

HISTORY TODAY

Bury, Spengler and the New Spenglerians

“There is no analogy,” wrote Bury, “between the development of a society and the life of an individual man”. Martin Braun describes how Spengler, Toynbee, Sorokin and others have sought to controvert him by arguing the case for the “Senescence of the West”.

Martin Braun | Published in History Today Volume 7 Issue 8 August 1957

There are books which, like fateful stars, appear in conjunction on the intellectual horizon of an age — portents of things that are yet to come and of things soon to be eclipsed. To grasp the import of books of this order is to discern the signs of the times.

The “constellation” of books I have in mind belongs to the solid, yet now extinct, middle-class society of Europe on the eve of the first World War. In 1912 the great Byzantinist, J.B. Bury, was working away on his *History of Freedom of Thought*, which was published in the following year.

It was a slimmer volume than some of the other books written by the famous Cambridge scholar, “the most erudite of British historians”, as Dr. Gooch has called him. Yet it soon became a classic, not only by virtue of its crystal-clear, flawless style but also because it bore the unmistakable marks of a labour of love. Here was the profession of faith by a high-minded and sincere man — of faith in freedom and tolerance, in reason and progress.

What Bury achieved in this little volume was to make articulate once more the deepest convictions of the Victorian Age. If I say that he wrote it with a sense of urgency, one may perhaps suspect him of being driven by forebodings as to the immediate turn of events. Nothing could be farther from the truth. He wanted to deliver his message before his general health and his eye-sight had failed him completely. No, there was hardly any cloud on his horizon. He shared the all-pervading optimism of his contemporaries.

For a fleeting instant it occurs to him that “attempts may... be made in the future to put back the clock”, but the uncomfortable thought is as quickly brushed aside. What Bury intended to write was a manifesto in the cause of rationalism and intellectual freedom: in fact, he unwittingly wrote their epitaph. It is this innocence which adds a special poignancy to his story of European intellectual struggle and achievement.

How easy it is for us to smile at Bury’s blissful ignorance of the irrational and destructive forces that were ready to erupt and blow sky-high the established order of things and ideas! Let us remember that his lack of vision was due to the blindness of a whole epoch. Moreover, the mental climate of late Victorian and Edwardian England was singularly unsuited to produce prophets of doom and destruction. There is nothing more apt to illustrate this than a reminiscence of Professor F.M. Powicke¹, looking back to his undergraduate days.

It was shortly before the turn of the century that he contributed to a college magazine some observations on the Armageddon which was to come. “But”, Professor Powicke remarks, “though they must have been the truest thing I wrote in those days, I am sure I wrote, not in a genuine spirit of prophecy, but rather in the mood in which Macaulay described the New Zealander meditating on the ruins of London”. And he adds with a sigh of nostalgia: “How innocent, how ignorant, how safe a boy was then”... The three adjectives apply also to the great scholar who, in 1912, was writing on freedom of thought. He had no inkling of the profound tidal change that was under way.

Nobody has expressed this change in mood and outlook more concisely than Lord Vansittart. Viewing the whole panorama after two world wars, he declared: “It almost breaks my heart when I think that I started life in a world inhabited by hope and am ending it in one inhibited by doubt of its own duration”².

Probably without intending to do so, this brilliant phrase pays tribute to the book mainly instrumental in bringing about and ushering in the new “Twentieth-Century” mood and outlook. I am referring to Oswald Spengler’s *The Decline of the West*, the Apocalypse of Man without Hope, written as a manifesto for Nietzschean *Herrenmoral* and, at the same time, as an historical guide-book whose vast perspectives are dominated by one theme — the birth and death of civilizations.

It was not by accident that the modern Cassandra arose in Germany caught as she was in social, intellectual and ideological crosscurrents. The ground had been prepared by a host of apostles of the “Dangerous Life”, of anti-intellectualism and anti-liberalism, among whom Nietzsche and Stefan George are but the most illustrious. It was left to Spengler, an unknown private scholar, to provide this revolt

¹ Modern Historians and the Study of History (1955), p. 226.

² Quoted in Viscount Cecil’s autobiography *All the Way* (1949), p. 241.

against the bourgeois and utilitarian West with an historical metaphysic and justification.

An ex-schoolmaster whose subjects had been mathematics and natural science, he was free from the academic historian's scruples and inhibitions. His penetrating mind roamed over all the ages, continents, and civilizations. His most remarkable gift was an uncanny intuitive flair, and in 1911, at the age of 31, he had his great inspiration. It was during the second Moroccan crisis that he pierced the veil of the future: he diagnosed world war both as imminent and — to quote his own words — “as the inevitable outward manifestation of the historical crisis”.

