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THE HISTORICAL IDEAS OF J. B. BURY

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J. B. BURY

Edited by

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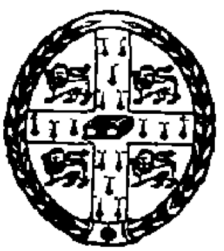

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INTRODUCTION

THE HISTORICAL IDEAS OF J. B. BURY

§ 1

"History is a science, no less and no more". This famous sentence, emphasised in Bury's *Inaugural*,* has greatly obscured his thought to contemporaries. It at once produced a controversy and one into which Bury never really entered. He made no reply at the time to the campaign in the periodicals, and it was only after several years that he pointed out one obvious misinterpretation. He doubtless trusted that study of his other utterances would reveal his real ideas, and perhaps forgot that they were scattered in different publications. His works on the method and purpose of history have now been assembled, and the three first essays here printed seem to make the pattern on the carpet clear.

It was as a classical scholar that he first became acquainted with history. And as those who attended his lectures on the Use of Authorities will know, the consequences of this approach to the subject were momentous. For in classical times Clio was regarded as a Muse, and History therefore took her place as a branch of rhetoric. This view greatly distressed Bury and he gave several instances of its unfortunate result. Thus one classical writer would borrow the details of a battle from another, just because they happened to be picturesque and despite the fact that they related to a totally different period or event. He considered it one of the chief

[* *pp.* 4, 9, 19. It is not, I think, sufficiently considered by English readers that the word "science", as applied to history, has been adopted from the French where its meaning is not quite the same as in English.]

faults of the Renaissance, that its historians imitated the classical models in making history the instrument of rhetoric. It was the way of authors under Queen Elizabeth, who pilfered a scene or a character from an Italian drama to serve the purposes of an English one. The result might be magnificent, and might be art. It could not be history, and it showed the mischief of regarding history as a rhetorical art.

The first step forward was to cut history loose from rhetoric. For "so long as history was regarded as an art, the sanctions of truth and accuracy could not be severe" and "history is not a branch of literature". In writing thus (*pp.* 6, 9), Bury perhaps "strains the note", as he says Acton did. But it is easy to see why. A man with strong scientific instincts, beginning his studies with classical texts and orators, is apt to see history differently from one who begins it with state-papers and dry-as-dust historians. To the first rhetoric is a cloud, to the second a sunbeam. Bury's early vision was obscured by a purple haze of oratory, and he had to disperse it before truth could shine through. That is why he wished to put Clio in a laboratory, before allowing her to declaim in an Academy.

§ 2

The release of history from rhetoric was but the first step. Only one degree less evil than the rhetorical view of history were the various pragmatical conceptions associated with it. History was not a body of concrete maxims, supplying examples from which ordinary men could learn to be good and statesmen to be great. To learn morality or success from history was little better than to use it as an instrument of eloquence, and he regretfully records that Polybius and Thucydides, "the

two greatest of the ancient historians", like Machiavelli, held that "the use of studying history was instruction in the art of politics" (*p.* 24). Another influence retarding the conception of history as a science was the weight of authority and church tradition. All these "political and ethical encumbrances" hindered the growth of a scientific method. Under the pressure of such circumstance even a scholar like Tillemont, whom Bury followed Gibbon in admiring, could do little. He could amass erudition and heap up incident, or produce "a collection of annals". But such works proceeded on no true system or plan. For "facts must be connected", and "I cannot imagine the slightest importance in facts or sequences of facts, unless they mean something in terms of reason". "Reason" could only be found in an author who pursued a method of selecting and analysing his facts according to some rational or scientific principle.

§ 3

Scientific method was foreshadowed by the rationalists like Gibbon and Voltaire, and established by technically trained investigators like Wolf, the critic of Homer, Niebuhr, the critic of Livy, and by Ranke, the founder of the modern school, basing its results on scientific dissection and reconstruction of authorities. But even Ranke, though a great Master, was not fully emancipated and was deeply influenced by two forces regarded by Bury as dangerous to a true conception of history. The first of these, nationalism, supplied a powerful motive for historical investigation and "quickened" the processes of study. Yet national and patriotic prejudice was a grave danger especially when, for purely political reasons, it stressed "inspiring and golden periods" at the expense of others historically more valuable and

instructive. And from this "tendencious" nationalism Ranke was not wholly free.

