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J. B. BURY: HELLENIST AND HISTORIAN [1]

BY PROFESSOR MICHAEL TIERNEY

THE name of John Bagnell Bury, Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge University from 1902 till his death in 1927, is widely familiar to classical and historical students as that of a brilliant Irishman and one of the most learned scholars of his time. Born in County Monaghan and educated at Trinity College, Dublin, he was the pupil of Tyrrell and Mahaffy in their heyday, and won for himself fame hardly if at all inferior to the legendary renown of his masters. Always looking younger than his years, he was precocious from the first. At the age of ten he impressed Tyrrell by his knowledge of Greek grammar. Before he was twenty he collaborated with Mahaffy in editing the *Hippolytus* of Euripides. Not yet quite twenty-eight, he startled the learned world by the thoroughness and authority of his *History of the Later Roman Empire from Arcadius to Irene.* He produced a remarkable edition of Pindar, valuable standard Histories of Greece and of the early Roman Empire, and an unrivalled commentary on Gibbon's *Decline and Fall.* It was especially in the wide and difficult field of Gibbon's work that Bury laboured most enduringly. Even before his appointment to succeed Lord Acton at Cambridge he was universally regarded as a foremost authority in Byzantine studies. His later work, more particularly on the constitution and administrative system of the Eastern Roman Empire, was of fundamental importance, and it is probable that it will be remembered longest of all that he did. Following Acton's model, he planned the *Cambridge Mediaeval History,* and was principal editor of the *Cambridge Ancient History,* to which even

[1] *A Bibliography of the Works of J. B. Bury.* Compiled, with a Memoir, by Norman H. Baynes. Cambridge University Press. 1929. 10/6 net.

in failing health he contributed some of its most brilliant and interesting chapters.

Although utterly dissimilar to his famous predecessor in almost everything else, he resembled him in the range of his learning, which in some ways surpassed even Acton's own. Not only was he in the front rank of classical scholars, with more than the ordinary classical scholar's mastery of French, German and Italian. He had also a good knowledge of Russian and Hungarian, both of which he learned in order to equip himself for his Byzantine studies. Besides having an unusually close acquaintance with a wide range of documents in his own special subjects, he was widely read in philosophical and scientific literature. His thoroughness was equal to his width of interest. He entered the domain of Irish history with his *Life of St. Patrick*, and in spite of his ignorance of Irish the book marked a very great advance on previous work. Elected professor of Modern History in Trinity College, Dublin, in 1893, he was made also Regius Professor of Greek in 1898, and held both offices together till his transference to Cambridge. His Inaugural Lecture in that University was an extraordinary success. So great was the crush of listeners that the representative of the *Cambridge Review* could not get in; and the preponderance of young women in the audience led that journal to remark that it "could not contemplate with equanimity the time when a shed for perambulators would form a necessary part of every lecture room." Bury, however, was not destined to carry on permanently the magnetic tradition of Acton as lecturer. His tastes lay rather in the direction of research, to which he devoted most of his energies. Oscar Browning described him as "the good boy who won't allow anything to take him from his lessons." This concentration revenged itself upon his health, and from 1910 onwards he was forced to withdraw more and more into his own workshop, where he laboured with courageous perseverance to the last.

Mr. Baynes's Memoir and Bibliography enable us not only to estimate Bury's great and lasting contributions to knowledge, but also his position as a historian and his general philosophy of history. It is clear that his chief distinction lay in special fields, in establishing the character and quality of the sources for particular periods and events, and in the acute analysis of documents. He had little interest in personality or in broader political issues, while excelling in the study of institutions as such. Unlike his remarkable predecessor, he had small experience of public affairs; he was the type of the cloistered researcher, and his impartiality was rather the fruit of an exclusively intellectual interest in his analytical work than of any exercise of historical judgment in the political or ethical sense. Although eminently sensitive to ideas such as that of Progress or Freedom of Thought, he had none of Lord Acton's passion for freedom in the broader meaning of the word, nor of his determination to "suffer no man and no cause to escape the undying penalty which history has the power to inflict on wrong." His absorption in details, in clearly-bounded departmental problems which admitted of semi-mathematical solutions, made him attach a minor degree of value to the virtue of consistency; he boldly proclaimed that he would not consider himself to be doing his duty unless he changed his views every two years. Now it makes all the difference in the world whether a historian changes his views on the interpretation of evidence in detail, or allows his judgment to fluctuate on large issues or on the very function of history. Unfortunately it was in wider matters of judgment and principle that Bury most lived up to his conception of his duty.

