committee before publication, and imprisonment of historians who caused problems. More important than any of these specific measures was the awareness of what might befall a historian lacking in discretion.

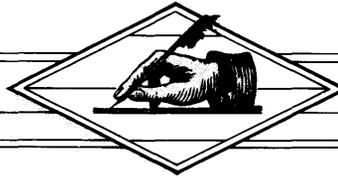
## II

EARLY in the nineteenth century, as archives in Italy were being opened up to research—coinciding with the rise of modern historical scholarship and an intensive interest in national origins—scholars began to show an interest in the materials of the Vatican. The procedure, if you got permission to use the materials at all, was that someone would copy it out for you. You would not see the original text and would not even have a chance to compare, in order to ascertain the accuracy of the transcription.

It was in this period of time that a German historian, G. H. Pertz, wrote the following: "There is no better defence of the Papacy than to unveil its inward being. If weakness is shown up, you can reckon on a more friendly judgment through historical understanding than if, as often until now, it is all kept secret and men are left to suspect what they will."

One of the subjects that scholars wanted to explore was the trial of Galileo, but this was one subject the officials did not want looked at. It had to be "enemies of the Church" who were interested in looking at such an incident and hoping to discredit the institution and its leaders. What they did not understand apparently was that there was no version that scholarship might produce with complete access to the sources that could be as bad and as unfavorable to the Church as the simplified rumors that were making the rounds and being accepted as accurate.

The history of the Council of Trent is another example. Sarpì's version was countered by Pallavicino's version. Both were partisan. The primary sources were used selectively by these two near-contemporary authors and for many generations were not available for checking. "Historians see the past through the eyes of



the authors of the archives which they use," Owen Chadwick has wisely noticed. Later, when an effort was made to publish the complete sources for the Council, of course it would have included speeches and some of these speeches would have contained ideas unacceptable to the Church. The suggestion was made that this be done only if footnotes were provided to refute the erroneous ideas. Some Church officials did not want any further publication of sources or any additional history because that would tend to undermine the "official" history—that of Pallavicino—that already existed.

Although the subject being examined, the Council of Trent, was in the sixteenth century, it was in the nineteenth century that this whole question was going through a reexamination. Scholarly efforts by Catholics to reexamine the Council of Trent were constantly frustrated by the feeling that it would not do to stir the waters. One historian answered that if we Catholics are going to be secretive, restrictive, and defensive with our historical documents, how can we proclaim boldly that history is on our side or how can we criticize the Protestants for behaving similarly with their sources?

The relevance of history was unmistakable at the Vatican Council of 1869-1870. The main question, at least the main result of this council, was the official promulgation of the doctrine of papal infallibility—that when speaking *ex cathedra* on matters of faith and morals the pope cannot err. Now this was an historical question, in part, because it necessitated showing that the belief had been held by "a cloud of witnesses"—by the uninterrupted tradition of the Church—and that previous pronouncements had in fact been infallible. Both sides in the controversy appealed to history, by necessity. But those advancing the infallibilist position appealed to "forged, spurious, mutilated or interpolated" documents, according to one Catholic historian. They interpreted passages to their own advantage, making history say what they wanted it to say, constructing "an image of the past that had very little to do with historical reality."

When certain historians complained about the misuse of their discipline, they were denounced. "Dogma must triumph over history," was the saying. Not that the proponents of the doctrine ignored history; rather, they misused it—ignoring or suppressing what they found inconvenient, misinterpreting or misemphasizing what they liked.

Then there was a cover-up of the history of the First Vatican Council. It would not do to have the faithful Catholics of the world know how these matters had been decided. So the documents were restricted. An official historian was appointed to write *the* history of the Council—the approved version. Other participants who kept records or who intended to produce histories were discouraged, their notes restricted and in some cases destroyed.

