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THE SEARCH FOR THE FIRST EARL OF WHARTON

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NOTE

The following essay on the theory and practice of historical biography was delivered as a speech at the Huntington Library; hence the format. The author, Dr. J. Kent Clark, is currently working on a biography of Thomas, 5th Baron, 1st Earl, and 1st Marquess of Wharton; hence the illustrations.

THE SEARCH FOR THE FIRST EARL OF WHARTON

J. Kent Clark

A couple of years ago I spoke briefly to this group about some of my adventures in constructing the biography of a magnificent 17th-century eccentric named Goodwin Wharton and about some of the general problems, rewards, and punishments that go with the trade of writing historical biography. I hope that you were all here for that talk and that you remember every word I said. Unfortunately, I seem to have been only half here, and while I no doubt said many true and memorable things (speaking ad lib and without notes from a vast and scarifying experience), I can't remember one of my words with absolute certainty. This odd blank, by the way, should be a lesson to all the historians and biographers here today. Since, ultimately, historical biography is the art of constructing men and women out of pieces of paper, the only words that really count are those that are written down. If, therefore, you are tempted to say anything true, memorable, significant, or even interesting, you had better get it down on paper — or tape, at the very least — if, that is, you care anything about the poor devil who may want to reconstruct you or use you as a frightening example of late 20th century decadence.

Warned by my own error, I have *written* today's speech, and I want to begin it by summarizing some of the things I *hope* I said last time when we were discussing the process of recreating the bizarre and implausible life of Goodwin Wharton. Then we will take up some of the special problems in recreating his brother Tom — or, more formally, Thomas, 5th Baron, 1st Earl, and 1st Marquess of Wharton — Prince of the Whigs, Scandal of the Tories, Revolutionary, Defender of the Faithless, and Promotor of the Hanoverian Succession.

The first thing I hope I said is that from one point of view biography is the only serious (not solemn but serious) subject in the world — and certainly the most fascinating. Since what ultimately matters is the quality of individual human lives, the attempt to understand those lives, reconstruct them, and render them relatively permanent becomes almost hysterically important. Let me add in passing that there are no uninteresting or insignificant

lives; there are only incompetent writers and inadequate information.

The next thing I hope I did last time was to quote a wonderful line from Voltaire, who was himself a historical biographer. "History," he said, "is a pack of tricks we play on the dead." This cynical wisecrack, a synoptic horror story, gives us the clue to all biographical virtue. The object of the game is *not* to play tricks on the dead. As biographers, we want to tell the truth and nothing but the truth — and though we know in advance we can't tell the *whole* truth, we want to give a crisp, condensed approximation. I hardly need add that this is a formidable and frustrating task, for while truth is not necessarily stranger than fiction (except perhaps in the case of Goodwin Wharton), it is several orders of magnitude more complicated. Once we get down below the large-order generalizations (sometimes wrong) of history into the multitudinous and random clutter of individual human experience, we usually find ourselves in very deep water and often in very deep trouble — if I may mix a metaphor or two.

If we are not going to play tricks on the dead, the first thing we have to do (as I hope I said last time) is to convince not only our brains but our corpuscles that our protagonists were actually alive — like our personal friends and acquaintances. This statement probably sounds a little silly, and in theory it *is* silly. Of course, historical figures were alive. In practice however, it is difficult *not* to treat historical figures as abstractions — as paper symbols or as characters in plays or novels, to be juggled around at the convenience of the writer. In practice, we must constantly (or at least once in a while) jerk ourselves out of the world of abstractions and achieve a sort of gestalt perception of our protagonists and the people that surround them; and we are constantly looking for the documents, the places, and the events that collapse time, give us the immediacy we need, and make our characters breathe.