Karl Julius Beloch, whose recent death has removed an historian no less renowned than Bury himself, draws, in the Preface to his "History of Greece," a distinction between the *Historiker* and the *Philologe*, which gives him the opportunity to register some sharp and rather

amusing criticisms of his forerunners and compeers. "The philologue believes what stands in his sources until it is proved false; the historian only believes it when it is proved true." This is really a distinction between the man of letters and the historical researcher. The former is interested in literature, the latter in truth. The historian looks on his documents as sources of knowledge, the man of letters looks on them as sources of aesthetic enjoyment. Bury himself had made much the same distinction in 1892, from a slightly different standpoint, in reply to Jowett's protest against "patching the good cloth of Herodotus or Thucydides or Xenophon with the transparent gauze of Diodorus and Plutarch." Jowett's valuation of his sources was dictated by aesthetic and stylistic prejudices, which, as Bury rightly pointed out, should have no influence on the seeker for truth. The distinction thus made by Beloch, however, does not go to the root of the matter. There is an historical philologue as well as a literary philologue; an historian who does not indeed suffer from aesthetic prejudices, but whose training and pre-occupation is none the less with *criteria* of a literary order. Such a historian, of a very eminent and fruitful kind, was Bury, notwithstanding his insistence on the title of History to take rank, not as a branch of literature or philosophy, but as a Science in her own right.

Indeed this very emphasis on the scientific aspect of History was one of the causes that determined his own relative limitations as a historian. It is precisely when most severely confined to the analysis and comparison of documents and the establishment of a chain of evidence that the work of the historian is most "scientific" in the sense that his results are most capable of being clearly demonstrated; whereas it is in the exercise of judgment upon the results themselves that he must needs depart from "science" and become a literary artist, a philosopher, or both at once. Bury's fellow-Byzantinist,

August Heisenberg, has most definitely given expression to this criticism of him. "Even as historian," he says, "Bury remained always the philologue. . . . He admired the greatness of the Empire, but otherwise the culture of Byzantium left him cold. Byzantium was for him first and foremost an object of learned research." It is rarely possible for the same man to be at the same time in the front rank as literary critic of historical sources and as judge of historical cause and effect. Bury was a very clear and interesting, often even picturesque, writer; but perhaps it is only in his *Life of St. Patrick*, where he relegates the laboratory-work to the appendices, and concentrates in the body of the book on the literary formulation of his results, that he comes near success in effecting the complete synthesis. It is no disparagement of a great scholar to say that he does not succeed so fully in his other works. In some of them, of course, he was merely restating the results of others; but in his own special field of research the "philologue" often has his way with the historian. His great *History of the Later Roman Empire*, which appeared in 1923, is best described as an admirable collection of detached monographs. Its second volume justifies its claim to be the most complete account of the reign of Justinian ever published; but the great Imperial dreamer is buried under the details of his wars. In dealing with the causes for the collapse of the Roman Empire in the West, Bury shows at once the carelessness for consistency and the "philological" quality which marked his historiography. In earlier life he had explained the collapse by a somewhat bold theory of intellectual decline, which he illustrated by instancing the failure of the Romans to establish a Ministry of Commerce or a Board of Trade. In the "History" he abandons all attempt at generalisation and takes refuge in the statement that the Western Empire's fall was due to "a series of contingent events." This, as Mr. Baynes does

not fail to point out, is the abdication of History. "The simple annalist is master of the situation."

