

ARTHUR JAMES BALFOUR

(EARL OF BALFOUR, K.G., O.M., P.B.A.)

1848-1930

BY the death of Lord Balfour on 19 March 1930, the Academy lost one of its original members, an ex-President, a colleague of exceptional distinction, and a warm and effective friend of its work. It is not the task of a memoir such as this to recount or to criticize the career which made him one of the foremost statesmen and one of the most outstanding personalities of his day. With politics, except in the form of history or science, the Academy is not concerned. For the Academy, Lord Balfour was a philosopher and a President. After a brief summary, therefore, of dates and facts necessary to form the framework of a biographical notice, the main portion of this memoir will be devoted to a survey, by Professor C. C. J. Webb, F.B.A., of his contributions to philosophy, which will be followed by an account of his work for the Academy, and by a brief appreciation (by his successor in the Presidency) of his personality.

Arthur James Balfour was born on 25 July 1848, at Whittingehame in Haddingtonshire, the house of his father, James Maitland Balfour. He was educated at Eton and Trinity College, Cambridge; and Scotland, Eton, and Cambridge were loyalties to which he never failed to respond throughout his life. His mother was the second daughter of the second Marquess of Salisbury and sister of the third Marquess, Disraeli's colleague and successor. The way to a political career was therefore plain to him, and he entered Parliament in 1874 as member for Hertford. After being initiated to official life as his uncle's private secretary (including attendance at the Berlin Congress in 1878), he began to attract notice as a member (somewhat loosely

attached) of Lord Randolph Churchill's 'Fourth Party' when his party went into Opposition in 1880. On the return of the Conservatives to power he held office successively as President of the Local Government Board, Secretary for Scotland, and Vice-President of the Committee of Council on Education for Scotland; but the first proof of his quality came when he was appointed Chief Secretary for Ireland in the troubled years 1887-91. Thenceforward his career belongs to history. He was First Lord of the Treasury and Leader of the House of Commons under his uncle's Premiership for ten months from October 1891, and again from 1895 to 1902 when, on Lord Salisbury's retirement, he became Prime Minister. Defeated in 1905, he led the Opposition till 1911, when, in consequence of the misguided impatience of some of the younger members of the party, he retired. The war brought him back to public life and to office, and he rendered invaluable service to the country in the Coalition Government, serving as a member of the War Cabinet, First Lord of the Admiralty, Foreign Secretary, and (when the war was over) President of the Council. In 1919 he was a distinguished member of the Peace Conference, and again did admirable service as the principal British representative at the Washington Conference in 1921. In 1922 he retired from office with an earldom, but returned to the post of Lord President in the Baldwin Government of 1924-9. Though no one was a more convinced and loyal supporter of his party than he was, in the last fifteen years of his life he was rather one of the 'Elder Statesmen' of the whole country, trusted and respected by all, and loved by those who had the privilege of knowing him. He died, after a long period of slowly fading strength, on 19 March 1930.

The list of his honours is too long to enumerate. He held the two most select of distinctions, the K.G. and the O.M. He was Chancellor of Cambridge and Edinburgh Universities, Lord Rector of St. Andrews and Glasgow, Honorary Doctor of nearly a score of universities, President of the

British Association in 1904, and a Fellow of the Royal Society as well as of the British Academy.

These distinctions were not merely the tributes paid by learning to public service. They were earned by distinguished contributions to philosophic thought, and by a genuine interest in the progress of science. It was as a philosopher, not as a politician, that he became a Fellow of the British Academy, and it is to his contribution to philosophy that this memoir is principally devoted.

Professional philosophers are sometimes tempted to regard one who is not one of themselves, yet whose great position in the world draws attention to his utterances on philosophy, as a mere *dilettante*, whose contribution to the literature of the subject is not to be too seriously taken. The British Academy was adorned, until very lately, by two very eminent men, Arthur Balfour and Richard Haldane, who combined the study of philosophy with active participation in public affairs. Both were *dilettanti* in the proper sense of the word; they did not earn their bread by philosophy, but pursued it from a disinterested love of speculation on the ultimate nature of the world and of life. There was, however, a striking contrast between them. I do not suppose that any student of philosophy, whether he sympathized or not with Haldane's philosophical opinions, would have questioned that he had as much right as any professor in the land to be considered a representative of philosophy. Though he had never been a professional teacher of philosophy, he had been, as we say, through the mill; few professional teachers indeed could rival his acquaintance with the literature of philosophy. He was a statesman, but his activities as a statesman were confessedly governed by his principles as a philosopher; he was religious, but it was in his philosophy that his religious life found its sustenance and its exercise. In all these points Arthur Balfour was unlike his distinguished contemporary. He had not been through the mill; he was not, nor pretended to be,

