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JOHN BAGNELL BURY was born in the county of Monaghan on 14 October 1861; he died in Rome on 1 June 1927. His father, the Rev. Edward John Bury, rector of Clontibret and afterwards Canon of Clogher, had married Miss Rogers, of Monaghan. She was 'a very clever woman and a great reader', while his father was a sound classical scholar. J. B. Bury was educated at Foyle College, Londonderry, and at the age of seventeen entered Trinity College, Dublin. In 1879 before the close of his first session he obtained first place in the examination for Classical Scholarships which was open to students of all years. In 1880 Bury spent six months at the University of Göttingen studying Sanskrit under Benfey as well as Syriac and Hebrew. In September of that year he visited Italy. In 1881 he collaborated with Mahaffy in an edition of the *Hippolytus* of Euripides: 'the labour of sifting the materials and composing the notes', wrote Mahaffy, 'has mainly been undertaken by Mr. Bury; but in the critical suggestions, the illustrations and the opinions propounded we have always worked conjointly and have each of us tested every vexed question independently'. That is a remarkable tribute when paid to an undergraduate. Bury, it is essential to remember, was a classical scholar before he became a historian. At the Honours Degree Examination of 1882 Bury obtained a double First with first place in Classics and fourth in Mental and Moral Philosophy.

In these early days at Dublin Bury's interest was not only enthusiastic, but many-sided. Poetry, philosophy, and music were all alike pursued alongside of his classical studies. Hegel exercised a profound influence upon him, and that influence can constantly be traced in the work of his maturity. Swinburne's poetry he knew by heart, and, though in later years the Hellenist might feel that in the troubled passion of Swinburne there was a danger for one

who would attempt to recover the temperate εὐφροσύνη of the mind of Hellas, Bury could never escape from the haunting echoes of those songs of revolt. The whole corpus of Browning's work he had read with loving care, and the paper on 'Browning's Philosophy' which he read to the Browning Society in 1882 is of primary importance, for nowhere else in his published work can one see, as here, that background which underlay the conscious reserve of Bury's historical writing. The objective poet fulfils his function of finding and showing to man the truth by presenting in poetical dress nature and life as they immediately seem to be: the subjective poet by acts of insight apprehends transcendent Truth—'not what man sees, but what God sees—the Ideas of Plato, seeds of creation lying burningly on the Divine Hand—it is towards these that he struggles.' But there is a danger that the reader, after sharing for a moment in this rapt experience of the subjective poet and sinking again to the light of common day, may doubt whether the vision were not an illusive dream. Browning avoids this danger: in his work he stands revealed as at once a subjective and objective poet: he supplies mediating links between experience and the absolute Truth and thus meets our need, the need of a poet who will use understanding as well as insight. Just because the individual side of Browning's thought is prominent in his poetry, it is the more essential to emphasize the universal context in which Browning's individualism is anchored. It was this universal context which Bury studied in this remarkable paper, a study culminating in the correlation of Love and Beauty as of *absolute* significance. Sir Almroth Wright remembers that Browning writing to Bury described him as 'one of whom I have heard but lately, but henceforth am little likely to forget'.

After taking his degree Bury worked for his Fellowship, and this as the result of a period of concentrated study he obtained in 1885: in September of the same year he married his second cousin Jane Bury, and together they travelled in

North Italy. A projected visit to Greece was prevented by an epidemic and a consequent threat of quarantine. He now became a frequent contributor to the learned journals. A paper read before the Royal Irish Academy in 1886 is significant: it presaged those works upon the administration of the later Roman Empire on which Bury's European reputation was securely founded.[1]

In 1887 Bury learned Russian, and in 1888 his Byzantine studies leave their trace in his published work: he contributed a paper on 'The Chronology of Theophylaktos Simokatta' to the *English Historical Review*. In the year 1889 Bury published his two amazing volumes of pioneer work, the *History of the Later Roman Empire*, and the classical scholar thus established his position as a student of history. In 1890 there appeared his edition of Pindar's Nemean Odes, which was followed in 1892 by his edition of the Isthmian Poems. The reader who will compare these editions with the *History of the Later Roman Empire* will best appreciate the sacrifice which Bury made to his ideal of scientific historiography. His passionate love of poetry, of the music of words and cadences, the free play of fancy and imagination which are everywhere manifest in his commentary on Pindar are sternly banished from his historical writing: imagination, if released, might refuse to be confined within the narrow bounds marked out by sources which were often painfully restricted in their range. Loyalty to those sources imposed a rigorous self-denial. 'What distinguishes the historian from the poet and the novelist is that the material with which he deals is confined strictly to what are known as "facts"—to deeds that have really been done, thoughts and feelings that have really been experienced by living men in times past. The poet and the novelist draw inspiration from these too; but while they may allow themselves to forget and transmute, to "shatter and remould"