By 1883 it seemed that a landmark had been reached. The Vatican Council was over. Pope Leo XIII stated (or endorsed) the idea that "The Catholic Church and the Holy See have nothing to fear from the truth of history." The principle was first stated in a letter to three

cardinals. "The Church has no anxiety before the truth," he said in effect if not in these exact words. Speaking to a meeting of the Gorres Society, the German Catholic

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Society for the study of history, he said, "Go to the sources. That is why I have opened the archives to you. We are not afraid of people publishing documents out of them," "*non abbiamo paura della pubblicita dei documenti. documenti.*"

One of the fruits of a new, open attitude after Vatican I was the great project of Ludwig von Pastor, who was granted permission to produce a multi-volume history of the popes. The instructions he was given by Leo XIII were that he should work on this project "*con amore,*" with love. A truly great historian, with thoroughness, indefatigable energy, scope of vision, and a capacity for human understanding, Pastor explained, "The Catholic historian must not be an apologist. This is a danger which presses in these controversial days. A historian who struggles for impartiality will not be so respected in his own day as the historian who is an apologist, for the second is the man of the moment. Later it is the other way around. The impartial historian does not die with his generation. The apologist is understood by his party, but to posterity is nothing but a pamphleteer."

The reactions to Pastor are interesting. By Protestants he was condemned as an apologist, although they developed a grudging admiration as his volumes continued to appear, as he demonstrated a thoroughness and as he said what had in honesty to be said about Alexander VI. Some Catholics deplored the history, wanting to place the history on the Index of Prohibited Books. You should not say unkind things about the dead, said one cardinal: "First charity and then truth, even in writing history." Fortunately one man not swayed by these criticisms was Pope Leo XIII. Such is the importance of having a champion in the right time and place. Pastor's work continued to appear and stands today as one of the monuments of modern historical scholarship—a tribute to the Church that produced it, encouraged it, and (miracle of miracles) continued to survive and grow during and after the publication of the work.

But such brave words were easier expressed than carried into practice. An archivist named Balan, one who was vigorous in preventing material from being too readily available, himself came under suspicion. Rumors abounded. He had pirated out documents; he was selling



them, writing pamphlets for the opposition, showing poor judgment—rumors that were sufficient to lead to a quiet “promotion.”

One way the scholars were kept from the documents was simply to have the documents uncatalogued. Thus it was possible, whenever the inclination was there, to say, “We don’t have that.” Or, “We have no way of finding that.” Or, “Come back in five years, and perhaps we will have those processed.” These were documents that for practical purposes did not exist.

There was always a certain amount of “looking over one’s shoulder”—trying to second guess what those higher up wished. Despite his specific statement that he wanted the archives “open,” Pope Leo XIII was thought to have stated or someone heard that he wished no one to pursue research on the notorious Borgia, Pope Alexander VI. This private understanding, of what the “authorities” wanted, governed what the men working in the archives made available.

“History is on our side,” Pope Leo XIII is supposed to have said. Historians who wanted access to the record, those who saw the proceedings as high-handed, those whose own views were ignored and suppressed, might have found this hard to believe. They would have liked the current bumper sticker: “History is on our side as long as we can control the historians.”

But let us not be too hard on the Vatican and its archival policies. These matters must be considered in the context of what general standards are at a given time. As Owen Chadwick has reminded us, the

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protective and restrictive attitudes were not confined to the Vatican Archives.

Even in 1916 the German Foreign Office ruled that to publish the political testament of King Frederick the Great of Prussia was inopportune. The Italian government long refused access to its state archives, and its agents tried to prevent historians getting too near the papers of Cavour, or of the royal house. “It would not be right,” said an Italian prime minister, in 1912, “to have beautiful legends discredited by historical criticism.”

There had been progress during the nineteenth century toward a greater freedom of access, and the trend continued in the present century. Despite certain problem areas, one must grant in fairness that scholars have been granted a remarkable cooperation, as scores

of historical works in our own generation attest to. And the results have not been to degrade the Catholic church because of its human failings but to add to its luster as an institution with enough strength and confidence to face its own past.

### III

**F**INALLY, hoping to be somewhat fair in casting stones at everybody, I come to the writing of Mormon history. I do not have time to survey this whole process in detail. In part, we are just now starting to understand what went on. But we know enough, and some of the experiences are close enough, that I can mention a few things.

First, for a long time, and to some extent still, the interest in the history of the Church was combined with the assumption that there is one true version of that

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history—thus the work of compiling and gathering the so-called history of Brigham Young and the history of Joseph Smith. This was an effort to produce a reliable account of the events, but of course it required the choice between competing accounts, the smoothing out of differences, some textual emendations (corrections, improvements, deletions). Some people still think in this way.

Quite early in the process of working up Mormon history the “reading committee” was used as a means of clearing and getting a group judgment. Since the same device was used for works of theology, it is clear that the Church leadership recognized the possibility of problems from versions of history that did not fit the image they had in mind. The “reading committee” approach is still around.