If all this sounds abstruse and eggheaded, let me assure you that it is very simple and commonsensical — analogous, incidentally, to the process of reconstructing ourselves as we were, say, thirty years ago. Let me give you some examples from my adventures in reconstructing Tom Wharton. If you go to the British National Portrait Gallery (and if you don't, you have wasted a trip to London) and if you start on the top floor, which holds the earliest portraits, and work your way through your old friends to the early eighteenth century, you will come upon a small room entirely devoted to Sir Godfrey Kneller's portraits of the Whig Kit-kat Club. There they are in their full Louis-XIV-style wigs, the patriots

(says Horace Walpole) who saved England and who (as Walpole doesn't say) helped to make self evident certain political truths that weren't evident at all until they had chased King James out of England and helped King William and the Duke of Marlborough stop Louis XIV, wig and all. (It is only fair to add that Samuel Johnson, who thought that the first Whig was the devil, the second the Earl of Shaftesbury, and the third Tom Wharton, might have described these gentlemen as a cabal of "bottomless" unchanged rogues.) One of the elegant Kneller portraits — second from the top in the northeast corner last time I looked — is the picture of Tom (then merely 5th Baron Wharton) as he was at the age of about fifty. With his handsome unlined face and his faultless velvet coat he looks every inch the cool, competent aristocrat — the man whom a Whig spy named Macky described as "the finest gentleman in Europe." Kneller is the foremost portraitist of his age, and his picture of Tom is very probably accurate. This is indeed how Tom might have looked at a formal court function at Kensington or a reception at his town houses in Chelsea or Dover Street. But if Kneller's portrait is priceless to a biographer — giving him that vital jolt of recognition — it is also very deceptive (and a textbook example of the old saying: one picture demands a thousand words). Just to look at the portrait one might never dream that its subject was what Lord Macaulay would call an "emancipated precisian," what the Earl of Stanhope would call an old Roman, an English Brutus, or what Jonathan Swift would call a "universal villain." Tom's face, in fact, belies a great line once written about it — a line in a verse sometimes attributed to Tom himself and composed before he inherited the barony from his pious Presbyterian father, the fourth Lord Wharton. The verse goes like this:

May it please God to shorten the life of Lord Wharton
 And set up his son in his place,
 Who'll drink and who'll whore
 And a hundred things more
 With a grave and fanatical face.

Alas for wit (even if it should be Tom's), the face that looks out from the Kneller portrait is anything but fanatical. It is calm, tolerant, and self assured — the face of a veteran tactician and debater in the Commons and the House of Lords and of a man probably beyond surprise. As Kneller transports us, momentarily, back into the first years of the 18th century, we see Tom in one of his most important roles — as a lord of the famous Whig Junto.

But if we want immediacy — and we do — we can sometimes get it better from places than from pictures, or even primary documents. Many of the places that Tom, for instance, frequented not only exist still, but exist relatively unchanged; and for me, at least, nothing collapses time more effectively than standing in a significant spot and finding it recognizable. Perhaps my best day as a biographer came at Camaret Bay, near Brest, in France when I stood in the still-extant tower fortress constructed by Marshall Vauban and looked out over the gun emplacements from which, on 8 June 1694, the French cannoneers were firing at my flaky protagonist Goodwin and his redcoated friends, as the British were botching an amphibious assault — rowing ashore under the fire of more than 200 guns. As I stood there, the strategy and the tactics became instantly understandable, and (much more important) the whole episode became indelibly real. I could practically smell the powder and the fear.

