

## VISCOUNT BRYCE OF DECHMONT, O.M.

1838-1922

JAMES BRYCE was born in Belfast on the 10th of April, 1838, the eldest son of Dr. James Bryce, afterwards master of the Glasgow High School, and of Margaret Young, daughter of a Belfast merchant. On his father's side he was of pure Scottish blood, descended from Covenanters who had fought in the Civil Wars of the seventeenth century. His mother was Northern Irish, with a Celtic strain in her composition; and it is not fanciful to attribute to this mingling of the Scottish and Irish elements in his nature that union of caution and sobriety with imaginative ardour and sympathy which was characteristic of Bryce's public life and literary activities.

The Bryce family were greatly concerned with knowledge and education. Two of Bryce's uncles were well-known schoolmasters, one in Belfast and the other in Edinburgh, while his father was not only a first-rate mathematical teacher, but an enthusiastic geologist and a pioneer in his advocacy of the claims of natural science to be included among the subjects of school study. To his father's wide range of scientific interests Bryce owed an early initiation into many branches of natural science which did not then usually come within the purview of classical students. Indeed, his first publication was a contribution on the Flora of the Isle of Arran (1859) to a work upon that island published by his father. During the summer holidays he and his father had many a ramble together in Antrim and over the beautiful country in the neighbourhood of Glasgow, in which full scope was given to the boy's geological and botanical tastes. The elder Bryce was much interested in geography, and at the age of twelve the son knew most of the peaks of the Bernese Oberland and the Pennines from pictures and descriptions and could give the heights of many of them. These interests did not vanish with the passage of years. He retained them through life. Thus, travelling through Mashonaland and Basutoland in 1895, he collected and dried thirty-five specimens of plants, eleven of which were new to botanical science, and in the very last months of his long life he was engaged upon the compilation of the Flora of Forest Row, his country home in Sussex. Moreover, it was at his suggestion that President Taft's Cabinet dispatched a geological mission to the Panama Canal

to reap the geological lessons of the Culebra cut. These scientific interests afforded him great enjoyment and enriched the value of the books in which he recorded his travels and experiences of other lands.

In 1857 Bryce won a scholarship at Trinity College, Oxford, after a distinguished career at Glasgow University. Coming of a strict Presbyterian family, he was resolute against the acceptance of the Thirty-nine Articles which was then commonly required as a condition of election to a scholarship, and in deference to his staunch protests the condition was waived. His undergraduate career was one of exceptional brilliance, showing him to be possessed of great gifts as a classical scholar and historian, and culminated in a Fellowship at Oriel, then the blue ribbon of a University career. Like his friend, E. A. Freeman, he was a strong Liberal and a great sympathizer with the Italian *risorgimento*. Indeed, at one time he seriously contemplated joining Garibaldi as a volunteer. Politics, however, were not allowed to claim too much of his time. After a short spell of Oxford teaching he determined to make his way at the bar.

Meanwhile, in 1863, he had won the Arnold Historical Essay prize with an essay on the Holy Roman Empire, which on its publication (in a greatly revised form) in 1864, at once established his reputation as an historian. The Holy Roman Empire has gone through many editions. It has been expanded and amended and freshly connotated, but it has never been superseded, and it still remains the best contribution of a British scholar to the interpretation of German history. The critic may perhaps contend that in his exposition of the theory of the Empire Bryce has failed to distinguish between successive phases of opinion and has concentrated into one coherent system of beliefs fancies and ideas which shaped themselves differently in different centuries; or again it may be urged that the general impression left by the book is one in which the practical impotence of the Empire is insufficiently emphasized as compared with its theoretical importance. In such observations there may be some substance, but they do not seriously detract from the solid merits of a study which is so good that it will never become obsolete.

In 1865 Bryce began life in London, reading in the chambers of Mr., afterwards Sir, John Holker; but though he became a good English lawyer, and succeeded in acquiring a fair practice (mainly commercial), the life of a practising barrister never greatly appealed to him, and from the first he grasped opportunities of combining other activities with the study and practice of the law. Thus, in 1866, he became Assistant Commissioner of the Schools Enquiry Commission, and two years later a lecturer in Law at Owen's College.