That is to say, in Spengler's view — a view that became crystallized during the next few months — the forthcoming conflagration was not caused by any particular set of circumstances: it was pre-ordained and “due” to happen for the sole reason that the life-cycle of Faustian or modern Western Culture had reached the specific stage of what he terms “civilization”, in which the normal concomitants are wholesale wars, political disintegration, Caesarism and all the social and spiritual afflictions we have since experienced.

It was this vision of doom that prompted him to embark upon writing a book of breath-taking originality. By 1914 its first draft was finished, but the intervening war delayed publication until the summer of 1918. True, Spengler's *Decline* admirably suited the post-1918 mood of many German intellectuals, but there is no substance whatsoever in the often-repeated contention that to provide the collapse of Imperial Germany with a “meta-historical” explanation was its original or underlying purpose.

Let us here turn back to Bury and his *History of Freedom of Thought*. It is indeed fascinating to try to visualize the celebrated Cambridge professor hurriedly putting on paper his cherished ideas on freedom and tolerance, while at the same time in Munich an obscure would-be historian was frantically working on an enterprise of far wider scope — an enterprise involving the negation of all that Bury and his world stood for.

It would be difficult to imagine two authors more dissimilar in outlook and personality or more representative of their respective national and cultural environments. For reasons of space I must resist the temptation to compare their backgrounds and temperaments in greater detail and content myself with a few general observations.

Bury speaks with the serenity and quiet self-confidence befitting a member of the British intellectual aristocracy, whereas Spengler, the *declassé* intellectual, ridden with resentments and driven by nightmare visions, addresses his contemporaries with the strident, imperious, pitiless voice of Prussian command.

To Bury, Man is first and foremost a rational being, and history is, as he puts it, “the record of an uphill struggle in which the (human) race, heavily handicapped, has accomplished wonders”. For Spengler there is no such thing as a common humanity. Man is a beast of prey. History is devoid of meaning or direction. Does history reveal any progress? Yes, if you mean the progression from spring-time to winter, from childhood to old age, from birth to death.

Otherwise there is no progress. It is the cycle that forms the basic pattern in history. For Spengler, history consists of the periodic appearance and disappearance of superorganisms which he terms “cultures”. Each culture, endowed with its own distinct *Kulturseele*, is mysteriously born, blossoms out and, having passed through its old age or “civilization”, dies in accordance with the cosmic law governing all existence. From nothingness into nothingness — this sums up the course of history as seen by Spengler.

What makes his philosophy of history so repugnant is not its pessimism: the pessimism of some of the great poets and thinkers is ennobled by a profound compassion for the condition of suffering mankind. No, our revulsion is due to his Nietzschean perversion of feeling and judgment, his partisanship of the mighty, his glorification of brute force, of blood and race, his contempt for the downtrodden, his scorn for men of the spirit and intellect, his *Schadenfreude* at the passing of the Golden Age of bourgeois security and the almost sadistic pleasure he feels at the advent of the new Iron Age with all its horrors and sufferings.

At this point it is important to indicate a fundamental difference between Bury and Spengler. Bury was a rationalist and a lifelong critic of Christianity. He fondly fancied himself as an *anima naturaliter pagana*. It was the humanist’s paganism stemming from Gibbon and Voltaire and inspired by Pindar and Greek Philosophy. Son of a scientific age, Bury entertained the modern superstition that to discredit and undermine religion was tantamount to strengthening and advancing the cause of civilization.

Yet, with all his easy optimism and partial blindness, he was a pillar of European society, and there can be no doubt as to where he stood — on the side of the angels. With Spengler the position is entirely different. His paganism was of the fatalistic type — he worshipped at the ancient shrine of dire Necessity. He saw deeper under the surface than any of the contemporary historians. But — and this is essential — he was not simply diagnosing the irrational and destructive forces at work; he was actively and deliberately in league with them.

He provided them with their historical credentials and thus helped to unleash them. In his scheme of things *amor Dei* is ousted by *amor fair*, the categorical imperative of personal responsibility is replaced by that of historic Destiny as revealed by its Voice — Spengler. Yet this great seer was afflicted by a blindness of his own. It showed itself in his incapacity to appreciate the intrinsic and perennial value of things spiritual in general, and of the ideals underlying Western Civilization in particular; he perceived nothing but their abuses and distortions at the hand of the politicians and other self-seeking groups.

Moreover, he did not even foresee the outcome of the so-called National Revolution in Germany of which he had been the herald. He was dismayed when the new Caesarism became an historic reality in the shape of the Hitler regime. In 1936 he died, a lonely and disappointed man.