If we were to choose the place that Tom Wharton himself loved best, we would probably take the race track at Newmarket, where he and his friends gathered every spring and fall during two or three weeks of racing and where one fine day in 1699 his great horse Careless won a tremendous match race. (It is a good philosophic question, incidentally, whether anyone who has not had saddle sores can hope to understand Tom Wharton.) But modern Newmarket is so different from the place that Tom and King William knew that except during an actual race we might find ourselves more distracted there than educated. In recalling Tom, we would probably do better to go to the top of a hill in Upper Winchendon, Buckinghamshire, where his favorite manor house once stood and where the parish church still stands. If we look northwest from Winchendon, we see Quanton Meadows, where Tom had a race track of his own and where every August he hosted the Bucks racing crowd and his political cronies. If we look eastward we see Aylesbury, the site of the County elections and of some of Tom's most dramatic political battles — and of one of his duels. If we merely look around us, we see the fields and meadows virtually unchanged since 1673, when some of them were enumerated in Tom's marriage contract with Anne Lee. The church too is practically unchanged, though it is no longer used as an active parish church, and of course it is very significant. Tom obviously liked it. He appointed its rectors; he heard many sermons there; and he chose to be buried there instead of down at Wooburn with his father and mother, his maternal ancestors, and most of his brothers and sisters, including Goodwin. Both his wives, Anne and Lucy, are buried at Winchendon, as is his favorite brother Henry, who died in the epidemic of typhus that swept the English army at Dundalk in the Irish campaign of 1689. (The letters from Henry's fellow officers about his death and about shipping his body home are still extant.) Nevertheless, for me, the church does not evoke

Tom very well — not, I hasten to add, because Tom’s life was as scandalous as, say, Charles Second’s or because Tom spent his adult life combatting the claims of the Anglican Church to monopolize the religious and political life of England, but simply because Tom does not make a very convincing corpse. He was so kinetic during his life that I have a hard time imagining him dead. Stone memorials seem irrelevant.

Before we leave significant places, we are probably honor-bound to visit the House of Commons, where Tom sat as an MP from 1673 to 1696, and the House of Lords, where he served from 1696 to 1715. Although the actual chambers that Tom frequented, and occasionally dominated, were destroyed by fire in the early 1830s, the 19th-century replacements are close enough to the originals to give us a feeling for the operation — including the crucial fact that MPs still *face* their opponents, and still profess to doubt their brains, their morals, and their motives. Since Tom was a trenchant and witty debater, some of his speeches and miscellaneous wisecracks have come down to us in spite of the strict parliamentary rule which then existed against publishing debates of the Houses. For invoking Tom, we can hardly do better than to repeople the House of Lords as it existed on January 2, 1712, when twelve new Tory lords, created in a single batch by Queen Anne to overturn the Whig majority, were introduced one by one into the House. After the elaborate ritual and after the twelve had taken their places on the barons’ bench, Tom arose and with a suitably grave face asked them if they intended to vote by their foreman. It is a great one-liner, of course, one of the best in parliamentary history; and the episode reminds us that during Tom’s lifetime the definition of political felicity was being changed. When Tom first sat in the Commons, happiness was the favor of Charles Second; but when he sat in the Lords at the beginning of George I’s reign, happiness was a solid parliamentary majority. The divine right of kings was well on its way to becoming the divine right of committees. Unfortunately, the place that best symbolizes Tom’s lifetime efforts to construct parliamentary majorities (which are not confected on the *floor* of the Houses) no longer exists. It was a place called the Rose Tavern near Covent Garden, on the corner of Russell Street and Drury Lane. During the 1680s and 90s it was the favorite haunt of Whig conspirators and politicians, and if it still existed, we would be morally obligated to drink a toast there, in good Whig port, to King William and Revolution Principles.

For one final illustration of a point that is intuitively obvious (as they say at Caltech) — that places help to evoke people — let’s try Caen, in Normandy, where as boys Tom and Goodwin spent two years under the hyper-Puritan tutelage of Theophilus Gale and of his

only slightly more relaxed successor Abraham Clifford, and where both men worried lest Tom, who was always personable and who attracted many friends, should be corrupted by French manners and morals and lest he should somehow meet French girls. Modern Caen has spilled over across the Orne river, and the artillery of World War II has not done it any good. Nevertheless, the high street (La Grande Rue), where the boys lived is still there, and so is the citadel, where Tom studied military architecture (and from which, incidentally, William the Conqueror set out to invade England). And it isn't any trouble to visualize the scene on a morning in 1665 when the boys (Tom 16 and Goodwin 13) and their entourage set off for Paris. A crowd of French lads, perhaps Tom's first constituents, showed up to see him off. Goodwin, trying to attract his share of the attention, made his horse rear and promptly fell off. And Abraham Clifford, after ascertaining that Goodwin was uninjured, led his charges out of town, thanking heaven that they had escaped from Caen unhurt and unsullied.

