

## *John Robert Seeley*

SINCE Sir John Seeley's death a good deal that is interesting has been said, both about his remarkable personality and his historical and literary work. Older men have recalled the half-forgotten controversy that raged round 'Ecce Homo' and the well-kept secret of its authorship, and younger men have contributed appreciations of 'The Expansion of England,' and have pointed out how Seeley's exposition of English colonial policy touched a new chord of patriotism, and roused in ordinary men a new feeling towards their splendid inheritance. The result of this has been that although during his lifetime Seeley's name was not much before the public, yet the public have been enabled to realise the extent of their loss. They understand now the magnificent range and vitality of the writer who in the sixties was discussing at once reverently and suggestively the historical problems connected with the life of Christ, and in the eighties was popularising the imperial idea, and promulgating doctrines from a professorial chair which have already had a considerable influence upon practical statesmanship. But one very important aspect of Seeley's work has been left untouched—his work as one of the most stimulating and inspiring of Cambridge teachers. Of this the present article seeks to give grateful account.

His old pupils used to say that Seeley's lectures were, at any rate, an education in lucidity and thoroughness—virtues which they were accustomed to claim as specially characteristic of the university in which he was, for a quarter of a century, Regius Professor. His published work was elaborated in a way that his readers never realised, for as a rule he was sparing of footnotes and references, and made no parade of the pains he took. The exception is his diploma work, 'The Life and Times of Stein.' Dedicated to Reinhold Pauli, and with a quotation from Goethe at the back of the title-page, it is conceived and carried out after the German plan. The biography of Stein involves a detailed history of Prussia between 1806 and 1822, 'abundant information about other German states, and about Germany in general' is given, and 'biographies of other distinguished men, such as Hardenberg,

Scharnhorst, and others,' are 'interwoven with the biography of Stein.' The authorities on which the text is based are classified and described in the preface in an orderly manner, and though the style is dry and unimpassioned, nothing escapes the writer. And the method of 'Stein' was Seeley's ordinary method. The posthumous work on 'The Growth of British Policy,' still in the press, is based on forty manuscript volumes of extracts copied from the Record Office and other sources. Critics who read his finished work, and talk of 'hasty generalisation,' fail to appreciate the laborious process by which the finished work was produced. This habit of thoroughness Seeley communicated insensibly to his pupils. He never preached it to them, but it soon came to influence unconsciously the standard of criticism which they were accustomed to apply to what they wrote for him. To spare trouble was regarded by him as a kind of treason, and thus, though some of us might be flighty and others dull, we never scamped our work.

The other transcendent merit of Seeley as a teacher was his habit of insisting first of all upon clearness of thought and expression. It was never permitted to us to wrap up fallacies in fine phrases, or to use high-sounding terms that had not been defined. There was nothing that the professor enjoyed more than exposing this kind of imposture, and with him it was rarely attempted. He hated above all things the picturesque in history. 'That is the business of the stage-manager and scene-painter,' he would say, 'and not of the historian.' The business of history was with serious things, with great causes and great results. 'I fully admit,' he writes in 'The Expansion of England,' 'that history should not be solemn and pompous, and I admit that for a long time it was both. But solemnity is one thing, and seriousness is quite another.' And this hatred of the picturesque in history was largely due, as a correspondent in the 'Journal of Education' has acutely pointed out, to the severity of his artistic feeling. He was accustomed to keep strong restraint upon himself, to concentrate deliberately his whole attention upon clearness, and clearness only. His lectures consisted largely of dry statements of fact, marshalled, indeed, with such skill that their very order and arrangement were suggestive, but handled as a lawyer would handle them who was directing his argument not to the jury but to the judge. Yet in spite of this resolute self-restraint, Seeley, himself a poet, as we have come to know since his death, was always keenly alive to the poetry of history, and when he chose, the effect was irresistible. The modern theory of our colonial empire has become practical and prosaic under the hands of recent writers. Captain Mahan has worked it out on the naval side, and Mr. Spencer Wilkinson has popularised its more business-like aspect, until even the man in the street knows something of the way in which the empire

was built up; and of the policy by which it may be preserved. But the romantic story was first told in a Cambridge lecture-room, and told in such a way as to stir the imagination and quicken the pulses of the dullest undergraduate among the audience. Seeley's conception of the empire was the conception of a poet as well as an historian. To him it was a 'world-Venice'—

The sea is in the broad, the narrow streets,  
Ebbing and flowing.

