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J. P. WHITNEY (and J. B. BURY)

THE LATE PROFESSOR J. B. BURY

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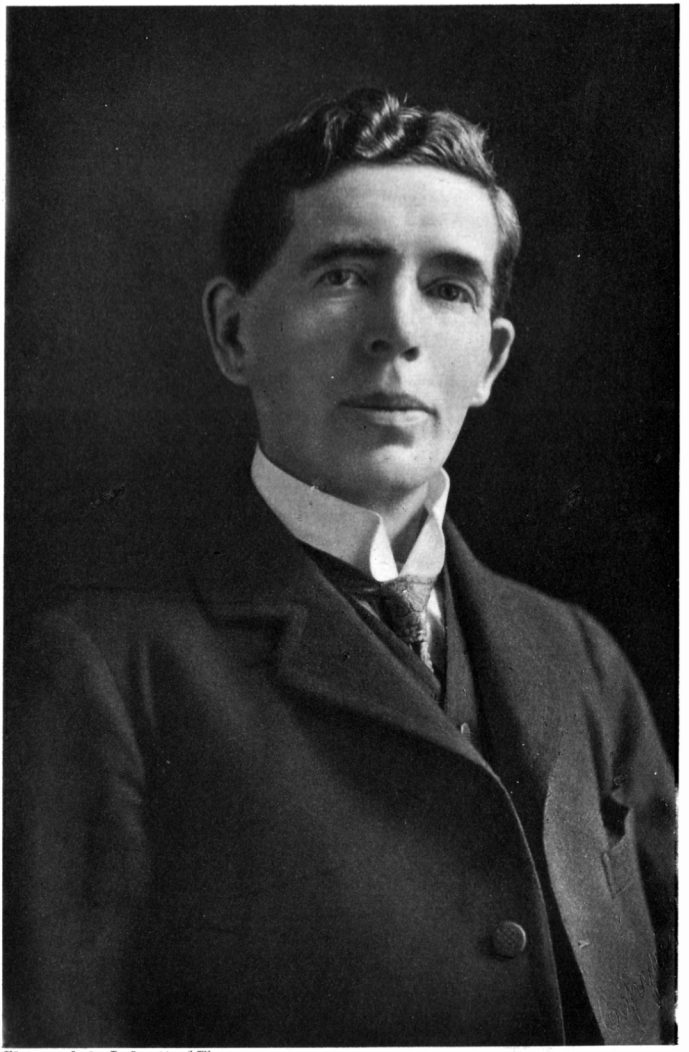

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J. B. Bury

THE LATE PROFESSOR J. B. BURY

(1) AN IMPRESSION BY J. P. WHITNEY

One characteristic of University life is the coming and passing of the students: another is the procession of its teachers. And now I, who was a pupil of Seeley's and knew, to my great gain, Lord Acton, am asked to write something of another Regius Professor of Modern History who has passed away. When I recall this great procession I am reminded how the study of History has grown here as elsewhere. Seeley would tell his class that History, although so little recognized, could hold out even some hope of a career, for they might become Extension Lecturers. Lord Acton had no need to apologize for History, its importance and its claims were felt on every hand: his vast learning and his love of historic truth made him a personification of his subject. Bury, like Seeley, had learnt how to love History, in the field of classics: like Acton he had, in his chosen sphere, peculiar knowledge that was not only wide but unequalled of its kind.

He was perhaps a little impatient of routine academic work: attending Boards was not to him the strange pleasure it is to some: there was nothing startling or dramatic in his lectures, so that crowds were never drawn to them by the chance of fireworks. He lived, as he worked, in a dry, clear light. His works were what he lived for, and his reputation and theirs not only made his succession to Seeley and Acton natural but even brought fresh glory to the Cambridge School. He had drawn up the plan of the *Cambridge Medieval History*, but (as I can say perhaps better than anyone now living) he did not leave it there: he often suggested fresh chapters or additions where research had opened up new paths or where something, small, but essential might be overlooked. And he was one of the editors of the *Cambridge Ancient History*, as to which more must be said. His name is thus closely bound up with our Cambridge School as it appears before the public. It can be seen, even if dimly, that we stand for a view of history, large in its conception and accurate in its details. No History school could ask for more, and this conception, large in its outlines and finished in its details, was what Bury aimed at.