That it was, even as a full-fledged theory, no momentary aberration on Bury's part, is proved by his essay entitled "Cleopatra's Nose" in the Annual of the Rationalist Press Association for 1916. There it already appears formally stated, and applied to such historical questions as the causes for the Peloponnesian War and the rise of Christianity, although it is in fact a theory which makes short work of all attempts at causation. Its genesis is partly to be traced to the specialist's difficulty in seeing the wood for the trees; but its appearance in a periodical devoted to the cause of "Rationalism" is a proof that its source is to be found in the development of Bury's most fundamental thought. All through life, from his student's paper on Browning's philosophy, he had been what is best described as a Hellenist in religious conviction, and his Hellenism went hand in hand with a deep-seated anti-Christian bias. This religion appears most clearly in his editions of Pindar of 1890 and 1892, and in a paper with the significant title "*Anima Naturaliter Pagana:* A Quest of the Imagination," published in 1891. In spite of having edited the *Hippolytus*, which gives expression, as perhaps no other book does, to a particular kind of pessimism inseparable from Greek paganism, Bury found in Pindar, and generalised for all Greeks, a quality of brightness and calm akin to the "Freude" of which Schiller vainly dreamed in "Die Götter Griechenlands." Though Bury himself disliked Romanticism and criticised Swinburne for having imported it into ancient Greece, there is no doubt that this emphasis on Greek brightness and joy is a modern Romantic fallacy.

The art of Pindar, said Bury in his interesting introduction to his edition of the *Nemean Odes*, was flawless because it mirrored these essential Greek qualities in an untroubled state. Into the calm Greek atmosphere

Christianity brought an element of trouble, a *déchirement*, a rending of the soul. From this element of trouble the *anima naturaliter pagana* will seek to escape, in order "to make a road to a region where the clipped wings of the most ardent Hellenist cannot bear him now." In a paper on compulsory Greek of the same period, Bury asserted that the precise reason for compulsion is because the study is strictly useless; and by this he meant, not that it should not subserve economic ends, but that study in general, and Greek study in particular, should be its own absolute end. This of course was a tenet not by any means peculiar to him; it was in fact common form in the English Universities of his generation. In his mouth, however, it was the expression of a kind of religion which did duty for and was hostile to all other religions. When he maintained that "the Greeks themselves . . . . were always seeking knowledge for its own sake without any regard for results," he was again generalising overmuch. The statement is true perhaps of the Ionians and of the old age of Aristotle, an Ionian himself; it was not true of those rather important Greeks the Athenians, least of all of Socrates and Plato.

From 1914 onwards Bury became a regular contributor to the Rationalist Press Annual. His Rationalism was only the logical development of his peculiar type of Hellenism; and his Theory of Contingency was one expression of both, a sort of generalisation of the Greek *Tyche*, Fortune or Chance, which so dominates much Greek poetry and history-writing. As a kind of manifesto of his adhesion to the Rationalist camp, he published in 1913 a little book which caused much stir at the time, his "History of Freedom of Thought." Written under the stress of illness and with the conviction that he had only a little time in which to deliver his message, this book fits completely into the framework of his earlier ideas. It begins with a description of the liberty enjoyed in that ideal Greek world to which his aspirations always

turned. This liberty was precarious because not consciously expressed and held as a principle. It required the experience of persecution, an invention of Christianity, to implant the principle firmly in men's minds. Full freedom of thought and discussion is now an essential element in civilisation. It is a human right, based on utility; but this does not justify governments in curtailing it on grounds of utility. The book was severely criticised by Mr. Hilaire Belloc among others for its many undeniable errors of fact. Mr. Belloc accused Bury of having, in his hostile judgement of mediaeval Christianity, "told the story of a great love from the standpoint of a heart decayed." It might more fairly perhaps be said that the book was the work of a great specialist telling in a hurry a story not his own, an effort of the *anima naturaliter pagana* to find its way back by an unfamiliar road to an ideal Ionian past. Bury himself rather deprived of seriousness his theory that freedom of discussion is an inalienable human right when in 1919, under strain of war, he declared that "every social principle is subject to the general rule that it must not endanger its own existence." The natural freedom of the Greeks was Convention, not Law, after all.