a scholar versed in the history of philosophical thought—he has told us himself¹ that when he went up to Cambridge ‘for the history of speculation he cared not a jot’—he was never, I think, deeply interested in it—nor, on the other hand, was he a thinker with a system of his own to propound. An observer of a momentous episode in his public career might indeed note in his critical attitude alike toward the fiscal orthodoxy in which he had grown up and toward the fiscal heresy which raised its head within his political party in 1903, his combination of dispassionate interest in the economic problem with a resolution not to allow the strife of opinions to imperil a union which seemed to him required by the true interests of the country of which he was so devoted a servant, a curiously close analogy with his drastic criticism of the philosophy which he found treated as orthodox by the men of science whose conclusions he had so little inclination to dispute, his inability, notwithstanding, to accept any alternative scheme as satisfactory, and his refusal to permit either the arrogant pretensions of Naturalism or the weakness of rival systems to disturb his profound confidence in the supreme value of aesthetic intuition, of moral loyalty, of religious faith. But, although the same temper might display itself alike in his political and in his philosophical position, he made no pretence of basing his politics on his metaphysical convictions—if he had allowed that he had any. When he turned from politics to philosophy, as he often gladly did, it was to enjoy the refreshment of a quite different environment. He, like Haldane, was religious; but his philosophy was not, as with Haldane, his religion; it was at best, in the words of the secondary title of his principal book, ‘introductory to the study of theology’; and he always disclaimed for himself any title to be called a theologian. The relation of his philosophy to his religion was, however, quite clear; he would subscribe to no philosophy which put religion out of court; and, in examining a philosophy which was commonly supposed to do so, he

¹ *Theism and Humanism*, p. 137.

considered himself to have discovered that only by the help of an assumption borrowed from religion could it hope to achieve any sort of rational coherence.

His philosophical writings may indeed be said to have had all one theme; the importance of attending not only to the rational grounds but to the non-rational causes of belief. *A Defence of Philosophic Doubt* (1879), *The Foundations of Belief* (1895), the Gifford Lectures on *Theism and Humanism* delivered at Glasgow in 1914, the Hertz Lecture on *Familiar Beliefs and Transcendent Reason* delivered before this Academy in 1925, were all devoted to pressing this subject on the attention of his readers and hearers. He did not perhaps keep sufficiently apart those 'non-rational causes of belief' which were physiological or physical from those (somewhat misleadingly grouped in *The Foundations of Belief* under the head of 'authority') which, though not in the individual believer reasoned grounds of conviction, are present in consciousness and often presuppose a reasoning process in others—such as what he has happily designated as 'psychological climate'. But he certainly rendered an important service to English thought by his persistent emphasis on the antecedents of belief which are not, properly speaking, reasons; especially if we remember that, when his earlier books appeared, the 'new psychology' with its perhaps exaggerated stress on the hidden roots of our conscious convictions and purposes in the depths of our unconscious mind, had not yet brought all reasoning into suspicion of being merely the 'rationalization' of irrational impulses.

Balfour was undoubtedly justified in denying that his contention was fairly judged by those who represented him as championing universal scepticism in the interests of an authoritative creed. The 'philosophic doubt' which he defended was not, like Mansel's, a metaphysical doctrine of the essential incapacity of the human mind to know things as they are in themselves; it was a scrutiny of the claims of a particular philosophical creed to give to the human mind

the only answer to its questionings that it could reasonably demand. Nor was it, like Mansel's, extended to the deliverances of the moral consciousness. Nor, lastly, was Balfour, when he spoke of 'authority', thinking of a dogmatic creed imposed under supernatural penalties for its rejection, but rather of a 'psychological climate', in which men of science were ready enough to find a sufficient explanation of their neighbours' religious convictions, while overlooking the precisely similar prejudice which the indisputable successes of natural science in its own field created in favour of a philosophy professedly founded upon scientific principles.

