

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PAST \*

CAN we, in our busy lives, take the time to consider what we owe to the past? It is a strange question to ask today, for so much of our thought bears upon the present, so much of it is devoted to the future, that we have been trained by our modern mentors to look to the days to come, as those which will bring us hours of well-being and leisure. Unfortunately, the predictions of the modern prophets have not been fulfilled so far as material comfort is concerned, and certainly the day of leisure, in the true sense of the term, has been set much farther off in the future. The more we strive industrially, the less we gain; and the more leisure, the less culture. This is not putting these grave matters too strongly; perhaps the reason for the condition which faces the youth of today is to be found in the lack of inclination to acquire a culture which will enable him to read the riddles of life with some composure.

The young man without a knowledge of tradition, without guiding principles to maintain him in a crisis, is like a ship without rudder or compass in a storm-tossed sea. Therefore, we may devote a little thought to a review of some of the recent discoveries made by anthropologists and archaeologists, which bear directly upon the present state of thought.

When one considers that the scholasticism of the Middle Ages was based upon the classics, and that the great revival of learning which spread over England in the days of Wyclif and Erasmus was based upon the Greek and Roman authors and the Bible, it seems curious that, today, our attention should be concentrated mainly upon the productions of men of our time. This is to be attributed to what has been called the advancement of the "scientific method"; but many men still talk in exactly the same terms that we all used back in the days of Huxley and Tyndall.

These two men were the leading agnostics of two generations ago. They were undoubtedly great scientists and, perhaps, they had more to do with reshaping the ideas of our system of education than any two men of the period. Both lectured to working-class audiences and devoted much of their time to societies for the encouragement of the pursuit of knowledge. It has been

said that Huxley was largely responsible for the decline in Bible reading. He could not dispense with the Bible and, yet, he could not accept it. He considered that it was essential in a system of education, but what he called "the myths" disturbed his scientific mind and caused him hours of perplexity. Were he alive today, and just as keen as he was, as a scientist, to learn what is taking place in the world, he would be the most amazed man in England or America. For many of the Bible myths which he could not accept have been reconsidered in the light of scientific knowledge, and now it is admitted that the writers of the work, in recording the story of the past, had considerable substance on which to base what Huxley called their "myths."

Consider, first, the myth of Abraham: today Ur of the Chaldees is a place, not merely a Bible name. Also, the dates of the stories in the Pentateuch have been substantiated by the archaeologists who have worked in Egypt and Palestine. The dynasties of the kings are fairly well known now. Take another myth which disturbed Huxley and kept him awake at night: that was the crossing of the Red Sea by the Israelites and the catastrophe that overtook the battalions of Pharaoh. Scientists who have worked upon the territory now inform us that this could have

happened because the area reveals all the indications of having suffered, in the past, from severe physical and tidal changes.

Then again, Huxley was quite disturbed by the twenty-first verse of the thirteenth chapter of Exodus, which tells us: "and the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of cloud, to lead them the way; and by night in a pillar of fire, to give them light." Scientists have now found that they were heading for a volcano which was erupting and, of course, there was a column of smoke by day, and a pillar of fire by night. The construction put upon these myths by the writers of the Old Testament is not one whit stranger than the constructions which are put upon certain scientific manifestations by the scientists today. They interpret them in their own way.

Not only Huxley but other scientists have lost many nights' sleep over the report in the Old Testament of the conquest of Jericho by Joshua. They concentrated their attention upon a blast of trumpets, which caused the walls to fall down, and the command of the man at the head of the Israelites for the sun to stand still. These were regarded as unadulterated myths which no sensible man could possibly accept. Since Huxley's day, John Garstang has worked on the site of Jericho and has revealed, after excavating for

some time, that the walls did fall down and that the city was burned.<sup>1</sup> Again, scientists show that the land suffered from earthquake, and the coincidence of a blast of trumpets and an earthquake taking place just when Joshua was ready to destroy the city seems, of course, to many skeptics, to be carrying dramatic license a bit too far.

An expert, in examining some pots unearthed by Professor Garstang at a lower level than that of the Jericho of the Bible, remarked on the symmetry and simplicity of the work done 2400 years ago. He added that there was really nothing finer produced today in this respect.

We think we know a great deal about building, laying one stone on top of another, but our pride is somewhat humbled when we stand before the base of the Step Pyramid at Saqqara. Professor Cecil M. Firth of the British Museum removed the sand which had gathered during several millenniums, and found that the marble casing of the first step was intact, and so remarkable was the work that it was impossible to insert a piece of note-paper in the joints. How many books have been written on Greek architecture which have assured us that the Doric form, particularly that of the column, was original with the Dorian Greeks? Yet, strange

to say, Firth, in removing the sand at the base of the Step Pyramid, discovered a Doric temple which must date nearly 2,000 years before any known Doric architecture in the Greek archipelago.