His high academic attainments received still further recognition when he was appointed in 1870 to the Regius Chair of Jurisprudence at Oxford. The fruit of Bryce's Oxford teaching (always a very subordinate part of his multifarious activities) is contained in two substantial volumes published in 1901 and entitled *Studies in History and Jurisprudence*. In these lucid and discursive addresses, which treat of topics so different as the law and custom of ancient Iceland, and an analysis of the motives which combine to give support to political obedience, Bryce showed that he gave no narrow or pedantic interpretation to the duties of his Chair. It was, indeed, his main duty to excite an interest in the subject of Roman law, and when he laid down his Oxford work in 1893 he could claim with justice that the subject was in a very much stronger position than had been the case when he was first appointed to the Chair. But he did not limit himself to an exposition of Justinian or Gaius. For him law was a part of general history, one index (among many) of the stage of civilization reached by society, and to be expounded with all the illustration which the historian and traveller could bring to bear upon the theme. In particular he was interested in the age of Justinian, and always proposed to write a life of the great Roman legislator. That, however, was one of the many literary projects which was left unaccomplished; but among the preparations for the unwritten book was a happy search in the Barberini Library (January 1883), which resulted in the discovery of the lost life of Justinian alluded to by Nicolo Alemanni in 1623 in the first edition of the *Anecdota of Procopius*.

Meanwhile hardly a year passed without foreign travel. Leslie Stephen instilled into him a love of mountaineering during a tour through Transylvania in 1866, and Bryce's early travels in the Dolomites, in the Pyrenees, in Iceland, and in Portugal were generally combined with some stiff climbing. Being small, light, and tough, full of endurance and courage, with an excellent geographical sense, he was a good natural climber, though he had not the professional's passionate interest in the athletic side of mountaineering. The feat for which he will be principally remembered among mountaineers was his ascent of Ararat in 1876, not by reason of any exceptional mountaineering difficulties, but because he was alone for the last part of the way and had to climb in cloud and against time at a very high altitude. His experiences on this journey are recounted in *Transcaucasia and Ararat*, the most delightful of his travel books.

The journey in the Caucasus and back to Constantinople for the first time brought Bryce into immediate contact with the circumstances of Turkish misrule. The desolation of Asia Minor and the unhappy

position of the Armenian nation made a deep impression on him, and when he entered Parliament in 1880 as Member for the Tower Hamlets he was already known as a prominent member of the Eastern Question Committee and as a champion of the Armenian cause. His views upon this question were strong and clear cut and remained unmodified to the end. He held that the Turk was incapable of governing Christian people, that the Armenians alone could regenerate Asia Minor, and that Great Britain had undertaken a special obligation towards the Christian subjects of the Porte under Act 61 of the Treaty of Berlin. During the twenty-seven years of his House of Commons life Bryce took every opportunity of advocating these views.

Though politics necessarily absorbed a great deal of his time, and though he held office in three administrations and made many valuable contributions to debate, it cannot be said that the House of Commons was Bryce's sphere. Many other men with not a tithe of his ability have made better Parliamentarians. The truth probably is that his manner was too didactic to suit the fastidious taste of that assembly, and that he was known to be occupied by too many other interests. The House of Commons is a jealous mistress and is impatient of divided loyalties.

One of the interests which was at this time competing with the House of Commons was the United States. Bryce paid his first visit to the Western Republic in 1870 with his friend Albert Dicey and was captivated by the interest attaching to this great democratic experiment. Other visits followed in 1881 and 1883, and then in 1888 the fruit of his inquiries was published to the world in his *American Commonwealth*. The book was at once received as the most authoritative exposition of American public life since De Tocqueville's classical volumes half a century earlier. It is true that other writers had expounded the Federal Constitution, but no one had embraced in one and the same survey an account of the federal constitution, of the working of the party machine, of the State and municipal constitutions, and of the social and religious life of the people. It is probable that Bryce was too indulgent to the worth of the Federal Constitution, which is not without its grave defects; but the picture which he drew of the corruption of State politics was severe, and but for the mitigation which the author found in the private life of the American people and portrays to the readers in the third and concluding volume of his work, would have created a damaging impression of democracy as practised in the West. One remarkable feature of this extensive work is the degree to which it

was built upon personal inquiries. As a photograph of the United States in 1888 it is unequalled. Subsequent editions, since they have added information belonging to a later date, have not improved the accuracy of the impression.

