

Bury, John Bagnell

(1861–1927)



Michael Whitby

John Bagnell Bury (1861–1927)

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Bury, John Bagnell (1861–1927), classical scholar and historian, was born in co. Monaghan, Ireland, on 16 October 1861. His father, the Revd Edward John Bury, curate of Monaghan, subsequently rector of Clontibert and canon of Clogher, had married Anna Rogers of Monaghan, 'a very clever woman and a great reader' (*DNB*). Edward Bury was a sound classicist, and introduced his son to Greek and Latin at a precocious age: John began Latin at four, and as a youth his command of Greek was such that Professor Robert Yelverton Tyrrell was unable to disconcert him during an examination in Greek grammar.

After attending Monaghan diocesan school and Foyle College, Londonderry, Bury entered Trinity College, Dublin, in 1878 and in 1879 came first in examinations for classical scholarships. In 1880 he spent six months in Germany at Göttingen,

studying Sanskrit, Syriac, and Hebrew; in the same year he visited Italy for the first time, and won the Bishop Berkeley medal for Greek, a distinction of which he remained proud. In 1881, while still an undergraduate, he collaborated with Professor John Pentland Mahaffy in editing Euripides' *Hippolytus*; in his introduction Mahaffy gave Bury the main credit for 'sifting the materials and composing the notes', whereas 'the critical suggestions, the illustrations and the opinions propounded' were a joint effort. In 1882 he graduated with a double first, taking first place in classics and fourth in mental and moral philosophy; his especially distinguished answers in classics earned him a large gold medal and a studentship of £700. He now embarked on a campaign, which lasted three years, to secure a fellowship at Trinity: in the 1883 examinations he obtained third prize; he spent the autumn of 1883 in Leipzig, working for the 1884 examinations when he was awarded the Madden prize for classics; his labours were rewarded in the 1885 diet when he became a fellow. As he confessed to a friend, Nathaniel Wedd of King's College, Cambridge, he had worked 'to the extreme limit of his powers' (Baynes, 3). The publication in *Hermathena* of emendations on Pindar, Euripides, Sophocles, Diogenes Laertius, Hesychius, Sappho, Catullus, Cicero's letters to Atticus, and Plautus reflects the breadth of his reading.

In September 1885 Bury married his second cousin, Jane, daughter of John Carleton Bury, physician of Mitchelstown, co. Cork; they spent their honeymoon in north Italy, where they visited Ravenna, but an epidemic prevented a planned visit to Greece. The marriage produced one son, Edward Basil, born in 1891.

Early intellectual interests

Bury's intellectual interests were always wide. Philosophy was part of his undergraduate studies, and he remained under the influence of his preferred master, Hegel. Music inspired him with its ability to transcend the constraints of time and space, but poetry was an even greater interest and pleasure. Swinburne was one favourite, even if he came to feel that the poet's romanticism was an obstacle to recovering the cheerful spirit (*euphrosynē*) of the ancient Greeks. In 1882 he delivered a paper on Browning's philosophy to the Browning Society in London, which attracted the poet's attention; Bury presented Browning as a writer who helped his readers make the transition from the world of experience to the realm of eternal truths, and who recognized the universality of the individual. He addressed the society again in 1886. One result of this devotion to poetry, in combination with his linguistic skills and lively sense of humour, is the sequence of translations into Greek and Latin verse, published in the magazine *Kottabos* between 1888 and 1895 (Bury himself was editor from 1888 to 1891). He regarded verse composition as a training in the virtue of words, whose disappearance from British scholarship would be a sad day. A similar approval for the educational virtues of useless learning informed his reaction to the retention of compulsory Greek at Cambridge in 1891: universities should not be converted into utility institutions for technical, commercial, or other training — transferable skills and graduate employability did not concern him.