This is almost commonplace now, but upon some of us it came fifteen years ago as a revelation.

If Seeley's style was highly artistic, it was also highly artificial. The effects were consummate, but they were all carefully planned. His voice was never strong, but it was clear, and he managed it with the utmost ability, using all the delicate shades of emphasis. The lucidity of his arrangement seemed almost to communicate itself to his reading, and to find physical expression, as it were, in his modes of speech. His old pupils will recollect also with what infinite skill he utilised a slight cough, in order to point a sentence or emphasise a phrase. His use of quotations was masterly and suggestive in the highest degree. He once summed up a long passage that dealt with the important place occupied by religion in early states: 'We may say of states, as Wordsworth did of men,

Heaven lies about them in their infancy.'

Readers of the little-read volume published in 1870 under the title 'Lectures and Essays,' and republished only a few weeks ago, will also remember the quotation with which he concludes his striking parallel between Milton and Carlyle at the end of the essay on 'Milton's Political Opinions.' The same habit of deliberately working up his effects is to be traced in the subject-matter of his lectures as well as in the literary form into which they were thrown. He would take pains to travel to the same conclusion by several roads in order to make it appear irresistible. Lines of argument, however different, converged inevitably upon the same point. The result was that one of the greater objects of the teacher was secured, and it became impossible for his scholars to misunderstand or to forget what he was teaching them. They left the lecture-room feeling that though other departments of knowledge might be affected by the process of the suns, the conclusions of the Regius Professor of Modern History were established upon adamant foundations. This note of dogmatism was in all Seeley's professorial utterances. Personally reserved and reverent, when he spoke *ex cathedra* it was with no uncertain sound. Even in its published form 'The Expansion of England' begins with the words, 'It is a favourite maxim of mine,' and those who were accustomed to hear him lecture will recollect the autocratic phrase, 'according to me.'

Yet this dogmatism appeared as the natural expression of an austere and dignified personality, and it was impossible that it should ever be resented. The professor had studied all the sources, and had arrived at certain results; why should he make a pretence that he did not himself believe in them? The monarchical manner sat well upon one whose sovereignty in his lecture-room was so absolute and unquestioned.

In selecting subjects for his public lectures Seeley was attracted most by the international history of modern Europe. Of late years he has lectured on 'Napoleon,' on 'English Foreign Policy in the Eighteenth Century,' 'International History from the Sixteenth Century,' 'The Wars of Louis XIV,' and congenial subjects of the kind. 'The Expansion of England' itself was a course of lectures delivered in 1881-2. Quite recently he delivered a course on 'Political Science,' dealing especially with the classification of states. Thus he was accustomed to study the broad effects. He preferred what he called 'large considerations,' and was much more at home in dealing with a century than with a decade. The whole drift of his mind was towards the suggestive treatment of large phenomena, rather than the microscopic investigation of details. Thus 'The Expansion of England' rather than 'Stein' represents the kind of work he liked best. His method was, as it were, astronomical. He swept the whole heaven with his telescope. It was the heaven that had overarched all our lives, but he found new things there, and his hearers shared the delight of discovery. The old familiar facts became instinct with new meaning, and they felt 'like some watcher of the skies, when a new planet swims into his ken.'

If the various courses of public lectures delivered by the late professor during the last fifteen years were passed in review, the most characteristic, though not the best, would be found to be a course on the 'Holy Roman Empire,' delivered in the academical year 1879-80. It covered an enormous area of history, for the first lecture was concerned with the fall of Rome before the barbarians, and the last dealt with the characteristics of modern democracy. The purpose of the course was 'to follow out in each of its stages the transformation of the Roman empire into modern independent states,' and this gave abundant opportunity for the historical paradoxes which Seeley loved. In these discursive lectures he summed up, as it were, all the views with which his name has been specially identified. From time to time, in parallels drawn from Scripture history, the author of 'Ecce Homo' spoke. In a lecture that dealt with the progress of the 'nation-states' in the eighteenth century, 'The Expansion of England' was foreshadowed. In the final lectures of the course Seeley sketched out the conception of Napoleon that was to come before the world in his 'Short History of Napoleon' in 1886. The lectures are full of the protests

in which he took so much pleasure against rhetorical views of history.