Meanwhile, in 1885, his London constituency having disappeared as a result of the Redistribution Act, Bryce was elected member for South Aberdeen, a constituency which remained faithful to him, despite all the ups and downs of the Liberal Party, so long as he was in a position to sit in the House of Commons. A safe and loyal constituency is a great help to a busy politician, and in the electors of South Aberdeen Bryce found a continuity of support such as constituencies in the southern part of the island rarely afford. For a few years, while the Irish Home Rule question was to the fore and the Liberal Party was in power, Bryce had little time for learned publications. He was Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster under Mr. Gladstone, and President of the Board of Trade under Lord Rosebery, each office carrying with it the labours associated with a seat in the Cabinet; and in addition to this he served as Chairman of a Royal Commission on Secondary Education. But with the eclipse of the Liberal Party at the General Election in 1898 a new prospect of leisure was opened out of which Bryce was prompt to take advantage. He determined to pay a visit to South Africa, a country which was rapidly coming into the public eye, owing to its sensational material development and the menacing rift between the Dutch and British elements of the population. The impression which he formed of the land and its inhabitants was subsequently embodied in a volume which still remains the best account of the permanent factors in South African life. Bryce and his wife (he had been married to Miss Marion Ashton in 1889) travelled everywhere and saw everything except what was carefully concealed, the preparations for the Jameson raid, the news of which reached them on their homeward voyage. The general conclusion which Bryce drew from his travels was that although indignation had been caused by the obscurantist and in some respects oppressive government of President Kruger, there was no fundamental social antagonism between Boer and Briton, and no reason why, with patience and prudent handling, their differences should not be composed. Accordingly, when war actually broke out, Bryce ranged himself among the critics of the Government. His view was that the whole course of the British negotiations with the Boers had been handled with a signal lack of prudence. 'I do not', he said, 'believe that the Government wanted war; my opinion is that they went on thinking that the Boers would yield.' As, however, the

conflict had begun, he contended that it must go on until the Boers accepted defeat. Then the settlement should be as magnanimous as it could be made.

Bryce's pro-Boer sympathies involved him in much unpopularity; but though he was cautious in the formation of his views, he was not the man to run away from opinions when he found them to be unpopular, and since in the long run there is nothing which pays better in English politics than courage, he had his reward. In 1905 the Liberals came back to power in overwhelming numbers. Bryce became Secretary for Ireland, a laborious post, and one in which no great achievement was at that time possible. Bryce, however, had keen Irish sympathies and threw himself *con amore* into all the problems of Irish government. He was not, however, destined to be long in this new post, for in 1907 Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman invited him to undertake the British Embassy at Washington.

Though Bryce was not a professional diplomat his appointment to the American mission was generally applauded, and there is no part of his busy public career in which he did work of such incontrovertible value as the six years during which he represented Great Britain at Washington. It fell to him to clean the diplomatic state of many ancient controversies, and though the opposition of the American Senate frustrated the ratification of a Treaty of Arbitration which had been signed by Mr. Knox, the American Secretary of State, the relations of Great Britain and the United States were greatly improved as the result of his mission. His great personal popularity in America, his ceaseless journeys, and innumerable addresses to Universities and other learned bodies, his obvious appreciation of the good points in American life and character, were even more effectual to this end than his actual handling of diplomatic problems.

In international affairs much depends upon atmosphere. Bryce created the atmosphere in which difficulties promptly dissolve themselves. Moreover, he made it a point of special importance to establish confidential relations with the Canadian ministers, and was wont in any special case of difficulty to arrange for a personal conference. He was the first of our British ambassadors to regard himself as an ambassador not to a government or a court, but to a people.

The periods of vacation permitted to an ambassador were so husbanded as to be employed in the characteristic purpose of extending Bryce's knowledge of the planet. One holiday was spent in a tour through South America, the story of which is recounted in a delightful volume which exhibits to full advantage Bryce's remarkable talent for describing landscape; another in a voyage through Aus-

tralasia, from which (seeing that Labour Governments had just been established in that region for the first time) valuable lessons were extracted as to the working of democratic institutions in new countries. Finally, when Bryce laid down his office in May, 1913, he and his wife travelled home by Japan, China, and Siberia, taking an arduous trip into the little-known recesses of the Altai mountains on their way.