[1] Paper read before the Royal Irish Academy (December 13, 1886) on *The Praetorian Praefects and the Divisions of the Roman Empire in the Fourth Century*.

them "nearer to the Heart's Desire", the historian, most ascetic among artists, must keep his imagination strictly under control (ask Froude and Macaulay how hard that is to do) and concentrate all his strength on the interpretation of the stuff that lies before him. For the peculiar effectiveness of history—the peculiar emotion which the historical artist aims at conveying—depends on its being true in this limited sense of the word. . . . History is one thing and myth is another.'[1] From the work of Bury the historian the poet in Bury was resolutely and unfalteringly banished. On the publication of his history veterans in Byzantine study—Tozer and Freeman—were not slow to congratulate the new recruit.

In 1889 Bury's paper on Psellos (*English Historical Review*) gave promise of a history of the East Roman Empire under the Comneni: a promise which Bury up to the time of his last illness was still hoping to redeem.

In 1891 he began to write for the literary journals, and the essays which were published in this and the following years illustrate his abiding passion for the lost world of Hellas—the vision of that Land of Promise to which he ever sought to return. In 1893 at the age of 32 he was elected Professor of Modern History at Trinity College. About this time he began the preparation of his History of Greece, and from Athens in 1895 he went for a week's tour with Mr. R. C. Bosanquet visiting Thermopylae, Chaeronea, Thebes, and Plataea. 'Bury was a delightful companion', writes Mr. Bosanquet, 'with his mind full of everything in history and literature that bore upon the places we visited. He knew just what he wanted to see or verify on each site, and carried the classical authorities in his head and quoted them with wonderful precision. He had a thought-out programme and adhered to it with placid obstinacy, which made my work of piloting him easy. He knew little about travel in Greece, but faced discomfort cheerfully so long as he saw what he wanted.'

[1] A. E. Zimmern, *Solon and Croesus*, pp. 48–9 (Milford, 1928).

In 1896 there appeared the first volumes of that masterly edition of Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* which is in some ways the most remarkable memorial of Bury's scholarship. In 1898 he was appointed Regius Professor of Greek at Trinity College, Dublin, and was at the same time allowed to retain his Professorship of Modern History. The year 1900 saw the completion of his edition of Gibbon and the publication of his *History of Greece*: it thus marks the close of a period in his literary activity.

In 1902 he became Regius Professor of Modern History in the University of Cambridge, and on 26 January 1903 in his Inaugural Lecture he proclaimed his conception of the historian's task. In 1904 he lectured in America—in Colorado and at Cornell University—and in 1905 he published his *Life of St. Patrick*, upon which he had been engaged since 1901. In this work 'by the conscientious preparation of his materials and by his courage in the handling of them Bury has more than any other scholar advanced our understanding of St. Patrick and of his place in history'.[1]

The years 1906 and 1907 were marked by the appearance of two magnificent papers on the work of Constantine Porphyrogennetos—one on the Treatise 'De administrando imperio' in the *Byzantinische Zeitschrift*, the other on the 'De Ceremoniis' in the *English Historical Review*. Nowhere better perhaps than in these two papers are the depth and width of Bury's scholarship displayed.

In 1908 Bury was invited to visit America and to deliver the Gardiner Martin Lane Lectures for that year. The lectures were published in 1909 under the title *The Ancient Greek Historians*: it is from the vantage-ground of this book that the Inaugural Lecture of 1903 should be studied. In 1909 Bury held the Creighton Lectureship in London; in Oxford in 1911 he delivered the Romanes Lecture.[2]

In 1910 his health began to give way: he suffered from

[1] The judgement is that of Mr. Robin Flower.

[2] *The Constitution of the later Roman Empire* (Cambridge University Press, 1910); *Romances of Chivalry on Greek Soil* (Clarendon Press, 1911).

serious eye-trouble, and he spent the winter of 1910–11 in the Isle of Wight. His eyes never fully recovered. In 1911 Bury crowned his earlier studies on the work of Constantine Porphyrogennetos by the publication of his book *The Imperial Administrative System in the Ninth Century, With a Revised Text of the Kletorologion of Philotheos* (Supplemental Papers of the British Academy, I). It would be difficult to praise this masterpiece of scholarship too highly. A few months later appeared his *History of the Eastern Roman Empire*. These two works of 1911 and 1912 represent the high-water-mark of Bury's achievement.