In his Inaugural Lecture (26 January, 1903) he laid down his view of what History was: "a science, no less and no more." These words

are easy to say, although they are misunderstood by the public (and by some writers, standing, if I may be allowed to say so, on the fringes of the Oxford School, although far from its centre) to mean that History must be dull. But Bury passed on to speak of the process of thought which underlies the study of History no less than it does the course of events. It was precisely that which Bury felt and tried to realize for himself. A few years after he had delivered this lecture I heard him read a paper before a College Society. He was dealing with the great Greek historians: it was just after he had given his Lane Lectures at Harvard (1908) on the Ancient Greek Historians. A competent critic (it was Mr T. R. Glover) pointed out a seeming difference between the conception of History he gave us then, and that which he had given in his Inaugural Lecture. In his reply he said, with something of the detached irony noted by the writer of the notice in *The Times*, that he never thought he was doing his duty unless he changed his views at least every two years. What he meant us to understand was that new sides of his great study were always opening before him, and that was one of his greatest and best characteristics. His changing treatment of the decay of the Roman Empire is an illustration of his changing judgments as his knowledge grew[1]. He had the largeness of conception as well as the large array of details always before him. He sought a completeness of equipment, which enabled him to call up an ordered array of facts. In the classical languages, he was, of course, a scholar of the foremost rank (I remember that great historian, Sir Adolphus Ward, speaking to me of his admiration for Bury's Greek scholarship): of the Slavonic languages he had a wide although naturally less accurate knowledge (I amused Vinogradoff by saying that I could get a Russian letter translated at Cambridge without running to Oxford): and he read Magyar and Rumanian. With such a preparation and such an outlook Byzantine history was his natural field and there he was a master indeed. The invaluable fourth volume of our *Medieval History*, for which he did so much and summed up some tangled periods so ably, is a real monument to his memory. And his *History of the Later Roman Empire from the death of Theodosius I to the death of Justinian* (1923) is perhaps his most powerful work. It carried on studies which he had published as early as 1889, but there was an astounding advance in knowledge and in mastery. In particular his account of Cyril and Methodius and the conversion of the Slavs was a brilliant piece of work, as complete in its easy mastery as

[1] *V.* vol. I. ch. III of *History of Later Roman Empire* [1889]. Contrast vol. I. ch. IX. pp. 308–313 [1923], where he says (p. 311) that "the success of the barbarians... cannot be explained by any general considerations," but he had accepted some in 1889.

in its knowledge of Slavonic research. The learned periodicals of Eastern Europe were as familiar to him as the *English Historical Review* or the *Cambridge Historical Journal* (in which he took the deepest interest and for which, even in failing health, he was ready to do much)[1].

And in passing I may be allowed to remark that some writers have over-estimated the influence of Gibbon upon him. The rationalist phase, which has been ascribed to that influence, was not, I think, so permanent or so deep as it seemed at one time to be. It had not marked his period at Dublin and (although here like Gibbon) the growth of Christian civilization always interested him, as his *Life of St Patrick and his Place in History* (1905) showed. And in that book he not only tried to show the methods of historical criticism, on which he often lectured, but showed how the trained historian could rise above the views and prejudices which were expected from a patriotic Irishman such as he always was.