The irony of the situation lies in the fact that Spengler, boycotted by the Nazis, continued to be read and discussed in the United States and, though to a lesser

degree, in England — that is in the two countries which provoked sometimes his admiration but more often his bitter antagonism. However unpalatable his dogmatism and mystique of Blood, Instinct and War may be to the Anglo-Saxon mind, which is committed to empiricism and a liberal scale of values, it was unthinkable to ignore Spengler and his *Scienza Nuova* of cultural growth and disintegration.

What Giambattista Vico had done in advance of his time, Spengler did at the exact psychological moment: he put forward a comprehensive view of universal history based on the same ancient cycle theory which Bury had confidently declared dead and buried for ever — “abandoned for the idea of indefinite «progress»”³.

Yet Spengler could not afford the platonic detachment of a Vico: he was actuated by the urgent sense of crisis, and his method of Comparative History served him as a means of diagnosing the present and divining the future. Quite apart from its intrinsic value as a scientific technique, this method cannot but appeal to many Westerners who, haunted by the shadow of disaster, look to history for guidance. No wonder, then, that Spengler, the most brilliant forecaster of our time, should have emerged from the German catastrophe with his prestige enhanced rather than diminished.

As the founder of the twentieth-century *Scienza Nuova*, Spengler occupies a position of considerable authority — not, to be sure, among the professional historians but among those pioneers of research who work in the border region of history, sociology and anthropology. Toynbee in England, Sorokin, Kroeber, and Northrop in America are the best-known exponents of the new approach⁴. Sir David Kelly has dubbed them “the cyclists”, whereas the American historian H. Stuart Hughes, author of a penetrating monograph on Spengler, refers to them as “the New Spenglerians”.

Yet these western Spenglerians are at the same time anti-Spenglerians just as Benedetto Croce may be regarded both as an Hegelian and an anti-Hegelian. As the latter stripped the Hegelian dialectic of those features he ascribed to the philosopher’s personal and national idiosyncrasy, so Toynbee and Sorokin have de-Spenglerized the new and promising study of Comparative History and Comparative Sociology.

The enquiry that Spengler has launched into the patterns, rhythms and the many constant phenomena of cultural growth and decay goes on⁵, yet freed from his

³ The Ancient Greek Historians (1909)5 P- 248.

⁴ Cf. P. A. Sorokin: *Social Philosophies of an Age of Crisis* (1952). On Sorokin see F. R. Cowell’s admirable monograph *History, Civilization and Culture* (1952).

⁵ Compare with this modern trend the over-individualizing attitude of Bury and like-minded historians. “...we have ascertained that history does not repeat itself; that the likenesses between historical phenomena at different times are superficial and far less important than the differences ” (*The Ancient Greek Historians*, p. 248).

anti-humanitarian bias and rigid dogmatism; freed in particular from the incubus of his quasi-biological determinism whereby the history of a culture is envisaged as the enlarged replica of the lifecycle of a plant or a human being⁶.

Oddly enough, it was Bury who opposed this concept of history long before it had dawned upon Spengler. And, stranger still, Bury's criticism occurs in a discussion of the first volume of Otto Seeck's *Geschichte des Untergangs der antiken Welt*, the same work that twelve years later — in 1912 — suggested to Spengler the title for his as yet unwritten book, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*.

"Familiar fallacies", Bury remarks, "have been invoked, and loose thinkers will never desist from invoking them, to account for this decline which is apparent in Roman society from the beginning of the Empire. It is said that the nation was senescent — a false and misleading metaphor; for there is no analogy, as the history of modern nations is sufficient to show, between the development of a society and the life of an individual man"⁷.

Although a good many of Bury's ideas have since gone overboard, this crucial point of view has assuredly held its own and become an integral part of the "Western" outlook, as represented by the "New Spenglerians". Through their efforts a new synthesis is being achieved — a blending of Spenglerian elements with the liberal tradition of the West which had in Bury such a brilliant exponent. To pay homage to the memory of J. B. Bury (1861-1927) is particularly befitting in the year which witnesses the thirtieth anniversary of the death of this great English historian.

⁶ To meet a clear case of backsliding one must turn to G. Barraclough's *History in a Changing World* (1955) p. 236. At least in one respect Professor Barraclough outdoes Spengler by finding the cyclic spectacle of history *exhilarating* (pp. 2, 231, 238); Spengler speaks of a sense of *marvel* or *lament* (*Decline of the West*, 1934, vol. II, p. 435). Most impressive is Dr. A. Toynbee's summing up: "To our Western minds the cyclic view of history, if taken seriously, would reduce history to a tale told by an idiot, signifying nothing" (*Civilization on Trial*, 1948, p. 14).

⁷ In *The Quarterly Review*, vol. 192 (1900), p. 135.