A tendency to which Ranke was also prone was "the influence of philosophy and more particularly of the philosophy of history". On such philosophers Bury is rather severe. He regards Hegel, Comte and Krause as having constructed iron beds into which they forced living victims, or as founders of systems based on *à priori* conceptions without inductive value. He is likewise critical of all those, and they were not merely philosophers, "who so naively assume that the ideas which are within the horizon of *their* minds are the ultimate ideas to be sighted by man, the last ports to be visited in his voyage down the stream of time" (*p.* 50). He instances the thinker who regarded Christianity as the final religion, Prussia as the final state and his own Hegelianism as the final philosophy. He enforces these instances by asking how we can really believe that the present idea of freedom is the ultimate one, or that the present idea of nationality is "an end in itself or more than a phase in evolution" (*p.* 58). A generation later, when freedom is contracting into order and nationality expanding beyond the limits of country or of race, we can see the pregnant wisdom of this suggestion of 1904.

§ 4

Bury therefore held the position that the "doctrine of historical relativity applies no less to his [the historian's] own judgments than to other facts".* New facts might be discovered and new judgments delivered at any time, and he was himself the living illustration of the process. Between 1889 and 1923 he entirely remodelled his conceptions of the development of the later Roman Empire

[* *Ancient Greek Historians* (1909), p. 252.]

in the light of new materials and fresh interpretations. His judgments also altered with time. Thus a view of history that is purely unitary is shown in the first three essays here given, all written before 1909. By 1924 he certainly had begun to favour a pluralistic interpretation.* Again in 1904 he quoted Tacitus and Treitschke as useful examples of prejudice, but his letter of 1926 asserts that freedom from bias in history is not possible nor even desirable. For prejudices alone "engage the interest of the world" (*pp.* 70–1). He had thus reached a position the exact opposite of the Greek "who would have said that the judgment of a wise man at any time might be final or absolutely valid".** In his view a historian's judgment was of permanent interest only as an illustration of his epoch, and finality and impartiality were mistaken ideals.

§ 5

The chauvinistic influences of nationalism, the shadowy conceptions of philosophy, not only affected the impartiality of Ranke, but diverted and muddied the course of historical investigation. And these influences tended to obscure the light already thrown by eighteenth-century philosophers like Turgot and Condorcet. For these men had developed the Idea of Progress, a conception which heralded the dawn of true history and led ultimately to its renovation. It was the first attempt to give a true unity and synthesis to history of the modern type, the first threading of beads on a string stout enough to resist pressure. The idea of progress certainly helped to link up the past with the present and to give a meaning and a name to modern history. For when

[* *Idea of Progress* (1924), p. 368, *note* to p. 302.]
[** *Ancient Greek Historians* (1909), p. 253.]

the improvement, and not the decadence, of the world became a dogma the past ages yielded in interest and importance to the present and still more to the future. Thus the idea of progress, though having no actual connexion with evolution, served a similar purpose in promoting the conception of the unity of history. But it was not until Darwin appeared on the scene that the victory was finally won. Evolution, in Bury's view, was the final determining influence in establishing the unity of history, in making it into a science, and in relating it to other sciences. Its supreme achievement was to realise that "our conception of the past" is "itself a factor in guiding and moulding our evolution and must become a factor of greater and increasing potency". This is "a new stage in the growth of the human mind" (*p.* 12).