No historian ever wrote with a more conscientious study of original sources, and here, with his grand linguistic knowledge, he had a broad field open to him. But no other historian that I know of has shown such a regard for his forerunners, and such real appreciation of their labours. It is so easy for a modern writer, in his wish to be original and even more, to appear so, to forget those who have written before him. This snare Bury was too true a scholar and too great a historian to fall into. His edition of Gibbon, with its invaluable Appendices and its illuminating notes, is one of his most masterly works. He felt what Gwatkin, for instance (who had read, re-read and annotated Gibbon before he came here as a freshman) knew, that the reading of Gibbon is an education in itself. So too he turned to re-edit Freeman's *Federal Government* and *Historical Geography*: like Freeman he believed in the continuity of history, and so he tried to remind the present age of the works of the past, which (as all we poor examiners and still poorer reviewers know) are so often forgotten. One who had learnt much from Herodotus and Thucydides was not likely to forget Gibbon and, although on a lesser scale, Freeman.

Many students passed in all probability through our Cambridge School without knowing how deeply the Regius Professor cared for their welfare, but his *Student's Roman History* and his *History of Greece* might have taught them better. No other small history, for instance, brings before them the letters of Pliny, and his sketch of Greece almost suggests a writer who only knew the ancient world. Yet I heard him

[1] The first article in the *Cambridge Historical Journal*, vol. I. No. 1, 1923 "A lost Caesarea" was by Professor Bury. During 1925–6 he served on the Editorial Committee.

lecture on the Papacy of Pius IX, and then he seemed most entirely at home in the modern world. He knew like Seeley that all history was one, and like Acton that all history was life. It was the great process that he always saw.

It was a misfortune for us that failing health so often and so long deprived us of his leadership. We on the teaching side felt this most deeply. And so perhaps I may end on a more personal note. Professor Adcock, as one of his fellow editors for the *Cambridge Ancient History*, tells me how, even when ill-health restricted his labours, he was always most helpful in suggestions, and in guiding writers even where he had (and this with him was peculiarly rare) no expert knowledge. He wished to let the writers tell their tale as they thought it should be told. But it was his task to keep the balance of the whole. And as a colleague no one was kinder, more helpful, or more sympathetic when difficulties sprang up. In the *Medieval History* I found the same, as my successors have told me they always did. He was always ready to help, and it seemed as if he felt it almost a pleasure to be interrupted in something he was busy with. So I learnt to love the man as I learnt to see what he knew, and it is as a great friend no less than as a great scholar that his loss must be mourned. He brought to our School a reputation already great, and Cambridge, with Dublin and indeed with the world of learning at large, is richer for such a memory.

(2) HIS VIEWS ON THE SCIENCE OF HISTORY, WITH A RECENT LETTER ON PERSONAL BIAS IN THE WRITING OF HISTORY

THE *Inaugural Lecture* of Professor J. B. Bury contained a passage which awakened much interest and some discussion in the historical world. "It has not yet become superfluous to insist that history is a science, no less and no more; and some who admit it theoretically hesitate to enforce the consequences which it involves[1]." He stated that the idea of evolution or development had transformed the conception of history. "It bids us consider the whole sequence of events up to the present moment as probably no more than the beginning of a social and psychical development, whereof the end is withdrawn from our view by countless millenniums to come. All the

[1] *Inaugural.* Cambridge University Press [1904].

epochs of the past are only a few of the front carriages, and probably the least wonderful, in the van of an interminable procession[1].'

"And here I may interpolate a parenthesis...I may remind you that history is not a branch of literature. The facts of history, like the facts of geology or astronomy, can supply material for literary art; for manifest reasons they lend themselves to artistic reproductions far more readily than those of the natural sciences; but to clothe the story in a literary dress is no more the part of a historian as a historian, than it is the part of an astronomer as an astronomer to present in an artistic shape the story of the stars. Take, for example, the greatest living historian. The reputation of Mommsen as a man of letters depends on his Roman History; but his greatness as a historian is to be sought far less in that dazzling work than in the *Corpus* and the *Staatsrecht* and the *Chronicles*[2]."