For nearly a hundred years now the past has been antedating the past, and archaeologists and historians find that much of the work that was given to us for our studies must be rewritten. This is the day when we boast of our engineers and our builders of bridges and dams, but what an extraordinary thing it would be if some of our experts could tell us how the ancient Egyptians were able to place the marble coffins in the tombs of the Serapeum at Saqqara. Neither the entrance to the tomb, which is cut in solid rock, nor the alleys indicate in any way how these gigantic sarcophagi of the sacred bulls were lodged in the tombs. Our modern engineers are dumbfounded when they see them and speculate upon the task of putting them there.

It is well that we should keep in mind, when we are paying homage to the wonderful achievements of modern science, that there were engineers who did mighty things long before our era was thought of; and that there were philosophers with a comprehension of what life is, and what it means to man, who gave us the fundamentals

upon which we work today. Thucydides and Livy were no mean historians, and, strange as it may seem, there are scientists today who still revere Aristotle. Moreover, notwithstanding our Whitehead and Bradley, we have no Plato to deal with ideas and metaphysics; indeed, metaphysics seems to be the bane of the modern thinker's existence.

Therefore, it surely behooves us, when we are considering a system of education, to see that the young who seek knowledge should have every opportunity of entering into as wide a sphere of it as possible. This is necessary if the ripening man is to go out into the world with a background of solid information which will enable him to make his contrasts with some feeling of surety, and to apply his judgment of the utility of things with the care and sagacity of a person of understanding. Let us not forget that the term "science" is a broad one; that it is not to be applied merely to physics, mathematics, chemistry and physiology, but that, in fact, we cannot reflect for long on life itself without calling to our aid the scientific methods of the past.

But the man with the sense of humor cannot repress a smile when he knows that it takes a scientist to upset another scientist. They are

always doing that in physics and biology. Think for a moment of what has taken place in science since the days of Ptolemy! Copernicus came along and made the Egyptian look rather foolish. Then Newton appeared and gave us more up-to-date ideas of the physical laws of the universe. Then came Einstein, and he caused scientists all kinds of nightmares. Now, as Jeans says, scientists had better make no more pronouncements; they had better set to thinking for the next twenty years. You never know just when the scientist has discovered something that will confound all the fixed ideas of his brethren who lived in the generation before him. The strangest part of the matter, however, is that the poor, old, discredited past, so full of myth and fantasy, is now becoming the prime attraction of the scientist.

Consider what our grandfathers thought about Homer and his works: the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Troy to them was a superlative myth, the myth of all myths! There were no such people as Priam, Hector, Agamemnon, Helen and Cassandra. However, about the middle of the last century, there was a German boy who heard his father and uncle read the Homeric story of the fall of Troy, and he was audacious enough to believe it. This boy's name was Henry Schliemann, and he

determined to work and make a fortune so that he would have money to search for Troy and discover it. The story of Schliemann<sup>2</sup> should be one of great interest to the student. He himself has told us how he studied his languages and became a renowned linguist. He always carried a book with him, which he studied in every spare moment. Schliemann not only found Troy, but he afterwards crossed over to the mainland, and there discovered the home of Agamemnon.

How many years is it since anthropologists seemed to have a definite idea that an approximate age could be given to the period of man on earth, and that he was derived from tree-dwelling ancestors? In the middle of the last century, Charles Darwin quite upset many of us by giving us (or so it was thought he did) a lineage that made us feel rather uncomfortable. But now all these ideas are undergoing some extraordinary changes. The Peking Man has appeared, and he has shifted the age of man upon this globe back some half million years.<sup>3</sup> Strange to say, this gentleman out in China pursued just the same activities, in essentials, that we pursue today. We have found not only some of his food—the bones of animals that he ate; we have also found his tools and the grains he cultivated.

The most amazing part of this story is that he was a farmer. Rather an old industry—one that goes back 500,000 years! There were cocksure scientists during the nineteenth century who believed implicitly that the original industry was hunting, but the past tells us quite another story. Moreover, this gentleman of Peking has revealed to the anthropologists that he really was a man, and there are no signs at all about his remains that he had any connection whatever with the arboreal species whose tails were as long as their features were unprepossessing.