§ 6

The transformation of history into a science meant the enlargement of its sphere and the extension of its influence to the furthest boundary of the earth. Ranke erred by confining history to politics, and Seeley by extending it only to political science. Bury would intrude it into every domain. For the temporary purpose of "isolating the phenomena" or for research, he might confine history to one aspect or to one period. But as all ages of history are of importance in the cosmic process, so all activities of man should be the province of the historian. He must look beyond governments to peoples, beyond laws to superstitions, beyond religions to folklore and the arts, he must study every intellectual, material and emotional aspect of human life and society. In his *Inaugural* Bury points to a passage in the *Antigone* as "the first amazed meditation of man" on what he had

wrought (*p.* 11). One famous passage of this chorus suggests for a moment that political activities ranked high among the inventions of man.

καὶ φθέγμα καὶ ἀνεμόεν
*φρόνημα καὶ ἀστυνόμους ὀργὰς ἐδιδάξατο.**

But a closer examination shows that even here the emphasis is on social rather than political inventiveness. In the whole passage there are some two or three lines devoted to the city state, and some fifty to man's mastery over beast and bird, earth, wind and sea and all other creative activities. Because of this very width of view "broad as ten thousand beeves" the passage exactly expresses Bury's view of the range of history.

§ 7

It is astonishing that Bury's *Inaugural* was interpreted by one distinguished critic as a pleading that Byzantine history was superior in importance to every other.** In fact he thought that history really became of decisive importance some fifty years after Byzantium and the Roman Empire perished together. It is even more extraordinary that the editor of Gibbon should hold that history began to be of real importance a few years from the date at which his master ceased writing it.

Those who knew Bury well, at Cambridge, could never have been in any doubt as to his preference for modern history. It was evident enough to anyone who heard his lectures on the Use of Authorities. It was

[* *Antigone*, lines 354–5. "Speech, wind-swift thought and all the moods that moved a State, hath he [man] taught himself". Jebb, *Antigone* [1888], p. 74 *note*, points out these are "feelings which lead men to organise *social* life, and to uphold the *social* order by their loyalty". Italics my own.]

[** Professor Carless Davis, *v. Baynes*, p. 112 and *note*.]

equally evident to anyone who was present at the History Board when the reform of the Historical Tripos was being discussed.* But, though the fact was certain, the reasons were not at first evident. Acton called modern history "the prize of all history", because he saw in it the improvement of the world under divine guidance and the ascending movement of man as the centuries quickened. Bury did not admit the existence of supernatural agency in history, or think it a demonstration of ethics, or even of progress. But he agreed with his great predecessor in regarding the study of modern times as "the most pressing of all".

Bury's reasons for his preference were intensely characteristic. He regarded modern history as the only period in which the records were abundant and certain, and therefore as the only period in which history could be set forth in its all-embracing range. You cannot portray an age in all its aspects unless you are "in direct relation with it". "The spiritual boundaries of the ancient and mediaeval worlds" were set too far back for us ever wholly to pass them, as his own long and sad experience had taught him. In the century and half between Theodosius and Justinian "no full account of a single battle is extant". And there were endless fragmentary inscriptions and untrustworthy chroniclers casting their fitful and broken lights upon dim emperors and shadowy events. It was not in such sources that you could read the minds and hearts of men. Only abundant records enable the historian to see with the eyes of contemporaries. "Sympathetic

[* Bury made a great effort to increase the amount of modern history studied in Part II of the Historical Tripos at Cambridge. He first proposed that two out of the five papers (excluding essay) in Part II should be devoted to Modern History Outlines. When the Board confined that study to one paper, Bury proposed that it should have double weight, i.e. receive twice the marks of any other paper.]

appreciation" is only possible to those near enough to understand the atmosphere, the passions, *les derniers frémissements* of an age. That was the only way to "see Shelley plain". It is the modern man's duty to posterity—above all—to study and to describe "the emancipatory movements of the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries". He states elsewhere that the "great movements of thought of the nineteenth century" are as remarkable and important as those of the sixteenth, and as "new and striking a departure as any to which our records go back". Because they give the true history of the freedom of the spirit, and because their records are fuller than any other, the last four centuries are superior in importance to all others.