In 1910 he had been threatened with a complete breakdown in health: he was conscious that he had a message to deliver and the time left to him might, for all he knew, be short. Hastily he wrote his *History of Freedom of Thought* (1913). The little book written 'with fire and force' *lives* as does perhaps no other work of Bury's: in it the author has communicated to the reader something of his own passionate interest, for here he has abandoned the studied reserve of his historical work.

It was the Great War which caused Bury to make his sole contribution to contemporary history: in his pamphlet *L'Allemagne et la Civilisation slave* (1915) he sought to counter the German claim that the war was the struggle of Teutonic civilization against Slav 'barbarism'. After the War, despite continued illness—every winter from 1918 to 1927 Bury spent in Rome—he produced two more books, his *History of the Later Roman Empire (from the death of Theodosius I to the death of Justinian)* and *The Idea of Progress*, the former appearing as a re-edition of the work of 1889; it was, in fact, completely rewritten and dealt only with a part of the period covered by the earlier volumes. As editor-in-chief of the *Cambridge Ancient History* he not only guided the counsels of his colleagues but to that History he himself contributed several chapters. With the study of the literature of classical Greece he began his life-work; with the study of that literature his life-work ended.

The influence of some great scholars operates through personal contact: they write little, but in their intercourse with students they give much—an inspiration which may leaven a life. There are others who live for and in their writings, and of these was Bury. It is not as Professor of Modern History in Dublin or in Cambridge that Bury will be remembered. In Cambridge, since he had no admiration for the Historical Tripos, he refused to adapt his lecturing to meet the needs of students working for that examination. The undergraduate saw little of Bury and the Professor never sought the intimacy of undergraduates. But if with the Tripos behind him the student came to Bury for help, he found a ready response and received generous encouragement and advice. Mr. Wedd has written of Bury: 'his eagerness to foster original work was unceasing: . . . his judgment of others was essentially genial, he was quick to see the possibilities in any new view, however extravagant, and his knowledge of ancient sources and modern research was so vast that he could at once put the investigator on to the right literature for his purpose.'[1] Professor Fay, of Toronto, has said more than once that it was a relief to come into contact with Bury after the ordinary lectures for the Tripos: 'it made you sit up and think; a talk with Bury was almost like being present at the making of history.'

As an examiner Bury was careful, tolerant, and patient; he was particularly helpful as an examiner on the special subjects in the second part of the Tripos. Even in an examination his humour did not desert him. At Oxford during a viva voce he passed to Professor Firth an impromptu description in Latin sapphics of each woman student. After the examination Bury retrieved these poems, but unfortunately they are among his *opera deperdita*. In examinations for College Fellowships the width of his knowledge was invaluable: he would read theses whether they were on scientific, literary, or historical subjects, and

[1] Annual Report of King's College, Cambridge, 19 November 1927.

could thus compare the relative merit of work in different fields of research, for 'though he never went deeply into any of the Natural Sciences, he kept in touch with the progress made in each department, and he was so far an expert mathematician as to find in pure mathematics his best cure for a headache'.[1] For the administration of a University Bury had little taste, and he was unwilling to make the sacrifice of time which administrative duties demand of a University teacher.

His encyclopaedic knowledge was, indeed, bought at a price. Oscar Browning said of him: 'Bury is the good boy who won't allow anything to take him from his lessons,' and he had in consequence little time for the cultivation of social intercourse. Especially after his health first broke down in 1910 he found himself compelled to adopt a secluded mode of life.

But perhaps that which in his later years most impressed those who knew him was his sheer courage in the face of pain and weakness—his magnificent determination to continue to the end the work to which he had devoted his life. To the last the indomitable will was unbroken.

Bury's reputation is based upon his work as a student of history, but the constant background of that work was his rigorous training in the school of classical philology. It was in the criticism of sources that Bury's historical achievement was most striking: it is this fact which makes the papers of the years 1906 and 1907, in which Bury analysed the two treatises of Constantine Porphyrogennetos, such admirable examples of his peculiar talent. 'Documents are not ready for the constructive operations of the historian till they have been submitted to the analytical operations of the philologist.'[2] Heisenberg has rightly pointed out how characteristic that dictum is of Bury's best historical work. Despite his passionate admiration for the spirit of ancient Hellas it is probable that it is not his study of the civilization and

[1] Mr. Wedd.