What a thing is science! But what a wonderful thing is the past, and, yet, it should not be strange to the thinking man that, if he really wants first-hand information on nearly any cultural subject, he must go to the past to find it. It has been stated by authorities that nothing of importance has been discovered in fundamentals and essentials since the six Greeks—from Thales to Democritus.

There was a time when scientists laughed at the notions of alchemists. The transmutation of metals was considered a subject for romantic novelists, such as Bulwer-Lytton. But Lord Rutherford, before he died, did considerable work in the transmutation of metals, and he

never hesitated to tell us that Nature herself is in the business, morning, noon and night.

It was not difficult in the Middle Ages for the people of a town to learn something of the history of the church from the architecture and iconography.<sup>4</sup> The sculptures, entablatures, and windows taught them the Bible stories. One cannot stand before a great cathedral, such as Chartres, without being impressed with the fact that the church really was "the Bible of the poor." Perhaps that was the reason why so many of the poorest of the boys of that time became great prelates. The spirit of the church, in the best sense of the term, was always there as an inspiration. It was the center of all activity of life in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Why should not the school represent for the modern boy what the church represented to the boy at the time of St. Thomas Aquinas? The church was the center of learning. Every boy who had a desire to be educated had to go to church and there he learned the history of the institution, what its tradition was, what it meant to mankind, and why it should endure.

What boy of today entering a school stops for a moment to think of the tradition of the institution? The school, unfortunately, tells him little or nothing so far as the architecture can

speak and, as a rule, schools have no sculptures and no stained-glass windows which record any of the history of the institution. Nevertheless, the boy ought to realize that he is stepping upon sacred ground, for the tradition of the school has been hallowed through the ages and is still to be regarded, in spite of all its defects, in the legitimate line of descent from such great centers of learning as Oxford and Paris.<sup>5</sup>

A Rhodes scholar, some years ago, said that he never realized what a marvelous history was to be found in the development of the college and the university until he read Sir Charles Mallet's *A History of the University of Oxford*.<sup>6</sup> Again, if we would know the higher values of those institutions and societies which we use for the purpose of gaining knowledge, we must hark back to the past.

Similar thoughts are inspired when we consider the library, for it is the vessel which contains the history of the culture of man. It is the place where the student will find the best that has been said and thought in the world. Here, again, the pupil is on sacred ground and, if he but knew it, he might be the one to be chosen for the writing of a work which does not now exist, that is, the history of the library. Think for a moment what such a history would con-

tain! For long before there were books, men wrote upon stone, impressed characters upon clay, carved hieroglyphics, such as those we see in Egypt, and inscribed their thoughts upon ivory. There was a day when kings indited a letter upon clay and encased it in a clay envelope.<sup>7</sup>

The recent discoveries at Mersin, in Anatolia (Turkey in Asia), reveal a civilization which is dated at 3800 years before this era. Not so long ago many archaeologists considered Egypt the land of old civilizations, and other workers in Mesopotamia thought the discoveries of Charles Leonard Woolley of the British Museum indicated a civilization older than that of the first dynasty of Egypt. But the Garstang finds at Mersin antedate those of Egypt and Mesopotamia.

At a lecture which Professor Garstang gave to the Society of Antiquaries in London, he exhibited wares from Neolithic levels at Mersin and, according to Professor Miles Burkitt, the great authority on the Neolithic period, this pottery belongs to the sixth millennium B.C.<sup>8</sup> So the past is reminding the present, almost every year now, that it has more to learn. Indeed, the statement attributed to Firth—that the past seems to be bent on making a fool of the



learning of the present—is being confirmed by the recent finds.

Many thinkers now wonder why it is that most of the men whom they meet fall short when it comes to the matter of acquiring some general knowledge of what is going on in the world. It is, of course, a rare thing to meet what we used to call aesthetically, a "good catholic." This meant a person who had what Matthew Arnold used to call culture; that is, to know the best that has been said and thought in the world. But is it a question of time, merely a matter of economizing the hours and planning from day to day what you are to do with your leisure? Every man has hours of leisure, if he knows it. Was it Ruskin who said that he went to bed feeling unhappy if he had not planned a full day to commence with the morn? Who does that now?

This is the age of specialization. Nowadays, every man is born with the idea of getting a job and keeping it, if he can. As the president of a large university points out, a great deal of the system of education is devoted to the notion of fitting young men for industrial or clerical work. It is an entirely new idea and some think a very poor one—one certainly not to be encouraged in a university.

