TRINITY

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John Bagnell Bury

IN the last years of the nineteenth century the school of classics in Trinity College must have been more distinguished than at any other time in the history of the University. Among the brilliant names of the period, that of John Bagnell Bury was to become the most firmly established in international reputation. The centenary of his birth falls this year on October 16th. His father was a curate in Monaghan, a man of no academic distinction. But his son in his school days at Foyle College, Londonderry, already showed extraordinary precocity, and after entering Trinity at the age of seventeen had a dazzling career of prizes and examination results. Already as a Junior Sophister he collaborated with Mahaffy in his edition of Euripides' *Hippolytus*. Obviously he would take fellowship, but in those days of competitive examination he had to make three shots at it, being twice beaten by older men, Culverwell and the future Archbishop Bernard. Still, he was not twenty-four when elected in 1885.

Bury's interests lay more in research than in contact with undergraduates. In those days a fellow's chief duties, apart from his classes, consisted mainly in his tutorship, from which rather than from his fellow's stipend of £50 (Irish) he drew his income. Bury was notoriously unsuccessful and uninterested as a tutor. A glance at the entrance book shows the names of his pupils only at rare intervals. It must have been a great relief to him when in 1893 a professorial chair became vacant, even though it was not in classics, but in modern history. While his most notable publications to date had been two volumes of Pindar's *Odes,* he had also produced as his first book *A Study in Byzantine History.* His election to the Regius Professorship of Greek in 1898 seemed to establish his position as a classical scholar. But he had retained the chair of modern history, and this was to displace the other muses in his affections. His next publications, the monumental editing of Gibbon and the *History of Greece,* showed this. Hence when in 1902 the Regius Professorship of History in Cambridge fell vacant on the death of Lord Acton, Bury accepted the invitation to succeed him, and resigned his fellowship and his chairs in Dublin.

The event was unprecedented, but was to start the century with a pattern which has since become more familiar. Up to then no Fellow of Trinity College had ever resigned to go to another university. Cambridge gave Bury the opportunity for ten years' productive work in the obscure field of Byzantine history as well as in more general studies. His prodigious output might have continued if it had not been that in his early fifties he began to be dogged by recurrent ill-health which affected his eyesight. He continued to write, but the flow of work was greatly reduced. Also its direction changed. His interest turned from history itself to historiography and the philosophical interpretation of history. His books on *Freedom of Thought* and on *The Idea of Progress* expressed openly an anti-Christian rationalism which he had held since his early days in Trinity, and which already had drawn him towards Gibbon. Contemporaries such as Hilaire Belloc pounced on inaccuracies in his broad treatment. To scholars of the present day it may more appear that these works instead of looking forward in ideas were looking back. Bury's rationalism savoured of the late nineteenth century, and his views on progress had a Victorian optimism about them. In his last years he produced one more great book on Byzantine history, and was associated as senior editor with the inception of the *Cambridge Ancient History,* which he did not live to see completed, dying in 1927 at the age of 65.

If we look back over his achievements, his philological and historical writing covers so much ground that a single evaluation is impossible. In Greek literature his work remains, though now outdated. In Greek history his standard textbook, piously revised, is in current use. In Byzantine history he built the structure from the foundations in source material upwards into an edifice which is likely long to remain unchallenged. Actually he disliked the term "Byzantine"; for his efforts were largely directed to show the development of the Eastern empire from its Roman origins. As a personality he has left far less tradition in his old college than such contemporaries as Tyrrell and Mahaffy. But he was not merely dry in his approach to scholarship. His revival and editing of *Kottabos* proves that. He avoided the company of any but chosen scholarly friends, and it is in the world of scholarship that he has left his mark.

H. W. PARKE