Bury's commitment to interpreting classical texts produced numerous publications, of which the most substantial are editions of Pindar's *Nemean Odes* (1890) and *Isthmian Odes* (1892). In spite of his philological skills, these editions did not have a major

impact since much of Bury's commentary was devoted to the ingenious tracing of verbal responses within the poems as an attempt to recover the texture of Pindar's poetry. Critical reaction to the *Nemean Odes* forced him to adopt a much more defensive position in the *Isthmian Odes*; thereafter, even though he asserted that he would confront the objectors, he abandoned his projected edition of the rest of Pindar. The editions, however, remain interesting since they reveal Bury's conception of the essential spirit of ancient Greece: he was attracted by Pindar as a poet whose celebration of the victories of great men of old would not tempt readers to modernizing interpretations; Pindar reflected the authentic quality of the Hellenic spirit through his depiction of the bright place in which his heroes lived. Bury's evocation of the life of the Aeginetan élite is more readable than his intricate literary theory.

Bury's enduring claim to fame is as a historian of the late Roman and Byzantine empires, though the epithet Byzantine would have been anathema, and his involvement with these topics is manifest in publications in 1888: he reviewed de Boor's edition of Theophylact and Sotiriadis' study of John of Antioch, and wrote his first article devoted to a Byzantine topic, on Theophylact Simocatta's chronology; he also demonstrated his familiarity with Gibbonian rhetoric by composing a stylistic parody devoted to the theme of home rule. These preliminaries scarcely suggested the magnitude of his achievement in the following year, when he published a long article on the emperors of the eleventh century, based on the narrative of Michael Psellus, as well as his first major work, *A history of the later Roman empire from Arcadius to Irene (a.d. 395 to a.d. 800)*, an account in two volumes, over 1100 pages. For Bury, eastern Roman history was a phase of Hellenic history, and so the History stresses continuities from the classical world: 'No "Byzantine Empire" ever began to exist; the Roman Empire did not come to an end until 1453' (*A History of the Later Roman Empire*, v). But his lack of sympathy with Christianity entailed that one of the major forces shaping the development of the eastern Roman empire received inadequate attention, and his preference for the deeds of the great, evinced in his editions of Pindar, ensured that there would be little attention to social history: Bury missed the value of hagiography for illuminating the lives of lesser individuals, and thereby for achieving a fuller understanding of the development of those societies to whose constitutional and institutional continuities he was devoted. However, the 1889 History at once established his international reputation: Henry Tozer, writing to congratulate him, stated, 'I have good hopes that your graphic manner of presenting your subject, and your agreeable style, will do much towards awakening a general interest in the history of the Eastern Empire' (Baynes, 6). The expectations may have been too sanguine, but the assessment of Bury's literary qualities is accurate.

Chairs at Dublin and Cambridge

In 1893 Bury was elected professor of modern history at Trinity, a post which he was allowed to retain even after appointment as regius professor of Greek in 1898. In 1902 he received an honorary Doctor of Letters from Oxford and was appointed regius professor of modern history at Cambridge, the position which he occupied until his death. He was elected to a fellowship at King's, where he was pleased to find colleagues who shared his anti-clerical views. His inaugural lecture was devoted to

the independence of history as a scientific discipline; history was not to be the servant of literature, a source of background information about a sequence of 'great works'; nor was it the educator of public figures, even though this view had been proclaimed by his two favourite Greek historians, Thucydides and Polybius. Rather, history deserved to be studied because of its value to human life, since the present can only be understood through reference to the past. The lecture's message was the triumph of rational investigation, a belief propounded in his earliest publications when he had attacked the superstitions and orthodoxy of 'maw-filled, crop-full Christians' (*Browning Society Papers*, 1, 1882, 261). Study of history offered mankind a chance to advance through the progress of knowledge, but, for history to supplant the institutionalized power of centuries of religious restraint, it would need to be conducted with exceptional rigour, hence the need for scientific history. By emancipating itself from the literary approach to historical evidence advocated by Jowett in the nineteenth century, history could proclaim its independence and, though remaining a humanist discipline, attain to the precision and objective truth with which the sciences were currently credited.