Education, in the past, aimed at the making of a man. It strove to put the neophyte in the way of acquiring knowledge. Then a transmutation took place; the knowledge that the young person had acquired fermented in the mind and spirit and yielded ideas which inspired the student to pursue the line for which he thought himself best fitted. The question of work, the employment that he undertook was, in the vast majority of cases, a bread and butter matter which enabled him to keep going while he developed the ideas. After he left school and started as an apprentice in some branch of industrial activity, he had at hand the night school, to which students thronged fifty years ago. There, as a rule, he found a laboratory for his ideas, where they were developed until he was turned out as an architect, a doctor, a lawyer, an artist, a musician or whatever his bent was. Education fitted him as a vessel to contain ideas, which would enable him to work out his own spiritual salvation. The job business kept body and soul alive while he did the important work.

These questions should be asked, in all cases of young men who are half way through their courses in a college or a university: Have you no other idea in coming to this institution but one of fitting yourself to undertake a job? Is that all



you imagine is to be gained by spending four years in this institution? A year ago a Nobel prize man, and one of the greatest physicists in the world, said that in his laboratory at the university, there was a young man who had a genius for using and perfecting electrical apparatus. But he neither knew nor cared to know anything of a cultural worth beyond his specialty. He admitted that he could not enter into general conversation, and for that reason he kept to himself and spent most of his evenings at the movie. He was asked if he did not enjoy reading or if he was musical. He read detective stories sometimes; but as for music, he did not know anything about it.

Is this an unusual case? Some years ago Dr. H. R. Huse published *The Illiteracy of the Literate*. As a reviewer said, it was one of the saddest commentaries on our system of education that had been given to us. For our immediate purpose, it is only necessary to quote a few paragraphs:

The only periodicals of large total circulation not immediately dependent upon advertising are the "wood-pulps." Alvin Barklay writes of them as follows:

"A wood-pulp magazine is one of the most diluted forms of pabulum obtainable in America. It is just a half-rung below the average Hollywood movie.

For that reason it is, aside from the newspaper, the favorite reading matter of a huge proportion of the reading public."

These magazines, according to Barklay, tell three stories (with variations): Adventure, Mystery, and Love. The love stories are written for women, with the distortion implied. The "westerns" are for big and little boys. (Many of the authors of these have never been west of Pennsylvania.) "The first editor I worked under," writes Barklay, "told me on the first day of my editorial career, 'Always remember that we are getting out a magazine for the Great American Moron.'"

This seems to be hitting below the belt. It is an astonishing statement to come from Barklay who ought to know what he is writing about, but his commentary is not nearly so severe as that which fell from the lips of the head of the university librarians at their national convention in New York two years ago. This gentleman stated that they were all proud of their libraries, but they were not proud of the fact that 80 per cent of the students who had access to them left the universities "quite illiterate."

Dissociating ourselves from the type of society which reads the wood-pulp magazine and turning our attention strictly to those who pass through universities, we might ask how this condition arises. It is now conceded by educa-

tionists of the thoughtful type that it is to be attributed to "specialization gone mad," as someone said. This is a very serious charge, and if it be true, it is one which deserves the immediate and close attention of every man who is really interested in education.

Can it be true, as is so often stated, that the young man of today, with all the labor-saving devices which have come to him, cannot find time to apply himself to intellectual avocations? Have the motor car, the radio, and the movie stolen from him the best days of his years, and do these devices yield to him compensations which are of enduring value? To one who lived through the last quarter of the nineteenth century and had to work hard for bread and butter and, at the same time, search within himself for principles which would guide him to days of enjoyment in middle life, it would seem that many of the young people of today have not the intellectual capacity nor the spiritual strength to endure privation for the sake of finding cultural abundance. Reviewing the scene as it is presented at this time, we find that it is only the few who are prepared to make sacrifices in the halcyon days so that they may the better enjoy the years of middle life.

The old viewpoint as to the qualifications and adequacy of youth has changed. It is strange to hear young men and women say they have no time to do this or to do that. This condition is not to be attributed solely to what is called "the pressure of existence." Perhaps the reason for it is that there is not the inclination today to extend the period of acquiring knowledge over a lifetime. Many of these people have spent from eight to twelve years at institutions of learning where they have received not only the elements of knowledge but also the technique of how to acquire more of it. Is it all done then? Is there no more to it than, perhaps, the specialty that is to be the means of earning one's bread and butter? Like the Preacher, do they give up the ghost and say "Much study is a weariness of the flesh"? When one thinks of the labors of love concerning cultural achievement, in which men persisted until late in long lives, when there were no such labor-saving devices as we know, either in mechanics or in education, it does seem extraordinary that the desire for learning for its own sake should almost disappear.

