In college and graduate school historiography classes, my professors stressed the flaws in Whiggish writing like Thomas Macaulay’s *History of England since the Accession of James II*. Such works were (and are) considered too narrow-minded and too self-congratulatory of Victorian Britain as the pinnacle of human development. Above all, Macaulay was too present-minded, too inclined to consider the past as interesting only insofar as its people and events contributed to the successes of his own age. To call a historical paper or point of view “Whiggish” has been, in my professional memory, to call it amateurish and lacking in true historical understanding.

Last spring while preparing for a class on John Churchill, the first Duke of Marlborough I came across a reference to how Winston Churchill had written a biography of his illustrious ancestor largely to counteract Thomas
Macaulay’s savaging of Marlborough in his *History of England from the Accession of James II*. I was curious in what terms Macaulay criticized Marlborough, so I took a look the *History*. Luckily for me the edition in our library had no index, so I began sifting through the four volumes looking for references to Marlborough. I found the work irresistible. Not only is it a terrific narrative, it is filled with interesting insights on human nature and historical memory. Here is an example:

It may at first sight seem strange that society, while constantly moving forward with eager speed, should be constantly looking backward with tender regret. But these two propensities, inconsistent as they appear, may easily be resolved into the same principle. Both spring from our impatience with the state in which we actually are. That impatience, while it stimulates us to surpass preceding generations, disposes us to overrate their happiness. It is, in some sense, unreasonable and ungrateful to be discontent with a condition which is constantly improving. But, in truth, there is constant improvement precisely because there is constant discontent. If we were perfectly satisfied with the present, we should cease to contrive, to labour, and to save with a view to the future. And it is natural that, being
dissatisfied with the present, we should form too favorable and estimate of the past. (Vol. I, p. 320).

Not only is this passage well written, but it hints at other elements that are characteristic of Macaulay and that I believe we would do well to emulate in our historical writing and teaching, particularly in survey world history classes.

Before discussing a few of those elements I want stipulate that I fully accept some of the charges made against Macaulay. It was Herbert Butterfield who first made the case against in *The Whig Interpretation of History* published in 1931. Butterfield defines Whiggish history as “…the tendency of many historians to write on the side of Protestants and Whigs, to praise revolutions if they have been successful, to emphasize certain principles of progress in the past and to produce a story which is the ratification if not the glorification of the present.”

In *The History of England*, Macaulay is guilty as charged, but perhaps not to the degree imagined by those who have not read him. He sides with the Anglican Church, but often praises the role of the Catholic Church in history
and condemns the persecution of its followers in Britain. He sides with the moderate Whigs, but defends with verve and respect the moderate Tory point of view. He reserves his highest praise for those who, like Lord Halifax and William of Orange, see beyond party loyalties and philosophies.

But the charge that Macaulay was partisan is less telling, at least to professional historians, than that he was guilty of what we would call “presentism,” that he judges the past based on how much it resembles, or contributed to, the present. Butterfield’s greatest work is in the history of science, and in that field his critique of presentism, was invaluable. Until Butterfield’s time most historians of science were retired scientists with no historical education, or the writers of science textbooks who wanted, usually in an opening chapter of a text, to honor historical figures who had contributed directly to current ideas. Butterfield’s articulation of the concept of Whiggish history was thus an important episode in the professionalization of the history of science. Since Butterfield's day, historians of science have sought to understand the broader context in which the “great men” of science of worked and have shown in dramatic and interesting ways that the process by which science has progressed is far more complex that was once imagined.
On Progress:

While it is widely agreed that natural science has been broadly cumulative and progressive, the same consensus does not exist as to the progressive character of history as a whole. Macaulay, however, has no doubts. It is true, as Butterfield charges, that Macaulay sees Victorian England of his own day as the culmination of a progressive historical process. He has no doubt that life in England in the mid-19th century is vastly better than it was in 1685, and not just for the upper classes. Virtually everyone benefited. And he makes his case with typical vividness; in discussing statistics on public health, Macaulay makes the telling point that the difference in general healthfulness between London in the 19th century and the 17th century was actually greater than that between London in ordinary times and London in the midst of a cholera epidemic. Let’s restate that: 19th century London in the midst of a cholera epidemic was healthier than that 17th century London in ordinary times. A characteristically vivid Macaulay comparison.

