The COLONIALIST CHARGE

A new book trying to tie Thomas Macaulay to the colonialism of his father misfires, writes Richard Allsop.
English historian Catherine Hall had a specific political purpose in writing this book. In the aftermath of 9/11, she strongly opposed the Blair Government’s decision to participate in wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and was particularly ‘horrified by the claim that the West had the right to assume such positions of moral certitude’.

Hall was particularly incensed by the liberal humanitarian part of the justification for these interventions, seeing this as having clear echoes of Britain’s ‘shameful’ colonial past. As well as marching against the war, she felt she needed to make a professional response as a historian. So she began working on a book about the renowned nineteenth century Whig historian, Thomas Babington Macaulay, because she regarded him as ‘one of the most influential proponents of liberal imperial discourse’.

However, rather than just study Thomas Macaulay, Hall chose to include his father, Zachary, as a major player in the story too. The father was useful to Hall, as his engagement with the Empire was a crucial turning point in Zachary’s life. Zachary went to colonial Jamaica as a sixteen year old and later time spent in Sierra Leone. His imperial experiences led to his becoming a member of the Clapham Sect, a group of evangelical Anglicans. He devoted much of his life to the campaign to abolish the slave trade, working closely with the Sect’s most famous member, William Wilberforce.

Like his father, Zachary’s first-born son Thomas also had a colonial experience, going to India in his thirties, but by then his attitudes were already well formed. Both before and after his time in India, he was a Whig MP, and served in two Whig ministries. However, Thomas’ lasting fame came from writing the History of England, which told the national story from 1685 to 1702, the period straddling the Glorious Revolution, an event which, in Whig eyes, made the country politically unique. Macaulay’s history was hugely influential. His sales matched those of the novelists Charles Dickens and Sir Walter Scott, and his work remained the standard history until the twentieth century.

Hall’s political purpose with Macaulay and Son is to link the father’s colonial experience to the more famous Whig son and thereby describe both men as ‘architects of imperial Britain’.

However, she fails on two grounds. First, the word ‘architect’ ascribes way too much significance to both their roles. Second, and more importantly for Hall’s thesis, it subsumes the profound differences in outlook between father and son.

The two men were not personally very close. Thomas was arguably more influenced by his mother than
his father, and certainly had a far more intimate relationship with two of his sisters. It seems odd that a feminist historian would use a title that reinforces gendered expectations that fathers are more significant than mothers, and that sons inherit the family business.

More fundamental was the difference in the political outlooks of father and son. Like most Evangelicals, Zachary was a Tory. The Evangelicals and the Whigs shared one great cause, the abolition of slavery. In her discussion of this slavery, Hall tends to overemphasise the role of the Evangelicals at the expense of the Whigs. The abolition of the slave trade was only achieved in 1806-07 because a Whig administration under William Grenville briefly interrupted several decades of Tory rule.

Thomas was only a child when the trade was abolished, but was an MP when slavery itself was abolished in the British Empire in 1833, under another Whig administration. Even on slavery father and son disagreed on detail, and on other issues there was a more significant divide. This was particularly the case in regard to religion. Hall herself acknowledges that Thomas' religious 'distance from his father in this respect was immense'.

While Zachary was more tolerant than many Evangelicals, his vision was for an England where people of other faiths converted to Christianity. In contrast, Tom's first speech in the House of Commons was in support of the removal of civil restraints against Jews. His argument was that Jews, like Catholics, could be patriotic members of the English nation.

Hall gives little credit to the Whigs for liberal reforms in Britain, or to Thomas for his role in them, because of 'the unfreedoms on which white freedom was built'. In other words, religious toleration, parliamentary reform, and other liberal reforms cannot be celebrated because the Empire remained intact. For instance, Hall tries to undermine the value of the Great Reform Bill of 1832, painting it as regressive and an attack on the working class. It is true that it did not extend the franchise to working class men but, as she herself describes, there were riots across the country when the Lords blocked the Bill in 1831. This would tend to indicate that there was strong working class support for getting it passed, no doubt feeling that it would be the precursor to further reform.

Thomas himself was not a supporter of further reform after 1832, describing John Bright's proposed Reform Bill in 1859 as 'trash'. This highlights the fact that Thomas was more Whig than liberal. He did not believe in the rights of man, nor agree with the arguments of John Locke or Thomas Paine.

The other great cause of Macaulay's time was free trade, a topic which Hall only mentions in the context of whether sugar produced by slaves should be treated equally with that produced by the emancipated. For Hall, everything
needs to be treated in the imperial context. And in her eyes, all shades of nineteenth century opinion were guilty of not recognising the value of 'the other', and held many views which are now regarded as 'tropes'. 'Other' and 'trope' are fast becoming the most clichéd words in contemporary academic writing. Surely there are better ways of expressing oneself than writing that 'Tom's mind was replete with images of otherness.'

For Hall, any Western attempt to change traditional behaviour in a colonial context is a failure to appreciate 'the other'. Hence, there is no acknowledgement that the imperial administration banning sati, the burning of Indian widows, was a good thing. Of course, today we might regard as wrong the position Thomas Macaulay took in his 1835 'Minute on Indian Education' to make English the language of education in India rather than the native languages, but it is worth acknowledging that it was done with at least partially liberal instincts in the 1830s.

There is often a sense in Hall's book that Thomas Macaulay cannot win, whether as political reformer or Whig historian. For instance, Hall criticises his history for having 'little interest in the details of war or warfare' and argues that thus 'the horror and terror of war was distanced'. In most cases, contemporary left-wing academic historians tend to claim that there has been too much focus on military matters in traditional histories, so this is at least a novel line of attack.

Yet, for all its ideological baggage, this book does have strengths. Hall correctly identifies sibling relationships as an under-studied feature of history. Her descriptions of Thomas' relationships with his favourite sisters, Hannah and Margaret, are fascinating and Thomas' view that their marrying was akin to death provides the basis for much absorbing psychological analysis. The language and content of the letters between the three provide a wonderful insight into the period.

The quality of some of this material, plus the range of insights into Thomas Macaulay's character, makes this a worthwhile contribution to the understanding of an important nineteenth century figure. The chapters on Zachary are also interesting, but what Hall writes about him is unlikely to convince her readers that he had any unusually large influence over his son, or was in any substantial way the architect of Empire. And her political point about the Macaulays and the post 9/11 world is even less persuasive.