We are not to imagine that the claims of Hildebrand had been deliberately planned from the beginning, and held in reserve by generations of popes till the time was ripe for urging them. These are melodramatic and sentimental, not sober views of history. We have to explain, not an incredible priestly plot, woven through a thousand years, but a transitory exaggeration of a sacerdotalism which had been in existence since the beginning.

A similar opportunity came again in his treatment of English liberty, which he was careful to regard as the result of geographical and other favourable conditions.

When we look at Europe from a distance we shall be tempted by the ethnological fallacy, we shall attribute the political success of Englishmen exclusively to 'English political capacity,' or to the 'quiet perseverance,' the 'common-sense,' or the 'natural moderation' of the Anglo-Saxon in distinction to all other races. It is, no doubt, hard to reject the doctrine that we are better than other people when it presents itself in the form of a grand inductive law.

But while he denounced rhetorical views of history, the majestic longevity of the Holy Roman Empire inspired him to a rhetoric of his own. After a long and close discussion of the 'Romanism' of the middle ages, in which he saw a combination of 'Romanity, the religion of the Seven Hills,' and 'Christianity, the religion of Mount Zion,' he pointed out that Dante perceived the double character of Romanism in his day.

Dante, led by two guides, Beatrice, who symbolised Christian theology, and Virgil, who 'was born under Julius and lived under the good Augustus,' sees in the deepest pit of hell's ninth circle the giant Lucifer, with his three mouths, in which he champs eternally three great criminals—in the one Judas Iscariot, for a reason we can easily understand; and in the other two, Brutus and Cassius, because they murdered the first Roman emperor.

The point is not that there is anything new here, for the passage is little more than a paraphrase of Mr. Bryce, but that Seeley, in spite of his apparent renunciation of rhetoric, was keenly alive to the rhetorical possibilities of his subject. He rejected a rhetorical view, but he did not reject a rhetorical statement of a sober view, and his habit of deliberate self-restraint enabled him, when he did use rhetoric, to use it with prodigious effect. He was himself the pattern of these austere virtues, and yet he wielded all the spells of eloquence as well. It was as though, like King Solomon, we had chosen wisdom, and received riches also. Thus from the beginning Seeley's supremacy over young men was assured.

But this supremacy did not rest upon the professor's public lectures alone. His old pupils carry with them grateful recollections

of his 'Conversation Class.' The subject was political science studied by way of discussion, and discussion under the reverential conditions that prevailed resolved itself into question and answer—Socrates exposing the folly of the Athenians. It was mainly an exercise in the definition and scientific use of terms. What is liberty? Various definitions of the term would be elicited from the class and subjected to analysis. The authors of them would be lured by a subtle cross-examination into themselves exposing their inconsistencies. Then the professor would take up his parable. He would first discuss the different senses in which the term had already been used in literature. Coleridge admired the French Revolution as a triumph of liberty because he liked 'the free motion of the clouds;' Shelley, in the 'Masque of Anarchy,' suggests that starving men are not free; according to him liberty is something to eat. Some writers speak as though it were decentralisation, and Mill uses it to express independence of public opinion. From an examination of these inconsistent accounts the professor would proceed to the business of building up by a gradual process, and with the help of the class itself, a definition of his own. Liberty is the opposite of government, and there is perfect liberty only where there is no state. Thus liberty is not necessarily good, and there is no point in the common antithesis between liberty and licence. We are not concerned here to defend the definition, but only the method of the great teacher who promulgated it. It was not told us on authority as something to remember, but we assisted ourselves at the creation of it. Thus it became a possession to be enjoyed with a title analogous to the title of authorship. It took an hour to define liberty, but the leisurely process had the highest educational value. It was an application to literature of the methods that are usually regarded as peculiar to science.