Macaulay is indeed an enthusiastic believer in human progress. For him, human history has a direction, and to write history is to chart its course. This is one of the underlying strengths of his narrative.
The twentieth century stands between Mr. Macaulay and ourselves. Having experienced two world wars, the holocaust, the nuclear terror and the killing fields of Cambodia, we are uneasy about progressive views of history. I believe we need to reconsider that stance. Looking, not just at England, but across the globe, it is impossible to resist the conclusion that human beings as a whole live, healthier, safer, more comfortable and more abundant lives at the beginning of the 21st century than they did at the beginning of the 19th. The same sort of progress, often interrupted but eventually recurring, occurred in earlier ages. Not only is this point of view well established by much scholarship, it is the near universal point of view of our students. The time has long passed when Americans of college age imagine that life was better in some romanticized period of the past than it is today. More likely, our students shutter at the thought of life without HBO. An explicitly progressive version of world history would reach our students where they already are. And it would challenge us to explain how so much suffering and tragedy accompany a broadly progressive narrative.

On Particularism:
Though Macaulay believed in progress, he comes very suspiciously close to suggesting that only Englishmen are capable of it. A Neo-Whiggish history would, in this regard, stand many of Macaulay ideas on their head. When Macaulay wrote, only the British had experienced both the industrial revolution, and stable constitutional government with assured civil liberties. Perhaps his exaggerated confidence in Englishness is to be expected. A century and a half later, we know better. It is now completely obvious that the development of the complex, highly specialized societies of the modern era was not the achievement of one society or race. Rather it was made possible by a gradual building of more and more social cooperation and peaceful competition within and between societies, and through extensive and regular exchanges of ideas across and among cultures.

Nevertheless, the achievement of the amazing levels of specialization in today’s advanced societies (i.e., modernization) is indeed the culmination of the historical process to date. That is the neo-Whiggish master narrative, a narrative of great, though not always glorious, achievement. It is not the achievement of any one culture, but a product of the interaction of brave people and brilliant ideas from many cultures. Nor does progress come without costs, for in the crush of modernization, positive as it is overall,
much has been lost. Often the losses are poignant and really quite undeserved. There is no place in this version of the master narrative of human history for expressions of the ultimate superiority of any one nationality, ethnic group or religious tradition.

Darwinian, not Newtonian:
The view of world history I propose is Darwinian, not Newtonian. That is, it does not suppose that some pre-determined plan gives history its direction. Though there is a master narrative, there is no master. Rather progress has occurred because greater social cooperation and increased social and economic specialization lead to greater efficiency in dealing with nature as well as in competition with other societies. To use Durkheim’s phrase, society is a collective adaptation mechanism. Societies with wider social cooperation and specialization have, over time, prevailed over more particularist and closed-minded rivals. That is a central message of the neo-Whiggish master narrative and an important way it can “transcend boundaries” for our students. But again I stress that the particular character of better-adapted societies is not pre-determined and is a product of a highly contingent, and often dramatic process. We call that process World History.
An Amateur’s Flair:

Thomas Macaulay is an old fashioned narrative historian. After years of reading mostly textbooks and specialized articles, I found this remarkably refreshing. Though the progressive direction of his narrative is clear, the precise path of that narrative is highly uncertain and often a function of the quirky interplay of complex human beings. Macaulay cares deeply about individuals and their complicated motives. In this way too, his sort of history would speak to our students with their busy, complicated lives. His portraits are colorful and filled with funny and revealing anecdotes. He sees great events as a test of character, a test that many fail. He enjoys musing about human frailty and human greatness, and often notes how frequently both heroes and villains have both qualities. He believes we often fail to appreciate that civilization has softened human character and made us kinder and more humane (Vol. I, p. 318). He is, then, an advocate for a liberal view of the human condition, as well as for the idea of progress. In all of these things, Macaulay betrays himself as an amateur, writing before the professionalization history, before the deadening effect of too many theoretical models, too many statistics and, perhaps, too many historical
conferences. That is precisely why Macaulay’s his sort of writing could make world history come alive for our students.

Conclusion:
In his recent AHR review article on macrohistory (April 2001) Gale Stokes observes that the broad-ranging studies under review, while valuable, cannot replace specialized monographic studies. “Marcohistorical works,” Stokes writes, “will never supplant the narrower monographic studies that constitute the solid basis of the academic historical profession…. because without monographic studies there are no resources for metahistorical works that cut across languages, cultures and centuries [to draw upon].”

In the same way a confident, colorful narrative of the sort that Tom Macaulay wrote can never replace the meticulous scholarship and measured conclusions of professional historians. But as a way of “telling” the broad and complex tale world history, as a way of recapturing our students’ interest in that huge subject, an updated version of Macaulay’s progressive, personal, narrative style, might not be a bad idea.