Bury's inaugural attracted such attention that numerous latecomers could not find space in the hall, but he did not have a great impact on undergraduates. He disliked the constraints of the Cambridge historical tripos, which focused on set books: instead he proposed a system of open-book examinations. If in this respect Bury anticipated academic developments by almost a century, other aspects of his professorial service are now less favoured: he had a healthy contempt for university bureaucracies, and declined to sacrifice the time and thought demanded by administrative duties. On the other hand, he did encourage those interested in research, being generous with time and advice: the young Norman Baynes and Stephen Runciman both benefited from the intimidating stimulation of such contacts. Professor Fay of Toronto commented that 'a talk with Bury was almost like being present at the making of history' (Baynes, 51).

Histories of the classical world and Byzantium

During the 1890s Bury continued to publish on classical topics. In 1893 there appeared his *History of the Roman empire from its foundation to the death of Marcus Aurelius (27 b.c.–a.d. 180)*, a work commissioned by the publisher John Murray. Bury had a low opinion of Romans: 'Their intelligence was solid and commonplace, moving rigidly on old lines; they were incapable of striking a new vein or of conceiving a new idea' (Baynes, 15). He was a Hellenist, and this preference is evident in the preparations which attended his other major contribution to the history of the classical world, the *History of Greece to the Death of Alexander the Great* (1900). Bury travelled extensively in Greece in 1895: Mr Bosanquet, who accompanied his tour of the classical sites of central Greece, commented that Bury was:

a delightful companion with his mind full of everything in history and literature that bore upon the places we visited. He knew just what he wanted to see or verify on each site and carried the classical authorities in his head and quoted

them with wonderful precision. He had a thought-out programme and adhered to it with placid obstinacy. (Baynes, 20–1)

Bury's good humour rendered tolerable a tour undertaken in bad weather through a region where facilities were often rudimentary and banditry an alleged threat. After this trip he published a series of articles which demonstrated his ability to fuse his critical mastery of textual evidence and familiarity with Greek geography. *The History of Greece* has stood the test of time far better than its Roman counterpart, and, as revised by Russell Meiggs, is still widely used as a text book for first-year undergraduates: if it fails to impart a notion of the diverse development of Greek societies and cultures, its clear exposition of a series of historical problems still makes a useful introduction to the principles of studying ancient history.

At the same time, however, Bury was even more active in later periods of Hellenic history, namely the later Roman empire and Byzantium. Between 1896 and 1900 he brought out a seven-volume edition of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*, providing the great work of another rationalist anti-clerical writer with a scholarly apparatus of notes and appendices which discussed the views adopted in the text and presented contemporary scholarship. He also wrote a series of articles on historical problems, especially from the sixth century: his study of the Nika riot (*Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 1897) remains the fullest analysis of the complex sources for this incident, and displays his sympathetic knowledge of the chronicle of John Malalas on whose text he had worked in the Bodleian Library at Oxford. In 1905 he published *The Life of St. Patrick and his Place in History*, whose scholarly basis had been established in numerous detailed studies published in the preceding four years. For Bury, Patrick was part of his study of the late Roman world, where the influence of Christianity served to spread Roman practices beyond the empire's frontiers; this classical approach to Patrick, coupled with his distaste for Christianity, meant that Bury, despite his precise scholarship, ignored the Irish dimension to the construction of Patrick and so failed to comprehend his inspirational power.

Patrick could be seen as a distraction from Byzantium, to which he had only devoted brief notes or reviews during these years, but Bury returned to his main theme in 1906 with an article, 'The treatise De administrando imperio', in the *Byzantinische Zeitschrift*. His interest in the writings of Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus is already evident in his 1889 History and in appendices to Gibbon, while in 1898 he had promised a new edition of these in the series Byzantine Texts which he was co-ordinating. He did not embark on this labour, and parts of Constantine's writings still require a modern edition, but this interest produced his most enduring scholarship: in 1907 Bury published 'The ceremonial book of Constantine Porphyrogenetos' (*EngHR*); this article was followed in 1910 by *The Constitution of the Later Roman Empire* (publication of the 1909 Creighton lecture) and in 1911 by *The imperial administrative system in the ninth century, with a revised text of the Kletorologion of Philotheos*. This last was identified by Norman Baynes as 'probably the greatest single piece of pure scholarship that he ever produced: it would be difficult to praise this masterpiece too highly' (Baynes, 34), a judgement which remains true. It exploited Bury's talents as masterly philologist, sensitive elucidator of administrative structures, and devotee of the history of eastern Rome; it is essential reading for those

interested in the structures of the middle Byzantine world, but also repays consultation by those concerned with other periods of eastern Roman history, since Bury was alert to the changes in institutional hierarchies over the centuries.