Since places are so important, it is almost the definition of a historical biographer that he goes around with two sets of maps in his head — current maps and period maps — maps of how things are and how they were. Let me say in passing that the Huntington Library has some huge and priceless maps of the Paris of 1665-66 when Tom and Goodwin lived on La Rue des Boucheries, near Saint-Germain-des-Prés. It is also the definition of a biographer that he worries about time in odd ways — not merely because he must try to collapse it (make himself and his readers contemporaries of his characters) or because he must deal with the old style method of dating, but also because he must accustom himself to a world where the fastest means of transportation — and transmission of news — is the saddle horse, and where English news from the Continent is at the mercy of the wind. Word of the death of Carlos II of Spain, for example, an event that ultimately led to a bloody European war, did not reach England for more than ten days. In the world of the Whartons, the biographical question is not merely when an event took place but also when the crucial characters learned about it.

If places and time sequences help a biographer visualize scenes and order them chronologically, his primary reliance is nevertheless on documents — on pieces of paper that explain people and events and that make places and times significant. In a very real sense constructing historical biography is a paper chase — low-grade detective work — and the constantly recurring question is how to find the right pieces of paper. I hope all this is blindingly obvious, but let me give you some examples from my own anxieties. Since in biography as in modern court trials what we want is eyewitness accounts and not hearsay

evidence (and since, incidentally, the rules of evidence are essentially the same in biography and law), what biographers treasure most of all is personal letters, journals, and diaries. The finest document, by several light years, that I ever saw is Goodwin Wharton's autobiography/journal, now in the British Library — roughly half a million words of convoluted, diffracted, and sometimes outrageous self revelation, along with many important historical facts. But there are many other valuable Wharton documents that have survived the hazards of time and chance. We still have, to name a few precious things, the correspondence between Lord Wharton and the boys' tutors when Tom and Goodwin were in France — as well as four or five letters from the boys to their father and to their sisters Anne and Mary. We have the correspondence between Lord Wharton and several Dissenting ministers who were trying to arrange marriages for Tom and Goodwin. We have the long and detailed marriage contract between Tom and Anne Lee Wharton — 72 pages (as transcribed by Carol Pearson) of information about Wharton properties — a treasure roughly equivalent to a copy of Lord Wharton's income tax for 1673. I am currently transcribing the letters that Tom wrote when he was Lord Lieutenant of Ireland to his friend Sunderland, who was then the English Secretary of State. The Huntington Library owns a printed copy of Tom's will, which was published immediately after his death, and it also owns a copy of the vivid and admiring memoir written shortly afterwards — which contains a wonderful description of Tom electioneering on the streets of High Wycombe.

But it is the iron law of historical biography that the documents that remain are few and scattering compared with the ones that are unwritten, destroyed, or unfindable. The first corollary of this grim fact is that frustration is the natural state of the biographer; and the second corollary is that an expert researcher can find anything but what he is looking for and what he truly needs. Nothing illustrates this law better than the problems of dealing with Tom Wharton. From one point of view there is a fearful and backbreaking embarrassment of riches. Since Tom was in every major political battle from 1673, when he was elected for Wendover, through the smashing triumph of the Whig party in the election of 1715, the Journals of the House of Commons and of the House of Lords, the scraps of debate that are preserved from the period, and the supporting papers from the bills, both public and private, that came before Parliament are all primary documents. They record a great deal of Tom's first-hand experience, and of course they simply must be read and understood by Tom's biographer. This in turn means reading all the relevant secondary sources — great historians like Macaulay, Trevelyan, and Churchill; fine contemporary scholars like Horwitz, Holmes, Cruickshanks, Baxter, and Bennet; competent biographers like Plumb, Haley, Kenyon, and

Hatton; sharp technicians like Rogers and Speck; and something like a battalion of earnest young scholars — one of whom, this very minute, may be writing a monograph that I really ought to see on the defeat of the Abjuration Bill in 1690.