'Psychological climate'—that of Cambridge in the late 'sixties and early 'seventies—had certainly much to do with Balfour's attitude of aloofness from a contemporary school of philosophical thought whose criticism, inspired by Kant and his successors, of the same 'naturalism' against which his own works were directed, eventually displaced it from the predominant position which it occupied in British seats of learning in the third quarter of the last century. The sense of humour which as a rule added so greatly to the charm of his writings—writings which, in the brilliance and ease of their style and in their entire freedom from pedantic technicality, carry on the best tradition of English philosophical literature—surely failed him when in *The Foundations of Belief* he described the Idealism which by that time had become prevalent at the sister University in smaller print than that used in the rest of the book, with the implication that he did not expect or wish any one to trouble his head about it, if he did not feel especially drawn to do so. Yet it is sufficient to quote such a phrase as 'We know in part, and therefore know wrongly'¹ to show how closely his own thought often approached that of thinkers of the type with which he found it so difficult to feel himself at home.

Had he not told us himself that the third Earl of Shaftesbury was not to him an attractive writer,² one would, I

¹ *The Foundations of Belief*, ed. 1895, p. 269.

² *Essays and Addresses*, 1893, p. 86.

think, have been disposed to see in that 'noble author' a philosopher whose position was curiously similar to Balfour's. Like him, Shaftesbury was a *dilettante* in the best sense of the word; like him the acute critic of a dominant philosophy closely allied with the scientific movement of the time, which seemed to him false to the obvious facts of aesthetic and moral experience; like him a champion of cultivated common sense, impatient of scholastic dogmatism and pedantry. Perhaps there was after all a certain subconscious sense of this likeness which sharpened Balfour's dislike of one who, he thought, wished to be considered a finer gentleman and a finer writer than he really was, and whose affectations jarred on a man, accused himself by others of affectation, who yet knew himself to be in truth profoundly in earnest about the most sacred interests of humanity.

I mentioned that Balfour, like Shaftesbury, objected to the Naturalism which he criticized that it gave no adequate account of the facts of aesthetic experience. The subject of the nature of the beauty created by art was one by which he was much attracted. The form of art with which he was most intimately conversant was music; and among musicians he had a special devotion to Handel, to whom he dedicated in 1887 an admirable essay contributed to the *Edinburgh Review*. Of the well-known amateur society which bears the name of his favourite composer he was for many years the President, taking more than a merely nominal interest in its affairs. But his interest in aesthetic theory was not confined to one form of art. Invited in 1909 to deliver the Romanes Lecture in Oxford, he chose 'Criticism and Beauty' for his subject. He delivered the lecture itself extempore, re-writing it for publication the following year. I was probably not the only person who heard for the first time while listening to it the now familiar name of Benedetto Croce. Balfour's remarks on the Italian philosopher's *Estetica* will be found in *The Times* report of the lecture, but in the published version no reference to him appears.

Balfour was not only a philosopher himself, but the cause of philosophy in others. He was always ready to assist any enterprise intended to promote the study of it. In 1882, learning that the University of Edinburgh could not legally employ its funds in a desired experiment in extra-mural university extension, he endowed for three years a Balfour Lectureship, to which Professor Andrew Seth (now Professor Pringle Pattison, an honoured Fellow of the Academy) was appointed. To this foundation we owe two important works, *Scottish Philosophy* and *Hegelianism and Personality*, representing a movement of criticism from within the idealistic school which usually awoke, as we saw, so little response in Balfour himself—criticism directed to certain features of its doctrine with the rejection of which Balfour would certainly have sympathized. When his brother-in-law, Henry Sidgwick, transferred to an association the maintenance of *Mind*, Balfour came forward as a guarantor. Of the British Institute of Philosophy he was President from the time of its first establishment in 1925. Many years before he had been one of the chief founders of the Synthetic Society which in 1896 rose from the ashes of the Metaphysical Society, to which I believe he had himself belonged. It was to my membership of the 'Synthetic' that I owed the privilege of what slight acquaintance I enjoyed with our illustrious colleague. He was a constant attendant at its dinners in the old Westminster Palace Hotel, and at the discussions which followed them. He would come in from the House of Commons as soon as he could be spared from public business; it was a pleasure never to be forgotten to listen to his talk at table; and, when we turned to philosophical debate, to follow his acute criticisms of the paper before us or of others' comments upon it. The 'toploftiness', which an Irish M.P. is said to have ascribed to him, was never in evidence at these meetings. My recollection is of the unfailing charm of his manner, of the unreserved frankness with which he threw himself into the discussions, of the courteous attention and

quick appreciation with which he listened to every reader or speaker. When, in 1908, he thought that the Society had done its work, he made a collection of the papers read to it, and presented a copy to each member: a precious record of a delightful and memorable association with some of the most remarkable men of their generation and not least with that most distinguished Fellow and President of our Academy, of whose philosophical work this is a very inadequate survey.