And this leads naturally to what lay behind all Seeley's public teaching, his definite and reasoned conception of the nature and functions of history. According to him, history has an allotted place among the sciences, and is in a fair way to become an exact science itself. He would sometimes put it that history is the residuum left by the sciences as they take possession one by one of the various departments of phenomena. 'At one time all phenomena were recorded by historians. Livy tells us that a bull spoke, but now this department has been annexed by physiology.' But the phenomena that are left to history can be dealt with scientifically. 'There is a 'political' science, the science of states. The method of this science is similar in character to that of other sciences; it proceeds by observation and induction, though it is unable to conduct experiments. It is therefore all the more dependent upon a large supply of trustworthy registered observations. These are history. Thus the method of modern political science differs from that of the



earlier political thinkers in two ways. In the first place, where early historians took little pains to secure trustworthy observations, modern historians take immense trouble about the authentication of facts, and apply to recorded observations tests which are not needed in any other science. In the second place, where Aristotle reasoned concerning the best state, modern political science sets aside deliberately the problems of good and bad. There is also another close resemblance between the method of political science and that of the other sciences, for in a sense the state can be described as an organism. The analogy was noticed by early writers, as in the fable of the Belly and the Members, or in the phrase of St. Paul, 'schism in the body.' But it is not more than an analogy, since the development of the state is partly self-conscious.

Though Seeley makes large concessions to his critics when he admits that the conclusions of political science are incapable of verification, and the development of the state organism is partly self-conscious, he held firmly himself in all his public teaching to his main position that a scientific treatment of history is possible. He set himself 'problems,' constructed 'formulæ' for the 'solution' of these problems, and regarded the explanation of historical 'causation' as his principal business. Thus his attitude towards the political controversies of history was naturally that of a man of science. 'Some historians,' he would say, 'do not classify corrupt governments or states of low civilisation. It is as though a scientific man should refuse to classify a centipede on the ground that he disapproved of creatures that had more than four legs.' Thus he thought with Freeman that there was no real distinction for the historian between ancient and modern history, although, unlike Freeman, he found it convenient for certain purposes. And the same attitude of mind led him to refuse to distinguish, on the other side, between history and politics. According to him all the phenomena of states are the proper business of the historian, and it is from the labours of the historian that the statesman obtains materials for forming a judgment. 'History,' he said, 'is the school of statesmanship.' If the question had ever been put to him, he would probably have held that the functions of a royal commission are historical in the strict sense of the term. That his literary instincts should have prevented his being always consistent is not surprising. It is the author of a vehement moral condemnation of Napoleon who writes :

The danger of the controversial study of history is, not that it makes us judge unjustly, but that it makes us judge at all. Men are apt to forget the proper historical question, and to lose exactitude of definition in exuberance of praise or blame.

No one was more sensitive to the charm of romance, or more habitually inclined, by stating a paradox in the very process of

explanation, to make his audience feel the attraction of the unexplained. Yet it is he who says in another place :

Some would have all history partake of the nature of romance, but in reality history is the exact opposite of romance. Romance excites wonder: history appeases it: romance seizes upon the marvellous, the unaccountable: history, by explaining causes, destroys the existence of the unexplained.

It will be doubted by some whether Seeley's view of history is one that can be maintained in the present imperfect state of human knowledge. His critics may be disposed to regard his use of the terminology of science as somewhat misleading; they may urge that the concessions made to them are so great as to involve a practical surrender of the whole position; the fact remains that for five-and-twenty years an acute and subtle thinker invested this view with an irresistible fascination. And there can be no doubt that for the purposes of education it possessed great practical value. Seeley's method taught a high sense of the dignity of history, and this in turn drew out the best powers of those who studied it under him, and inspired them with the kind of devotion to a subject which is only found among those who thoroughly believe in it. They felt that they were not concerned with musty records so much as with the great elemental forces that determined over centuries of time the organised life of mankind. The method also encouraged definiteness in investigation, for the true historian was not a mere digger in likely places on the chance of finding spoil. And if it was all based on a dream, a suspicion may sometimes cross our minds that the hope of completing the imperfect chains of causation and filling up the gaps in human knowledge, which at once inspires and gives definiteness to ordinary scientific investigation, is based upon a dream also. Whether Seeley was right or wrong in his view of history, matters little to his memory. It is sufficient that he was a great influence in his day and generation in favour of thoroughness of investigation, of habits of clear thinking and lucid expression, and that he did all in his power to bestow upon his pupils the incommunicable gift of style. Many who are middle-aged men to-day, in the full stream of active life, thought of him to the end with the same reverence as when they sat at his feet as scholars. It is in his teaching that they find the source of that intellectual inspiration which sometimes comes at the impressionable time of life, like the philosopher's stone, to transmute base metal into gold.

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