On his return to England Bryce, who had on two previous occasions declined a peerage, received the honour of a viscounty, and was well content to find in the House of Lords an arena in which he could contribute to the conduct of public affairs. Though seventy-five years of age, he was still full of vigour, as eager as ever for travel (he voyaged through Palestine in the spring of 1914 and through French Morocco in 1920), and bristling with literary projects. Of these the most considerable was a work on *Modern Democracies* which was published in March 1921. Here are to be found Bryce's most mature reflections upon the working of democratic principles in the United States, in Canada, in France, in Switzerland, and in Australasia. Britain was deliberately omitted, from the fear that a suspicion of partiality might attach to his handling of British politics and contribute to lessen the authority of the whole book. Such excess of scruple is characteristic of the man. Bryce was indeed a strong Liberal in British politics, and did not hesitate to use vehement language about his political opponents in private speech and correspondence, but when writing as a political philosopher he could be trusted to exercise a strict impartiality. A certain air, not perhaps of pessimism but of chastened expectation, pervades his treatment of democracy. It had failed to realize the hopes which he had entertained of it, and was clearly open to great abuses, and if it were to be preferred to other forms of government, it was because they were even more liable to corruption. In particular he noted the declining reputation of Legislative Assemblies. Only in well-constituted Second Chambers did he discover a remedy for the defects most commonly charged against modern Parliamentary bodies. This was no new doctrine with Bryce. He had always been a Second Chamber man, and had presided with great ability over a Conference on the Reform of the House of Lords in 1918.

The outbreak of the European War came as a great shock to Bryce. Not only did he hate all war, but a war with Germany, a country in which he numbered many personal friends and from whose vast stores of learning he was conscious of having derived great benefit, was inexpressibly painful to him. The invasion of Belgium, however, seemed to him to leave the British Government no alternative; and

once in the war he was opposed to a patched-up peace. In August 1914, he accepted the Chairmanship of a Committee to inquire into alleged German outrages in Belgium, a hateful duty unflinchingly discharged, but the principal part of his political thinking during the national emergency was devoted to the preparation of a scheme for a League of Nations, a subject upon which he corresponded with his American friends, being more particularly anxious that the plan should be ready before the end of the war and that it should be elaborated by a Joint Committee of American and British workers. President Wilson, however, declined to accept the proposal for a Joint Committee, and to Bryce's keen disappointment the Americans declined to join the League. Nevertheless, he did not surrender his hope that the two Anglo-Saxon peoples could co-operate to secure the peace of the world, and being invited to deliver a course of lectures in 1921 at the Institute of Politics at Williams College, gave upon this, his last visit to America, an eloquent expression to this, one of the principal aspirations of his political life.

Despite his multifarious activities Bryce was pre-eminently a man of learning and the friend of learned enterprises. The foundation of the *English Historical Review* in 1885 was due in part to his initiative, and he was also concerned with the institution of the British Academy in 1902. Of this body he was an original Fellow, and afterwards (1913 to 1917) President. In addition to his services to the Academy on the Council he delivered four Presidential addresses, which illustrate the immense width of his knowledge and interests. In one of these he states the position of a learned authority in relation to war.

'The Council has thought it better not to let these events disturb the even tenor of its way, but rather desirable that we should seek in the pursuit of our studies a measure of occasional rest and refreshment of mind from vexing anxieties and dolorous thoughts. . . . The general feeling has evidently been that the more all learned bodies are kept outside the passions of war the better for them and for the nation.'

And it is in accordance with these principles that he deprecated proposals that were sometimes made that action should be taken against the Corresponding Fellows who were subjects of States with which this country was at war. 'Bryce', writes Sir Frederick Kenyon, 'believed in the Academy, and by his belief and ungrudging willingness to spend himself in its service did more perhaps than any other Fellow to raise it to its rightful position.'

Bryce died suddenly in his sleep at Sidmouth on the 22nd of January, 1922. On the last day of his life he was working at a paper on Troy and Ithaca which was to have appeared in a volume

of *Memories of Travel*. Later on a journey to Rome was in contemplation with a view to the completion of the long projected *Life of Justinian*. A long career of happy and distinguished activity was thus brought to a close before any sign of declining zest or enterprise had made itself visible.

Bryce was a man of many and varied friendships, as is evidenced by his *Studies in Contemporary Biography*, a charming volume published in 1903, in which he portrays many of the eminent men with whom he had been brought into contact at Oxford, at the Bar, and in political life. His happy marriage, his good health, his vast range of interests, his balance of practical and intellectual activities, made his career peculiarly enviable. In an age of minute specialization he succeeded in preserving something of the omniscience of the medieval savant, for he had travelled in every part of the world save the Malay States and Borneo, maintained a vast acquaintance in two hemispheres, and managed to keep abreast with the march of knowledge in so many fields that it was difficult to say of him whether he was more distinguished as historian, jurist, traveller, or man of affairs. Certainly the British Academy possessed in him one of the most illustrious and variously gifted of its Fellows.

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