

Ciaran Brady. *James Anthony Froude: An Intellectual Biography of a Victorian Prophet*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. ISBN: 978-0-19-966803-8. Price: US\$65.00//£40.00.

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One of those names to swim periodically into the ken of the Victorianist—one of those graceful, assured voices that make up the background hum of Victorian intellectual culture—James Anthony Froude never quite seems to be the focus of scholarly attention in his own right. Ciaran Brady, in this beautifully balanced study of Froude, suggests that “in face of our difficulty with taking him whole, we have in general sought to fragment him, calling on his services in several different but always minor ways” (4). Indeed, the list of illustrative purposes for which Froude (whether in the form of his representative Victorian experiences or his representative Victorian writings) is wheeled in by teachers and writers on the period is lengthy, and astonishingly varied. *The Nemesis of Faith* (1849), while unreadable as a novel, could hardly be more useful as a summary of the spiritual and moral crisis that beset this generation of young, specifically Oxford, men. The scandal it provoked (in particular the irresistible account of the sub-rector of Froude’s college burning a copy of the book before fellows and undergraduates in hall) enacts the divisions and anxieties associated with this issue at the time. As a survivor of childhood brutality at home and at public school; a zealous campaigner against cruelty to animals; the writer of “one of the most realistic brothel scenes in Victorian fiction” (156) in his early story “The

Lieutenant's Daughter"; sometime-acolyte of Newman, and both disciple and gatekeeper to the great Carlyle in his later years, he lived many of the stereotypes and contradictions of his period. This is without even touching on his primary vocation as an historian, or his most controversial role as Carlyle's biographer, in which capacity he was to pen one of the classic formulations of the Victorian crisis of faith:

It was an era of new ideas, of swift if silent spiritual revolution ... all round us the intellectual lightships had broken from their moorings ... The present generation which has grown up in an open spiritual ocean ... will never know what it was to find the lights all drifting, the compasses all awry, and nothing left to steer by except the stars. (374)

While Brady covers all of these disparate aspects of Froude's history, many of them far more than competently, the payoff for "taking him whole" is considerable. The challenge of Froude as biographical subject, and the great achievement of Brady's book, is the forging of a coherent narrative that encompasses and makes sense of the multitude of apparent contradictions and anomalies which constitute the rule, rather than the exception, in Froude's life and work. This prickly and seemingly erratic figure, taken piecemeal, can serve either as a pioneer of modern, source-based historical research, or as a polemical history-writer in the most populist and jingoistic vein. His enlightened advocacy of a more equal and integrated British Commonwealth is flecked with both casual and calculated racism of the ugliest kind, and his treatment of Ireland, which "features in his work more centrally than in that of any other Victorian intellectual" (74), manages at the same time to acknowledge the

spectacular political and moral failure of English rule, and to insist on its historical necessity, both in the past and for the foreseeable future. Indeed, Brady notes that “[a]t one time or another almost everyone in British public life had good reason to feel mortally offended by Froude” (3). He espoused a far-reaching latitudinarianism with regard to world religions and theological speculation at home, but gave vent to virulent anti-Catholic sentiment throughout his career—except, of course, when he didn’t. He preached the necessary self-effacement of the public moralist, but in this same capacity assumes a domineering authorial voice in all of his writings. His apparent swerve from *enfant terrible* as the writer of *Nemesis of Faith* and other scandalous, free-thinking fictions, to a kind of radical Toryism as editor of *Fraser’s Magazine* in the 1860s and early 1870s, and Regius Professor of History at Oxford in the final few years of his life, is a trajectory shared by many of Froude’s contemporaries—but one the inconsistency of which, in this case, Brady calls into question.

For Brady, everything in his subject that appears, at first glance, capricious or dissonant or irreconcilable proves instead a site of more fruitful engagement with this self-appointed Victorian prophet. The many points of seeming contradiction in Froude’s character and published corpus furnish Brady with material for the construction of a remarkable coherence that is the most striking feature of the book. As Brady traces the key themes and tenets of Froude’s thinking through the several stages of his intellectual development, and the myriad incarnations of his public voice, the reader comes to accept—and confidently anticipate—that each new departure in tone, mode, or subject for Froude will only confirm the central set of convictions and concerns that animate his sundry endeavours from start to finish. In keeping with his own youthful battles with theological and moral uncertainty, these convictions center

around what Froude conceived of as the dilemma of his age: the difficulty—and the absolute moral imperative—for individuals, within the flux of historical forces grasped by most only imperfectly, subject to the deficiencies and limitations of personal inheritance and circumstance, and cut off by the decline of a vital system of religious belief from a sense of the eternal significance and purpose of human life, of discovering and fulfilling that most Victorian of tasks, their duty.