The last paragraph of the *Inaugural* (pp. 41–2) runs "I may conclude by repeating that, just as he will have the best prospect of being a successful investigator of any group of nature's secrets who has had his mental attitude determined by a large grasp of cosmic problems even so the historical student should learn to realise the human story *sub specie perennitatis*; and that, if, year by year, history is to become a more and more powerful force for stripping the bandages of error from the eyes of men, for shaping public opinion and advancing the cause of intellectual and political liberty, she will best prepare her disciples for the performance of that task, not by considering the immediate utility of next week or next year or next century, not by accommodating her ideal or limiting her range, but by remembering always that, though she may supply material for literary art or philosophical speculation, she is herself simply a science, no less and no more." Everyone, who knew Bury or reads Professor Whitney's note, would expect to find that he somewhat modified this view in later years. In the preface to the *Life of St Patrick* (Macmillan, 1905), p. viii n., he qualified his original statement as follows, in view of the discussion that had arisen[3]. "In vindicating the claims of history to be regarded as a science or *Wissenschaft*, I never meant to suggest a proposition so indefensible as that the presentation of the results of historical research is not an art, requiring tact and skill in selection and arrangement which belong to the literary faculty." And he explained that the text of the *Life* is "an effort in the art of historiography," while the *Appendices* "represent the work which belongs to the science of history[3]."

[1] *Inaugural*, 28–9. [2] *Ibid.* 17.

[3] Among those who took part in the discussion were John Morley, *XIXth Century and after* [Oct. 1904], G. M. Trevelyan in the *Independent Review* [1903]; *v.* also H. M. Gwatkin, *The Knowledge of God* [1906], II. 21, 282, S. H. Butcher, *Harvard Lectures on Greek Subjects* [1904], Lecture VI.

It has been pointed out above (p. 192 n.) that Bury insisted in 1923 on the importance of "a sequence of [particular] contingencies" in producing the barbarian conquest of the western provinces of the Roman Empire "which cannot be explained by any general considerations[1]." A careful and exhaustive explanation of the general relation of contingency to determinism was given by him in the *Idea of Progress*[2].

A still more interesting example of his later view is to be found in the *Morning Post* of November 30th, 1926, which is here reproduced by courtesy of the Editor.

SIR,

In reference to your article on "The Writing of History," it seems to me that it would be necessary first to elucidate two or three fundamental questions. For instance, Is history a sequence of contingencies, and can our knowledge of events of the past claim to be much more than a *fable convenue*? But to go into either of these problems is impossible here, it would need too much space and lead too far, but there is another fundamental question about which I will venture to make a brief observation.

It seems to be always assumed as self-evident and universally admitted that impartiality and freedom from bias are indispensable qualifications in every historian's ideal of how history should be written. Here I totally disagree, I do not think that freedom from bias is possible, and I do not think it is desirable. Whoever writes completely free from bias will produce a colourless and dull work.

Bishop Stubbs, our great authority on the early constitutional history of England, has remarked somewhere, if my memory does not betray me, "That it seems as if history could not be written without a certain spite[3]; and it is a fact that the most effective histories have usually been partial and biassed, like those of Tacitus, Gibbon, Macaulay, and Mommsen, to take familiar examples. Is there any event or any transaction worth investigating or writing about on which the writer can fail to have a definite bias if the subject really engages his interest?

[1] *History of Later Roman Empire* [1923], I. 311.

[2] [1920], pp. 303–4.

[3] It is here that the inverted commas should stop. The quotation is not verbal, but seems to be based on the following passage. Lecture V of Stubbs' *Lectures on Medieval and Modern History*, Oxford, 1887, p. 124. "It seems as if...no one has the spirit to undertake it [such work] unless he is stirred by something stronger than the desire of being useful, the desire of ventilating some party view or destroying the character of some partisan opposed to him."

And it will be admitted that otherwise he cannot hope to produce anything that will engage the interest of the world.

No history can be instructive if the personality of the writer is entirely suppressed; it will be dead and colourless and inhuman, however faultless it may be in detail, however carefully the rules of historical method may be applied.

J. B. BURY

ROME