§ 8

Bury viewed Darwin as having delivered history from its patriotic, philosophic, rhetorical and pragmatical obsessions. He believed the scientific method and "the dry light of science" to be essential to history. But he is very anxious to show that the analogy between history and other sciences must not be overemphasised. For instance he is at pains to draw a distinction between history and anthropology (*p.* 32 *note*). He is careful to demonstrate that human society is not an organism at least in the scientific sense (*p.* 28 *note*). He wrote that a man was not a historian if his "interest was primarily ethical". He rejected the idea of God as revealing himself in history or as altering its course, for that assumption postulated a *Deus ex machina*. And he did not, like some scientists, assume that energy or progress is a substitute for God. The idea of progress was a useful one but it was not strictly scientific nor identical with the Darwinian conceptions. "Evolution itself, it must be

remembered, does not necessarily mean, as applied to Society, the movement of man to a desirable good. It is a neutral scientific conception, compatible either with optimism or pessimism. According to different estimates it may appear to be a cruel sentence or a guarantee of steady amelioration, and it has been actually interpreted in both ways".* Bury speaks indeed of the "countless stairs" man must ascend in the future, and believed perhaps that the movement would be upward. But his belief in the future was rather a hope than a conviction. And even if he had felt a conviction, he would not have maintained that it was scientifically defensible.

§ 9

Bury laid down that history was a science to be studied by scientific methods but he did not believe that it proceeded wholly along fixed lines and according to mathematical laws. As history never repeated itself the past history of man could not be exactly deduced, nor the future precisely predicted. The accidents of history were such as to disturb any calculations. Great men, and he instances Alexander, Frederic and Napoleon, in one sphere, St Paul, Plato or Spinoza in another, had power enough to disturb or divert the stream of history. Their exceptional brains might be explained as being due to scientific causes, but such explanations did not supply us with a calculus for the future. The great man is not only an accident, but an unforeseen and extremely disturbing accident. He is sufficient in himself to prevent even the special demesnes of economic and social history, "where generalisation is most fruitful", from

[* *Idea of Progress* (1920), pp. 335–6.]

being wholly subject to general laws. Even in these demesnes the great man can intrude his imperious and disturbing personality. "The heel of Achilles in all historical speculations of this class has been the role of the individual" (*p.* 41).

Not only does the great man himself affect history, but he is himself affected by the exceptional events and persons he may encounter. He is subject to an influence, at once obvious and attractive and apparently trivial. Bury speaks of "the shape of Cleopatra's nose" and "the pretty face of Anne Boleyn" as changing the currents of history. The first instance he owes, of course, to Pascal; the latter perhaps to Canning, who once convulsed the House of Commons by quoting the verse

> When Love could teach a monarch to be wise,
> And Gospel-light first dawned from Boleyn's eyes.

These two amusing examples are illustrations of that theory of "contingency" which bulks so large in Bury's later studies. He came finally to assert that general causes did not usually explain the great events of history. And he thus reached, by another road, a conclusion or lack of conclusion which is often held by great practical men. Few of these will admit that the causes of great events are simple or ascertainable, and some, like Frederic the Great, ascribe everything to chance. Those who are steeped in practical affairs know how blind an instrument of destiny even a great man may be.

§ 10

The best application of Bury's idea is to be found in his view of the causes of the fall of the Roman Empire. In his earliest study he adopted conventional explanations. In his latest (1923) he adopted the "contingency"

theory throughout.* If there was any cause of the fall of the Roman Empire, it was that the German barbarians "peacefully penetrated" it, and finally took so many posts in the army that they rendered discipline impossible. "This was, of course, a consequence of the decline in military spirit, and of depopulation, in the old civilised Mediterranean countries".** But he asserts that "this policy need not have led to the dismemberment of the Empire" and that the barbarian infiltration is explained not by "any general considerations", but by "the actual events".***

It was the conflux of coincidences which proved decisive. The first contingent cause was the invasion of the Huns from Asia, a "historical surprise" and resulting from "events in Central Asia strictly independent of events in Europe".**** It was an "Asian mystery" how these Huns arose and poured into Europe. And to this first contingency was added a second, for the valiant Goths fled before them and poured into the Roman Empire. In their flight they met and defeated a Roman army and slew a Roman Emperor. This great defeat was mainly due to the contingent accident that the Roman Emperor was incompetent and rash. Theodosius, who succeeded Valens, set "the unfortunate precedent" of settling the Visigoths

[* I follow here the line of thought in my earlier (and anonymous) treatment of this subject in *Cambridge Historical Journal*, vol. II, No. 1 (1927), p. 162 *note*, and pp. 195, 196.