Well, what we need is the desire for culture—the craving to know the best that has been thought and said in the world. When this comes to the reflective being and he ponders the great

question of who he is, and from whence he sprang, there seems to come into his mind the necessity for making links with the past. How did he arrive? By what means has he attained his stature? What has gone on in the long periods of the past to make him an individual? Why this?—and what else?—the thirst for knowledge. And when he places himself in the tradition of those who gave to us our soundest views of economics, philosophy, art, and poetry, he knows that he is one of the army of the men who fought with their intellects to make the world beautiful and to inspire high ideals in their progeny. And that is why the past is so valuable to us. It tells us of that fight; it shows us the great ascending scale by which men have evolved from civilization to civilization, until today they realize that they are the heirs of the paeans of the great.

The Greek idea of perfectionism was undoubtedly the highest plane of culture and refinement to which man ever aspired. "Make your life perfect" is the echo of the Man from Nazareth. He, undoubtedly, was inspired by the Greek ideal. Perfectionism was not only an intellectual achievement; it was physical also. A sound mind in a sound body. To give the care to the body that one gave to the mind was not the whole gospel of the Greek, however. He realized, as we know

from Plato and Socrates, that perfectionism of the spirit was an essential of the whole man. And the Greek appreciated the refining influence of ideas. He realized how the intellect, when it was exercised, seemed to be in a process of purging away the dross. The higher the intellect, the clearer the vision. The apex of the philosophy was to realize the divine in man, for that was the necessary ultimate for bringing about the Utopian ruler, the philosopher-king.

How far short we have fallen of these ideals, only men who have studied the past can tell. Yet so long as there is youth, there is hope, and it needs only a great revival, such as we have had in times past, to thrill our youth and set him on edge to crave something better than he gets today. But first he must realize that the condition is what he makes it; if he wants change, he must change himself. He must desire the precious things of life—the indispensable tradition which will make him realize his full worth.

#### FOOTNOTES AND REFERENCES

\*Commencement address delivered at Ripon College, Wis., June 12, 1939.

<sup>1</sup>John Garstang, *The Foundations of Bible History: Joshua-Judges* (New York: Richard R. Smith Inc., 1931), pp. 143-47; *The Heritage of Solomon* (London: Williams and Norgate, Limited, 1934); with J. B. E. Garstang, *The Story of Jericho* (London: Hodder & Stoughton Limited, 1940), esp. chap. VII, pp. 127-55; Reports in *Annals of Archaeology and Anthropology*, XIX-XXIII (1932-1936); Chester Charlton McCown, *The Ladder of Progress in Palestine* (New York and London: Harper & Brothers, 1943), chap. VI,

pp. 68-85; Sir Frederic Kenyon, *The Bible and Archaeology* (New York and London: Harper & Brothers, 1940), pp. 186-90.

<sup>2</sup> Dr. C. Schuchhardt, *Schliemann's Excavations*, trans. by Eugénie Sellers (London: Macmillan and Co., 1891). See also Dr. Schliemann's own works: *Ilios*, including an autobiography of the author (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1881); *Mycenae* (New York: Scribner, Armstrong & Company, 1878); *Tiryns* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1885).

<sup>3</sup> For more on this subject, see chap. III, "Man—Builder and Wrecker."

<sup>4</sup> This subject is elaborated in chap. V, "Émile Mâle and the Spirit of Medieval Culture."

<sup>5</sup> See chap. VII, "The Roots of the Tree of Learning."

<sup>6</sup> 3 vols.; New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1924.

<sup>7</sup> Such a one was found by Prof. Garstang. This cuneiform tablet is now in the Helen Swift Neilson collection at the Oriental Institute, Chicago. Some of these date back to the sixth millennium B.C.

<sup>8</sup> See John Garstang in collaboration with others, with a Note by Miles Burkitt, "Explorations in Cilicia. The Neilson Expedition: Third Interim Report, Excavations at Mersin: 1937-38, *Parts I and II*," *Annals of Archaeology and Anthropology*, XXV, Nos. 3-4 (Liverpool, 1938), 106. Prof. Burkitt says: "Associated with it are new pottery types which indicate that the potters had already acquired very considerable skill, and the whole complex introduces us to a very early culture—possibly as early as the sixth millennium?—which had not previously been recognised in this region. . . . This early Mersin culture . . . probably occurs over a fairly wide area."

<sup>9</sup> New York and London: D. Appleton-Century Company, Inc., 1933, pp. 6-7.

## CHAPTER TWO

# THE HERITAGE OF THE BIBLE