CLEMENT C. J. WEBB.

Balfour was an original Fellow of the Academy, but he took no active part in its work in early years, and was never a member of the Council until his election as President. This was not due to a want of interest in its fortunes, but to the preoccupations of a political life. On the one occasion on which these orbits crossed, he endeavoured to serve the Academy. This was when, shortly after the foundation of the Academy, an application was made for a Government Grant. Tradition has it that when the application reached the Treasury, a young official exercised his gifts of sarcasm on this newly-founded body with its aspiration to represent humanistic learning, and recommended that the grant be refused. Refused it duly was by the Chancellor of the Exchequer; but Balfour, as First Lord of the Treasury, while acquiescing in the refusal, wrote a note which pulverized the young official's minute, and left a memory in the Treasury which bore fruit many years later.

In 1920 the attempt to obtain a Government Grant was renewed; but though sympathetically received by the Treasury, it failed to move the heart of the then Chancellor of the Exchequer. In 1923, however, when Balfour had become President, he readily responded to an appeal to use his great influence with his political associates. He had lately retired from office, but he had a right to believe that his advocacy would carry weight with his late colleagues; and it was a sharp disappointment to him when almost the

last act of the Conservative Chancellor of the Exchequer, before leaving office after the electoral defeat of the Government, was to refuse an application which had appeared to be on the eve of success. Characteristically, however, Balfour did not abandon a cause because it had failed once. When the Labour Government took office, he returned to the charge; and this time, with the ready assistance of another Fellow of the Academy, Lord Haldane, he was successful. The Government Grant, which makes such a vital difference to the utility and status of the Academy, was approved in February 1924. Balfour wrote as follows on hearing the good news:

I can't tell you what pleasure your letter of the 26th has given me. I was inclined to despair of the situation, and felt that no amount of individual devotion on the part of members of the Academy would enable them to do for this country what all other Academies do in their respective spheres. The relief is immense. . . .

Lord Balfour and Lord Haldane must always be gratefully remembered as prime benefactors of the Academy in this important matter.

Balfour was elected President of the Academy in July 1921. When first approached as to his willingness to accept election, he expressed his readiness to do so after the delivery of his Gifford Lectures at Glasgow should be finished. When this threatened to be delayed, he wrote to withdraw his acceptance; but an earnest appeal on the grounds of the interests of the Academy produced this answer:

Your arguments are overwhelming; and if, as you seem to suppose, it would really make a difference to the Academy what course I adopted, they are doubly overwhelming. So I withdraw my withdrawal!

It is believed to be no secret that he was also approached with a view to his acceptance of the Presidency of the Royal Society. There cannot have been many men who could be regarded as equally qualified and equally desirable to preside over the two bodies which claim to represent the whole range of humanistic and scientific learning.

In the first year or two of his Presidency his engagements made it difficult for him to attend regularly, and he never was able to give the same constant attention as Lord Bryce and some others of his predecessors. But his interest in the Academy grew with time, and not infrequently he took his place in the Chair at the regular lectures, and charmed his audience by his Presidential comments. It was always an intellectual pleasure to watch Balfour making a speech. He seldom, if ever, prepared anything in advance, and for the first few minutes his words were often halting and stumbling. Then he would strike upon some line of thought and follow it up, in his own inimitable way, with phrases of striking individuality and with a beautiful voice which added charm to all he said. He could never be prevailed on to give an annual Presidential address, such as had, in Bryce's time, been a notable feature in the Academy's year; but in 1925 he gave the Philosophical Lecture on the Hertz Foundation (on 'Familiar Beliefs and Transcendent Reason').