The *History of the Later Roman Empire*, vol. I, chap. III (1889), gives some general causes. An article in the *Quarterly*, 1920, vol. CXCII, follows a similar line (*v.* Appendix, *pp.* 231–42, for a part of this). The general causation is abandoned for the contingency theory in the *Later Roman Empire* (1923), vol. I, pp. 303–13. These views are explained more at length in *The Invasion of Europe by the Barbarians* (1928), *passim*. *Baynes*, pp. 74–6, should be consulted.]

[** *Later Roman Empire* (1923), I, 312.]

[*** *Later Roman Empire*, I, 311.]

[**** *v. infra, pp.* 62–3.]

—a new barbarian people—as a unit inside his borders. The fact that he died at the age of fifty was "a third contingency", for had he lived longer his great ability might have averted the evils of his blunder. But a fourth event, dependent on causes which had nothing to do with the condition of the Empire, was the mediocrity of his two sons who divided his Empire. The Eastern Arcadius was incompetent, and the Western Honorius was "feeble-minded". The final or fifth event was the fact that in the West poor Honorius was controlled by a German, Stilicho. His character is "a puzzle", and he admitted barbarians wholesale into the Roman Empire till he brought disaster on himself and it. When he died the mischief was done, Italy, Gaul and Spain were overrun by barbarians and "his Roman successors could not undo the results of events which need never have happened". It is thus that the true historian delicately poises his conclusion.

§ 11

In some respects Bury's mind was a hard one to read, for he possessed a humour which was not always appreciated. It would be a mistake for instance to lay stress on the famous remark that a historian did not do his duty unless he changed his mind every two years. No one indeed was more open to new influences, but one may conjecture that five or ten years would be actually more exact. And it was not only in remarks lightly dropped in conversation that he showed this archness. The famous published injunction to statesmen to "dare to be unjust" is a similar instance. The Saxon is not perhaps the fittest judge of such irony. But this side was not the only one which made it difficult to detect his real views. As he grew older it became a duty with him, so far as

possible, to avoid giving his personal impressions of a historical problem. In his lectures on the Use of Authorities he preferred telling you the way Ranke had handled a problem of historical criticism to explaining how he would handle it himself. On one occasion he discoursed to the "Junior Historians" at Cambridge on Lamprecht. He gave a most illuminating description of that scholar's philosophy but left us at the end without any clue as to his own judgment on its soundness. It was not until I saw his written views (*v. p.* 39 *note*) that it became evident that he regarded them with more favour and sympathy than we had suspected. It was not that he did not have strong views but that he feared to disturb the judgment of others by expressing them. He did not, for instance, believe in expressing moral judgments when writing history, but he formed some of his own none the less, as notably on religious questions. Once when I was consulting him privately about some points of German history, he told me he thought that Frederic the Great's invasion of Silesia in 1740 was much more justifiable than most historians had admitted. "After all", said he, "Austria had wiped her boots on Prussia up till then".

§ 12

It is strange that it should have been ever thought that Bury was opposed in principle to the literary art. Several of the essays here printed, and particularly those on the Byzantine Emperors, will sufficiently dispel this illusion. In certain respects his sympathies were singularly drawn to works of imagination which were not strictly historical. Thus he greatly admired some of the works of the great Hungarian romancer Jokai, notably *A Christian but a Roman*, and *Halil the Pedlar*. The last he

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the circumstances under which Bury stated his doctrine, and the consequences which he deduced from it, will always remain of great typical importance.