Obviously relevant and vital too is the vast array of political pamphlets, squibs, lampoons, poems, and books, to say nothing of the memoirs and histories, that were composed during Tom's lifetime or shortly after his death. Tom's age, I should add, understood namecalling and slander excellently well; and if it did not invent political satire, it certainly perfected it — a statement I can illustrate by merely rolling off the names of Dryden, Dorset, Defoe, and Swift (two Tories and two Whigs). This material is essential to understanding the age in general, and it is especially vital for comprehending a political organizer like Tom, who enraged Tories almost beyond endurance and who was practically the embodiment of the emerging (but hotly denied) fact that free government means party government. I hardly need add that Tom himself is the target of much literary flak, including a couple of marvelously witty essays by Swift. Nor do I have to prove that worse things could happen to a biographer than being obliged to read the poetry of the Earl of Dorset.

But the point is that with all this weight of important primary and secondary material — enough for the construction of a ten- or fifteen-volume political opus — there is comparatively little personal correspondence and personal revelation. Tom Wharton, like Yeats's Magi, tends to appear and disappear in the blue depths of the sky. Whereas to write about Goodwin is to be immersed in Goodwin's psyche — something like being thrown into a vat full of eels — writing about Tom usually means seeing him through someone else's eyes — and eyes that are anything but neutral. The problems of understanding Tom are like those of aerial gunnery — calculating deflection shots on a rapidly moving target. This lack of personal documents is relative, of course. We have more letters from Tom than we have from all the Plantagenet kings put together. Nevertheless it would be lovely to have some of the letters that a historical novelist would be compelled to invent — an account, for instance, of the no doubt memorable day when Tom discovered girls and embarked on his notorious career as a rake; some letters to Anne, his talented and poetic first wife, and to Lucy, his second wife, a toast of the Kit-kat Club; a letter to his father when he learned of Henry's death; a letter to his sister Philadelphia about Goodwin's illegitimate son; and a letter written from Yorkshire to his great friend Lord Somers when he learned that Queen Anne had died and that the Whig party was saved.

But let's stop talking about the frustrations of biographical research before you feel impelled to rush home, tear out your telephone, and start writing carefully dated and multicopied letters to all your family and friends. Let's go on instead to a couple of thoughts about writing, which (as we all know) is much more difficult than research. Here the primary fact is that the biographer is writing a story — a true story, to be sure, but a story nevertheless. This means, alas, that all the laws of effective story-telling apply, that biography is not merely a research project but an art, and that a biographer should be literate if possible. Here I think it is useful to make a distinction between *literary*, in the bad sense (meaning pretentious and pseudo-arty), and *literate* or *literary* in the happy sense (meaning well-read and competent with the language). Ideally every biographer would be a poet — not, I hasten to add, because we want him to write in verse, or prettify experience, or (worse yet) cover ignorance with rhetoric, but because we want him to have that extra octave of sensitivity which allows great poets to empathize with their subjects, intuit complex motives, and immortalize transient experience. The Duke of Marlborough once said that he had learned all his English history from Shakespeare's plays, and certainly we could use Shakespeare to recreate Marlborough, Sarah, Godolphin, James, Charles, Jeffreys, Scroggs, William, Talmash, Shrewsbury, Sunderland, Queen Anne, Queen Mary, Cutts, Swift, and Steele and the rest of the vivid characters that wander through Tom's life. In practice, however, great poets — like good men nowadays — are hard to find; and we current biographers will be lucky to have half an octave of sensitivity and to be able to write clear English prose — much less immortal lines. Nevertheless there is a certain level of verbal sophistication and psychological perception that is essential to biography. A historian can do useful work and still be rhetorically tone deaf. In fact I could name a couple of contemporary English historians who could have the words "mental monotone" stamped on their foreheads but who have done some valuable research on the absolutely vital problems of voting patterns in the Revolution period. They are competent, in short, to make an abstract statement like "the real income of the bourgeois rose half of one percent during the reign of Queen Anne" (Don't quote that figure; I made it up); but they would probably read *Gulliver* literally and find it implausible. But a biographer cannot be tone deaf, either literally or figuratively. Music, after all, evokes a period, and for students of the Revolution, it recalls the fact that Henry Purcell wrote the music and Tom Wharton wrote the words to "Lilliburlero" and that between the two of them (as Tom liked to remember) they sang and whistled James II out of three kingdoms.