[2] *Byzantinische Zeitschrift*, xv (1906), 517.

literature of the classical age that will be longest remembered: even his editions of Pindar are overweighted by his insistence on a doubtful theory of verbal echoes or 'responsions' which like signposts were supposed to indicate the connexions of thought linking together the separate parts of the poems. There is indeed good reason for concluding that Bury himself later abandoned this view. But in his work on the third phase of the history of Hellenism—the Byzantine civilization—he has assuredly raised a memorial which will not be soon forgotten. Here his researches have been woven into the warp and woof of European scholarship. His true field was the history of the later Roman Empire: throughout his work he insisted on the unity which linked Augustus to the line of the Byzantine Caesars: no Byzantine Empire ever began to exist, for the Roman Empire did not come to an end until 1453. But it was not the Rome of the West to which he naturally turned: his text-book on the early principate was no spontaneous expression of his personal interest: he was commissioned to write it, and it stands out of relation to the body of his work. It was to a Roman Empire set in Greek lands and proudly claiming for its own a Greek inheritance that the scholar's devotion was given. The constitution and the administration of the later Roman Empire, what are they but the casket which guarded from the barbarian the legacy of Hellas?—this was perhaps in Bury's eyes their greatest title to our remembrance.

The outstanding characteristic of Bury's historical scholarship was its width—its catholicity, its range. It was fitting that the disciple of Gibbon should illustrate that catholicity in his edition of his master's work. Freeman's books had awakened in Bury a latent sense for history, and through the years he won the right, as had Gibbon and Freeman before him, 'to go to and fro among the ages'. In a generation of narrowly specialized scholarship Bury preserved the sweeping vision of an encyclopaedist. A bibliography of Bury's work would have its surprises for most readers.

Bury, again like Gibbon, was a rationalist: supernaturalism was the enemy. 'There is nothing for it but to trust the light of our reason: its candle-power may be low, but it is the only light we have.' Thus Theism shared with Christianity a common condemnation, for creation may have been but a well-intentioned mistake. An act of faith is necessary if we would believe that God's power and knowledge will ultimately ensure for the inhabitants of the universe a satisfactory result. Since that act of faith is necessary, Theism is not distinguished in principle from systems like Christianity which depend on faith and not on reason. Thus for the history of religion it is not to Bury that the student will go. Nor will he find in Bury's work any close study of the social life or the thought-world of the common folk of the Empire. Bury is the historian of the East Roman *Staatsrecht* and of East Roman administration. He was immensely impressed with the force of institutions as a social inheritance and with their power of development and growth. 'The heritage of the past', he wrote, 'is no less necessary to progress than the solvent power of new ideas': the very possibility of social progress 'depends on the institutions and traditions which give to societies their stability'. Not individuals but institutions hold in Bury's work the fore-front of the historical stage.

If we would find the faith in which Bury worked, we must go to his Inaugural Lecture and to the commentary upon that lecture which he himself gave in his *Ancient Greek Historians* and in *The Idea of Progress*. We must remind ourselves once more that Bury came to history through the school of classical philology: that in this school History had long been the handmaid of a time-honoured literary tradition. Against this subordination of history Bury protested: we must desire to recover man's past for its own sake, not merely that we may better understand the masterpieces of literature. We must sit at the feet of Ranke and of Mommsen. The sources of truth are manifold and we must neglect none. History is no longer merely a branch of

literary study: she is emancipated and has asserted her own proud prerogatives. She is in her own right a science. 'History,' as Bury wrote, 'has really been enthroned and ensphered among the sciences.' But history is only freed from thraldom to take upon herself voluntarily the yoke of service: 'human knowledge has no value out of relation to human life'; and the vision which inspired Bury's work was that of a synthesis which should link together past, present and future: man as a reasonable being should fashion the future through his wider comprehension of his past development. Our judgements will all be relative—they cannot be final: they will be superseded, but they will abide as milestones of human progress, as steps towards the ultimate synthesis which shall fully unify the process of the ages. 'Every individual who is deeply impressed with the fact that man's grasp of his past development helps to determine his future development and who studies history as a science and not as a branch of literature will contribute to form a national conscience that true history is of supreme importance, that the only way to true history lies through scientific research, and that in promoting and prosecuting such research we are not indulging in a luxury but doing a thoroughly practical work and performing a great duty to posterity.' 'We work in faith: we work under the compulsion of a categorical imperative: our duty to the dead, the living and the unborn. The supreme reason of historical research is its value to human life. The cry of "History for its own sake" means that history has begun systematically to play the long game. Let us remember that, however long be the game and however technical the rules, human interest is its ultimate justification.'

It was in this faith that Bury lived laborious days, and of that faith his work is his lasting memorial.[1]

NORMAN H. BAYNES.

[1] The Cambridge University Press will shortly publish *J. B. Bury: A Bibliography compiled with an introduction by Norman H. Baynes.*

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