Bury's religious convictions manifested themselves often strangely enough in his historical judgments; the Theory of Contingency is a case in point. A less important but almost equally striking example is to be found in his "History of Greece." Most students are probably rather surprised to find, in chapter vii of that very able and useful summary, that the mystical religious movements typified by Orphism and Pythagoreanism are set side by side with the great Persian invasions as one of the "Perils of Greece" from which she only escaped providentially by the victory of Ionian reason and the Crotonian massacres. The truth of course is that if these things were a peril, Greece did not escape from them at all. They became a most important and

essential element in Hellenic life and thought, especially through the transformation of them at the hands of Socrates, whom Bury, curiously enough, was later to hold up to Rationalists as a kind of protomartyr for their own cause. Here again his Ionian prejudices joined with his romantic religion of Hellenism to mould his teaching in a very characteristic way.

Perhaps the strangest thing about the brilliant historian was, however, that his Hellenic rationalism was by no means his exclusive religion, although a most important and influential part of it to the end. It shared his mind, in later life at least, with a doctrine whose essential incompatibility with it he seems never fully to have realised: the doctrine of Progress. In 1922, a year before finally formulating his Contingency Theory, he published in "The Idea of Progress" his considered views on this subject. It was no new doctrine with him for all that. The first hint of his interest in it appears in 1894, and he recurs to it in two of his most important utterances on his own work, the Inaugural Lecture of 1903 and the Harvard Lectures on "The Ancient Greek Historians" in 1908. As Mr. Baynes points out, the book of 1922 "was the natural outcome of ideas which had long formed a vital part of his thought." On various occasions he uses the idea that "humanity is advancing in a definite and desirable direction, and that a condition of general happiness will ultimately be enjoyed" as the philosophical justification for the study of history. "We must see our petty periods," he says in his Inaugural Lecture, "*sub specie perennitatis*." In the Harvard Lectures he shows that "the absence of the idea of indefinite progress in Greek and Roman speculation is one of the gulfs which separate us from the ancients . . . With the Greeks, who applied the inadequate idea of *Tyche* or Fortune, the reconstruction of the past was an instinct which they justified by reasons which were superficial."

In "The Idea of Progress" we may perhaps glimpse

most clearly the curious unconscious conflict between the Hellenic Rationalist with his Theory of Contingency and the modern optimist believer in Progress. "The Idea of Progress belongs to the same order of ideas as Providence or personal immortality. Belief in it is an act of faith." It is the substitute, on a higher plane of civilisation, for these outworn ideas of Fortune and Providence. The thought occurs to him—an intrusion of the ever-wakeful Rationalist—that Progress itself may in time dispense with its Idea, just as the Greek *Tyche* and the mediaeval Providence have been dispensed with. But he dismisses this thought as "theoretical scepticism." "The Idea of Progress," says Mr. Baynes, "was Bury's working faith." As Mr. Christopher Dawson has recently shown, it is an eighteenth-century derivative of Christianity; in fact it is Providence with the Deity—and therewith intelligibility—abstracted out of it, and that is precisely why it was unknown to the Greeks. It was the great scholar's working faith only because he failed to realise its essential conflict with that other older faith which he seems to have held with conviction to the end. Bury the Hellenist, moved by his Ionian nostalgia, and Bury the Historian, "spectator of all time and all existence," never arrived at more than an uneasy accommodation. He was one of those very fruithful teachers who leave generations in their debt, and few of those who follow in his footsteps would care to have subtracted from their store of knowledge what they owe to his industry and skill. It can hardly be said so confidently that the Philosophy of History has been either permanently or considerably enriched by his Jekyll and Hyde contribution to her of anti-religious rationalism and faith in an irrational Religion of Progress.

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