§ 13

Science and Art have found a meeting ground in History to-day. But there remains a certain difference of emphasis between literary and scientific historians. The former tend primarily to generalisation and the latter to research. And the growth of Bury's historical ideas was undoubtedly from the one to the other. He is not afraid of certain generalisations even in his latest years. In 1919 he said that Byzantium produced "a succession of able and hard-working rulers such as cannot, I think, be paralleled in the annals of any other state during so long a period" (*p.* 122). In 1923 he said that a Byzantine army was *never* beaten except when its general was incompetent (*p.* 222). But he undoubtedly came to favour contingency at the expense of causation and to believe that many generalisations of to-day would become the fallacies of to-morrow. Holding this view of progress and the future, he was ready to think that the discovery of truth and the collection and interpretation of facts were the greatest service we can render to posterity. And it was for posterity and the future that he worked. From this point of view research, or the discovery of new truths or facts, was all important. He wished to revise the Historical Tripos at Cambridge not so as to make it an instrument of general education but as a means of promoting or training students for research.* To Bury that was the all-in-all. There was no project in his Cambridge career in which he took so

[* It is I think misleading to say (*v. Baynes*, p. 49) that Bury "had no admiration" for the Cambridge Tripos. If the view in the text is correct no History Honours Examination in any University would have satisfied

much interest as the foundation of the Cambridge Historical Society and the *Cambridge Historical Journal*. He was the first President of the Society, a member of the Editorial Board and a contributor to the *Journal*. The reason of his deep interest was that both were to be devoted to research. He told me more than once that the future of Cambridge historical study depended upon the development of these projects. And he said in his *Inaugural* that research is "the highest duty of Universities".

In the England of to-day it is unfortunately neither superfluous to insist on the importance of research in history nor to explain the value Bury attached to it. His wide outlook on historical development in other lands had taught him that history is too often a medium for patriotic propaganda. In such cases the historians work under difficulties we cannot conceive. They are sometimes the instruments of politicians, and are not always bold enough to tell the truth. He used to quote in his lectures how every Hungarian historian denies that the Rumans are descended from the Romans, every Rumanian historian asserts that they are. In Macedonia Serb historians reckon over a million Serbs, Bulgarians find not a single one in the country. In such cases only a fearless regard for truth based on research can emancipate men from prejudice.* And if we turn from East to West and seek light over the ocean we find that research in American history is the living example of

him as it would not sufficiently have promoted research. He certainly thought, as did everyone else, that the pre-1911 Tripos needed reform. But when it was reformed in 1911, he said in the Senate House, "I approve of a great many features of the new scheme", and he instanced the transfer of Special Periods to Part II as "an enormous gain". This Tripos is still in existence. Bury's interesting proposal about "set books" in connexion with examinations is well described by *Baynes*, p. 50, and was in fact again a suggestion for training researchers.]

[* *v.* especially *The Ancient Greek Historians* (1909), pp. 253–4.]

this. It has been shown almost wholly by the researches of American historians in the last thirty years that the Mother Country was by no means so tyrannical in its attitude as transpontine orators had asserted for a century. The knowledge thus acquired by scholarship is gradually penetrating to text-books in elementary schools in America. The result has been a definite softening of the old bitterness between England and America which, so far at least as educated leaders are concerned, will be permanent and lasting. There is no nobler victory achieved by research. The same methods are waiting to be adopted to a dozen other thorny problems. They have been applied to the origins of the World War of 1914, and are already producing appreciable results. It is not easy to see limits to the influence of well-directed research in assuaging national passions and in solving international problems. It is literally true to say that new forces may be set in motion by the historian from his study to-day just as they are released by the scientist from his laboratory. And it is some such thought as this which Bury had in mind, when he told us that "the study of history and the method of studying it are facts of ecumenical importance" and that "research might move the world". He was careful to add that results could not be immediate and that "short profits and quick returns" could not serve as a maxim for scholars. One day doubtless England will awake to this truth and will endow and encourage research on a scale comparable with that in some other countries in Europe. When this day dawns Bury's message will be understood and he will be seen in his true proportions as a historian.

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