Granting that our biographer is at least one cut above a monotone and that he has been soaked in the literature, history, and particularly the primary documents of a period for the twenty years or so it takes to get an era worked into the blood stream, he still faces interesting writing problems. One of these is the fact that biographical writing, like the research that precedes it, is a kind of exploration and a reexamination of values. Like all good story telling, the art of biography is the art of significant selection; and as one sits at his typewriter or computer and sweats out the words, he is compelled to make a whole series of judgments on relevance; and just as his research was an attempt to *discover* not *impose*, patterns in a life, so his writing is a review of the process, and if he has any luck at all he will see relationships he didn't really grasp the first time around. This is not at all a mechanical operation, of course, and, as I said, there is a certain amount of serendipity involved. The process, in fact, always reminds me of a wonderful line by Theodore Roethke: "I learn by going where I have to go."

Since a competent historical biographer must have two or three hundred times more material than he can ever use, and since much of it cost him years of research and many hours of frustration, and since he has to be more than slightly addicted to his trade or he wouldn't be a writer in the first place, his constant temptation is to overwrite. In principle, he may agree, as I do, with my friend Robert Rosenstone, biographer of the revolutionist John Reed, that no one should be embalmed in a two-volume biography, but in practice he will find his subject and his period infinitely fascinating and he will find the process of cutting out episodes (as I keep telling my friends) like giving himself an appendectomy with a dull knife. Nevertheless the cutting must be done, and what he needs next to the indexers, bibliographers, and librarians, who are his dearest and truest professional friends, is a good editor. He must always be prepared to sacrifice detail for narrative speed; because, as the song says, he may sometimes be a headache but he must never be a bore.

Since as biographers we are in the business of storytelling, we might take our final clues to the art from Homer, who understood stories extremely well, who wrote *The Odyssey*, the first historical novel (without the aid of the Huntington or the British Library), who was a walking compendium of what purported to be Greek history, and who clearly understood that nothing is more fascinating than lives — that everyone is what he is and also an artifact. There is a lovely scene in *The Odyssey* where Demodocus the minstrel recounts the story of Troy with the slaughter of the heroic young men and all the tragic waste. As the audience sits there sobbing, someone brings up what philosophers call the problem of evil. Why, he

asks, if the gods know what they're doing, do they allow such hideous things to happen. Demodocus answers like a writer, and particularly like a historical biographer. These things are allowed to happen, he says in effect, because they make marvelous stories for later times.

Well, we mustn't end a discussion of constructing biography, which is a messy and tedious process, with poetic lines from Homer, however relevant. Let's come back home. About twelve years ago, I was driving down Hill Avenue when I saw the wittiest bumper sticker I ever saw in my life. It said, THE ONLY ISM FOR ME IS NARCISSISM. I laughed, of course, but I didn't laugh long. I was up to my ears in the problems of Goodwin Wharton, and as I drove on towards the Huntington, I got an idea for a sticker of my own. If I ever get a bumper sticker it will read: THE ONLY ISM FOR ME IS MASOCHISM.