Bury's other major Byzantine work of this period, *A history of the eastern Roman empire from the fall of Irene to the accession of Basil I (a.d. 802–867)* (1912), continued the story of the Hellenic Roman world from his 1889 volumes; this could be praised as 'a revelation of the method of the scientific historian', though this rigorous approach has resulted in 'a collection of monographs rather than a history' (Baynes, 35), a work which lacks an artistic unity. Even during this period of late Roman preoccupation, Bury continued to publish notes on classical texts and in 1908 delivered a course of lectures at Harvard entitled 'The ancient Greek historians'; in reality a series of historiographical essays, these were published in the following year. His historical range was revealed by a contribution on Russia 1462–1682 to the *Cambridge Modern History*, as well as a projected biography of Catherine II.

A scientific historian

In 1910 Bury began to experience health problems, whose seriousness was disguised from all but a small circle of friends by his own determination and the support of his wife; he never fully recovered from eye trouble which afflicted him in the winter of 1910–11, and thereafter there were periods when he was unable to read. Ill health perhaps spurred him to produce a historiographical testament, the *History of the Freedom of Thought*, which expounded most explicitly the rationalist beliefs that had always spurred his approach to historical study. It charted the progress of mankind from the freedom of the Greeks, through the servility of the middle ages, to the emancipation of the modern period. In this work, composed 'with fire and force', Bury was concerned with the grand theme, and hostile reviewers, especially those alienated by his animosity to the church as an agent of repression, found plenty of scope for criticism on details. His rationalist views on the nature of history were further expounded in the *History of the Idea of Progress* (1920), which developed some of the themes of his inaugural lecture. But it is appropriate that Bury's last major composition was devoted to east Rome, the *History of the later Roman empire from the death of Theodosius I to the death of Justinian (a.d. 395 to a.d. 565)* (1923), 1000 pages in two volumes; the period covered is less than half that of his 1889 *History*, and the treatment is necessarily much denser. Equally appropriate for the philhellene is his commitment in his last years to the *Cambridge Ancient History*, of which he was editor-in-chief and to whose earlier volumes he contributed numerous chapters on classical Greek history and literature. From 1918 Bury spent every winter in Rome for his health, and it was there, at the Hotel Ludovisi, that he died on 1 June 1927.

Bury's assessment of Thucydides in his *Ancient Greek Historians* (1909) is applicable to his own achievements as a historian: he was not concerned to entertain but to establish a record whose truth would ensure its permanent utility; accuracy was of prime importance. As a scientific historian Bury rigorously excluded his own personality and opinions from his writings; events should be followed rather than moulded to fit an artistic plan; chance played a key role in determining the course of

history so that it was misleading to search for general causes for grand sequences of events, especially in the remote past. One example of the avoidance of personal judgements is his refusal to portray any major character from later Roman history, although he admitted the relevance of personal qualities and motivations in the historical process: even for Justinian, who dominates the second volume of the 1923 *History*, Bury contented himself with providing readers with materials to form their own character assessment while not committing himself. To the last he was a classical philologist who had converted to History. As a result many of his works fragment into collections of articles: particular issues are dispassionately dealt with in meticulous detail, but the place of each discussion in the wider work is overlooked. However, the fact that the best of these monographs are still required reading for specialists is testimony to the importance of Bury's historical scholarship. If his objectivity and precision suggest a dry personality, this was belied by his lively wit and happy conviviality, which endured even through his long battle against illness. His boyish good looks remained famous, and Bury seems to have delighted in exploiting them to surprise the unwary: Norman Baynes, on first encountering the distinguished professor, mistook him for a fellow undergraduate.

Sources

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Wealth at Death

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