The idea that nothing negative should be said about past Church leaders was a natural consequence of the position that nothing negative should be said about present leaders. “Sustaining the authorities” includes the idea, for Mormons, that one does not tear down, criticize, or otherwise resist the decisions of the leadership. In the Church context this position seems natural, and it functions in promoting unity and a sense of confidence in the institution. The Catholic cardinal who said “Charity before truth” expressed the attitude I heard in slightly different words from Mormon archivist A. William Lund. When I was working on a certain project, or trying to, he asked me the incredible question,



"Now what good will that do anyone to know?" Maybe it is a good question. But what historian could accomplish anything of significance by working with such self-doubt or by accepting the handicap that nothing negative must be said?

Control over the history of the Church that is produced is never total, but the Church has sometimes sought to exercise some control. The procedure has not always been well understood and perhaps has not been coordinated. On occasion it might have included the following:

1. Limiting access of researchers and writers to materials.
2. Allowing the materials to be examined but looking over the research notes and forbidding certain details.
3. Encouraging or discouraging publication through Church channels: Church magazines, BYU Press, and Deseret Book. Other publishers such as Bookcraft have tried to get on this bandwagon and thus have been careful to publish only approved works.
4. Encouraging or discouraging works that have been published by carrying them or not carrying them in the Church outlets. Since this market is extremely important to the economic viability of some publishers, it is crucial not to alienate those who make decisions.
5. Letting it be known that certain works that are published are somewhat less than *kosher*. The procedure here ranges from talks to certain groups, phone calls, statements by secretaries and assistants, and the rumor mill. In some societies, I would guess, such disapproval would be the surest way to guarantee the success of a work, but apparently it has rather good success in stifling historical writing.
6. Works that are published can also be kept from the knowledge of the reading public by simply not reviewing them in the daily newspaper or the weekly *Church News*.

Although there is nothing in all of this that sounds as ominous as an Index of Prohibited Books, and I do not see the procedures as anywhere near as clearly defined and responsible as those which Catholics use for the *Nihil obstat* and *Imprimatur*, the results are powerful.

#### IV

**I**T should be clear that history, far from being considered a harmless interest somewhere between novel-reading and stamp collecting, has been viewed as a prickly, troublesome threat with a power to do real damage. In Elizabeth's England, in late nineteenth century Catholicism, in Mormonism, various efforts were made to tame Clio, making her subservient to church or state.

My conclusion is not going to be only the cheap and easy one of calling for freedom in the research and writing of history. That *is* one part of what I wish to say. Those in positions of leadership in church or state, those who become concerned about speeches and writing they dislike, should once a year read John Stuart Mill *On Liberty*; they should commit it to memory; better still, they should understand it, believe it, and carry out its precepts. You will remember that Mill appealed for the free expression of ideas not only because true and valuable ideas might otherwise be suppressed but also

because of what the absence of comparison does to those holding sound positions. "If the opinion is right," he said, "they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth; if wrong, they lose, what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth, produced by its collision with error."

History which authority figures have feared has, as all three of our case studies demonstrate, turned out to be quite within the capacity of the institution to endure. Mill would say that an institution that does not have that capacity does not deserve to endure. When historical matters come out life goes on. Sometimes adaptation is made. Or counter-versions to the unwelcome history are produced, and scholarship continues its dialectical movement one generation after another. We vastly overestimate the extent to which most people are motivated by such things as history, and we underestimate their capacity for adjustment and

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enlarging and reformulating earlier views. Most of the time, it seems to me, institutions are better off by encouraging access to information and allowing good and well-researched history to be a standing rebuke and answer to shoddy, partisan history.

But indifference to what historians come up with, a complete willingness to let the research and writing take place without hindrance, an opening up of the archives in their totality to any and all research—such a situation is not in the cards. We will continue to experience tension in one way or another, which is to say that researchers will continue to push for access to documents and will write up their findings, while defenders of the bastions will find it necessary to draw lines and exercise restraints.

History is not as far removed from us as we sometimes think. Its tendrils reach from the near or distant past into our lives at many points. Concern over how much of history is revealed, and how it is presented, is the tribute paid by those who recognize that it is in fact relevant to the present. History is not the dead past, for it is not dead and, as someone has discerned, is in many respects not even past.

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