Balfour's Presidency terminated in a blaze of success. Negotiations had been on foot for some time to obtain official quarters for the Academy from the Government. For this purpose his prestige and influence were invaluable, and his tenure of office was prolonged for three years beyond the usual four. The negotiations were at last successful, and at a banquet held on 14 July 1927, in celebration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Incorporation of the Academy, the President was able to announce that 'in recognition of the position of the British Academy and its services to the nation, the Government has decided to assign it free quarters in Burlington House'. At the same dinner Sir Charles Wakefield (now Lord Wakefield), since known as the generous friend of the Academy who not only founded the Raleigh Lecture but also defrayed the cost of reconstructing and fitting up the new rooms, announced his gift to the Academy of Sir William Orpen's portrait of the President, which now hangs in the Council Room. One year later, on 24 July 1928, when Balfour at length laid

down the Presidency, and on the eve of his eightieth birthday, the new rooms were formally opened and a special Gold Medal was presented to him. The ceremony was followed by a luncheon which was honoured by the presence of H.R.H. the Prince of Wales, who proposed the toast of Lord Balfour's health. His reply was a worthy ending to the Presidency of one who had assisted at the birth of the Academy, who had added distinction to it by his presence in its Chair, and who during his term of office had secured for it both an assured income and a permanent home.

Two years later, at the Annual General Meeting following Lord Balfour's death, a tribute was paid to him by his successor, Mr. H. A. L. Fisher, which may serve as a fitting epilogue to this memoir:

'The death of Lord Balfour deprives the Academy of its most illustrious member and one of its staunchest friends. He was for many years our President, and during his term of office delivered the annual Philosophical Lecture. He spoke on that occasion, as was his wont, without a note, and gave to those who were present a luminous summary of the philosophical position which he had reached during the speculative labours of a lifetime. His charm, his dignity, his exquisite grace of manner and rare distinction of mind, made an instant and durable impression upon all who were privileged to meet him. Apart from politics his chief intellectual interest was philosophy—but philosophy and politics were for him closely allied, the political side of his mind giving a practical bent to his metaphysical speculations, and the philosophical side imparting a serenity and detachment to his treatment even of the most burning political issues.

'At an early age he revolted from the intellectual dynasty of the Philosophical Radicals, partly out of a dislike for dogmatism, and partly because he was profoundly convinced that the moral and aesthetic sensibilities which alone give nobility and purpose to life could only be explained

and justified on the hypothesis of a Power taking sides with the good and beautiful, and opposing all that was evil and ugly. In a series of volumes characterized by an elegance and charm of style which recall the great masters of English thought in the eighteenth century, Lord Balfour addressed himself to the task of criticizing the methods and conclusions of the Naturalist School with a view to sweeping away the obstacles to the acceptance of a Theistic interpretation of the Universe. There are some who hold that he was too sceptical to please the religious, too religious to please the sceptical. His object, however, was to satisfy himself; and it was in accordance with the general trend of his political conservatism that a mind as acutely sceptical as any of his generation was placed at the service of the old beliefs and traditional institutions of the State.

‘It is a common reproach levelled against philosophers that in action they are slow, timid, hesitating. No one could bring these charges against Lord Balfour, who in the difficult passes of political life was as swift, decisive, and courageous as any statesman in our annals; nevertheless even here he did not allow us to forget the philosopher. If the public and the House of Commons sometimes found him cold, it was because he was intellectually incapable of overstating his convictions. When an economic problem came up for discussion, he would treat it in the keen, balancing manner of the scientific student, as a matter of great interest and complexity about which much could be said. His famous Cabinet paper on Insular Free Trade is a case in point. Lord Rosebery observed to me that he had never seen a cabinet memorandum like it. Instead of a clarion call to action, it was an invitation to nicer and more exact modes of economic speculation.

‘The members of the Academy will not easily forget the last occasion on which Lord Balfour appeared in our midst. It was the day before his eightieth birthday, and owing to the happy diligence of our ever to be lamented secretary, Sir Israel Gollancz, it was arranged that the occasion

should be marked by the formal occupation of our new quarters here, by the presentation of a medal to our outgoing President, and by a luncheon at which the Prince of Wales should propose our President's health. The speeches which Lord Balfour delivered on this occasion were marked by a power and alertness of mind which seemed to indicate great reserves of physical strength; but we were listening to his wonderful voice for the last time: he has gone from us. His place on our Council is vacant, and must now be filled.'

F. G. K.