In light of the successive failures of established religion, philosophical speculation, and the modes of communication tested by Froude himself in his early writings (notably hagiography and fiction) to effect the moral regeneration of English individuals and society, Froude turned to history as the sole remaining means, in a time of spiritual decay, of demonstrating the workings of the divine in the temporal world, and the enormous historical consequences that hinge upon the actions or inaction of individuals. This very modern prophet sought to recreate for his readers “the moral difficulties inherent in being alive and sentient amidst the processes of history” (230), and to combat the confusion and convulsions of his age by imparting a sense of this complexity “as the essential human condition which threatened every generation and every individual with bewilderment, paralysis, and failure, and from which there was no escape but unflinching personal commitment and vigorous individual action” (436). Froude may have fashioned himself, “in the great age of history-writing that dawned in the years after 1850,” into “a master historian, an original researcher who worked primarily with archival sources” (22); but he wrote history neither to establish an objective account of past events, nor to come down on one side or the other of the historical debates raging in his own day. His goals in everything he produced throughout his long public career were openly and profoundly moral. With an especial focus on the cataclysmic changes of the Reformation—from

his monumental *History of England* (1856-70) to the late *Divorce of Catherine of Aragon* (1891)—Froude fought a “campaign to revitalise the moral fibre of doubting Protestant Englishmen” (216), and issued via historical displacement one long, continual challenge to his readers: “how were you, in your time, in your benighted circumstances, and with your limited capabilities, how were you going to act now?” (230).

Brady’s biography does, and does superlatively, what it says on the tin: it is, specifically, an *intellectual* biography, and of a Victorian *prophet*. The sincerity of Froude’s desire to be useful to his own generation, having himself emerged from the mental and spiritual fog that beset so many of his contemporaries, by sharing his own insight into the workings of history and the all-importance of human action within it seems beyond dispute. Brady demonstrates compellingly that amidst the “mutating ventriloquism” (x) of Froude’s monumental corpus is to be found a singleness of purpose that restores coherence—as well as an unlooked-for courage and integrity—to its ever-changing and frequently manipulative rhetoric. Brady is everywhere in this volume the enemy of the generalization, the over-simplification, the too-easy account, and his nuanced readings of Froude’s essays in particular, charting the various transitions in his public persona and interventions, are wonderfully persuasive. Despite an unfortunate number of stray apostrophes, inconsistently spelled names, and similar typos (one unfortunate slip has Froude’s letter of application to a history professorship at Oxford in 1862 failing to convince the appointment board of “the seriousness of his interest in the past”—rather than the post (234n3)), the book is a consummate guide through Froude’s labyrinthine and (to modern sensibilities) occasionally repellent work, which is deftly summarised and judiciously quoted throughout. Tantalising glimpses of Froude the man—such as Elizabeth Gaskell’s

account of his “magical, magnetic, glamour-like influence” (166)—are firmly subordinated to Froude as historian, biographer, editor, travel-writer, and (in and through all) prophet. Despite the “abnormal degree of private bereavement” Froude experienced, for example, with the loss of a mother, multiple siblings, two beloved wives, and three children, this suffering hardly registers in Brady’s account—inescapably, it seems, as Froude himself wrote very little about his personal life in any form and, even in the autobiographical reflections he composed in his final years, self-disclosure “was at least as much a means of furthering larger moral and social objectives” as an end in itself (60). *James Anthony Froude* is, decisively and even inevitably, an intellectual biography, of a Victorian prophet never off duty.

This biographical study of Froude is important for precisely the reason it has been so long in coming: the fact that “Froude has continued to stand as awkwardly in relation to us as he did to his contemporaries” (4). With his not infrequently repugnant views, the utter seriousness with which he took his public role, and his persistent engagement with questions we somehow no longer consider as falling within the scope of intellectual culture, Froude does not sit comfortably with us. His description of Erasmus, whose nature it was “to heat the water wherever he was” (444), holds true of Froude both for his own time and for ours. The scholarly temptation to study only the congenial has its sops in Froude—for example, in the satisfyingly representative course Froude navigates throughout his career between the perceived Scylla (in the form of Newmanism and, more broadly, a threatening reversion to Catholicism) and Charybdis (the slippery moral slope of perpetual agnosticism or even atheism) of his age—but the recurrent discomfort of the undertaking brings greater rewards. It is perhaps at the points of greatest divergence between our own age and that of the Victorians that we gain the hardest-won, least intuitive insights into both. Victorian to

the last, Froude's dying words (who now voices final words?), from Genesis 18:25—
“Shall not the judge of all the earth do right?”—bespeak the profound independence
of his life, and defy us to pigeonhole or dismiss him too readily.

Biographical Notice:

Natasha Moore received her PhD from the University of Cambridge in 2012 and has held research fellowships at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, the University of Sydney, and the University of Delaware. She is currently a Research Fellow with the Centre for Public Christianity in Sydney, Australia, and is also working on a literary-biographical study of nineteenth-century Anglo-Irish poet and critic William Allingham.