

**SIR WILLIAM HAMILTON, THE MAN
AND HIS PHILOSOPHY: TWO LECTURES
DELIVERED BEFORE THE EDINBURGH
PHILOSOPHICAL INSTITUTION,
JANUARY AND FEBRUARY, 1883**

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JOHN VEITCH

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SIR WILLIAM HAMILTON:

THE MAN AND HIS PHILOSOPHY.

TWO LECTURES

DELIVERED BEFORE

THE EDINBURGH PHILOSOPHICAL INSTITUTION,
JANUARY AND FEBRUARY 1833

BY

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WILLIAM BLACKWOOD AND SONS
EDINBURGH AND LONDON
MDCCCLXXXIII

PREFATORY NOTE.

THESE Lectures are printed almost as they were delivered. To the Second, that more specially on the Philosophy, I have added a few passages omitted in speaking, owing to the limit of time, but fitted to develop some of the points more fully.

J. V.

THE COLLEGE, GLASGOW,
February 1883.



LECTURE I.



I. PHILOSOPHY IN SCOTLAND BEFORE HAMILTON.— THE REGENTING AND THE PROFESSORiate.

THE study of Mental Philosophy has long been a highly characteristic feature of the university system of Scotland. Logic, Physics, and Ethics formed the almost exclusive subjects of instruction in the Arts' Faculty of the pre-Reformation universities—viz., St Andrews, Glasgow, Aberdeen—at their foundation in the fifteenth century, and for a long time afterwards. During the fifteenth, sixteenth, and even the seventeenth centuries, there was hardly a university on the continent of Europe at any time, which did not contain,—I might almost say, was not made famous by—a Scottish Regent or Professor of Philosophy, who had learned his dialectic in his native university. Just as the mediæval Scot sought service and fame on foreign battle-fields, so his poorer compatriot sought the laurel of learning in foreign universities. "The Scots," said Erasmus, "take a natural delight in dialectical subtleties;" and the names of Major, Lockhart, and Wedderburn in the

University of Paris, Mark Duncan in Saumur, Robert Balfour in Bordeaux, Gilbert Jack in Leyden, and numerous others, testify to the fact that dialectic was the strong and cultivated faculty of the Scot all through those times.

In those centuries no doubt the aim of university instruction was culture, rather than the search after new truths, or even putting men in the way of seeking new truths. It was culture, too, of a somewhat narrow kind, being that mainly of intellectual acuteness, dexterity in a debate, in *propugning* or *impugning* a given thesis. It was a culture, in fact, almost exclusively based on the Logic and Philosophy of Aristotle. The circumstances of the times led to this, the character of the teachers as mainly ecclesiastics, but above all the system of teaching which existed, that of *regent-ing*, as it was called. This meant that the student was handed over at the commencement of his university studies to a single teacher, who carried him through the four years' course, instructing him in the different subjects in turn, and finally presenting him for graduation. The teaching was mainly from appointed text-books, or from *dictata* given by the regent, in the different subjects. These the student had to master. There was little or no room for free thought on the part either of teacher or pupil. The practice of disputation, which allowed some scope for individual thought, hardly rose beyond arguments *pro* and *con* on the given thesis. It is thus clear that there could not be much progress in philosophical speculation or thought on such a system, even had the state of the country been tranquil, free from those devastating English wars,

those civil broils, those constant revolutions in State and Church, which, up to 1688, interfered with intellectual concentration, imperilled the very existence of the universities, and made the life of the Scottish scholar in his own land almost impossible. Any fresh thought which we find in these times was the swell of a wave from without. The existing theses which have come down to us show ever and anon the passing influence of a great thinker, foreign to our soil. In the sixteenth century we find traces of the influence of Ramus, in the seventeenth of Descartes and Locke. But it was only as an echo from other lands; free thought had not yet arisen in the Scottish universities: they had yet no voice of their own; they had not conquered any truth for themselves, and thus as yet had no title to mould the philosophy of other nations.

But a beneficial change and reform took place in the beginning and towards the middle of the eighteenth century. In the universities the old regenting system was broken up; the different subjects of the curriculum were distributed among different teachers; the system of the professoriate arose; the student came in contact with a new teacher at every term in his course; dictation and text-books were comparatively superseded; the professor became free to think for himself, was to a certain extent under an obligation to do so. Lecturing in English was substituted for dictation in Latin. There was also in the country greater calm and leisure for reflection; and now it was that there arose the first movement of that free thought and independent examination of the great problems of speculation, — regarding man, the world, and God, — which has grown continuously

within the last hundred and fifty years, and which has been sustained, increased, and widened by a succession of men of original power, industrious research, and simple life and manners, whose names are an honour to any land. Need I mention Turnbull and Campbell of Aberdeen; Gerschom Carmichael, Francis Hutcheson, Adam Smith, Thomas Reid of Glasgow; Adam Ferguson, Dugald Stewart, Thomas Brown, and Sir William Hamilton of Edinburgh? And ought I not to add to the memorable list, though his thinking was cast in a somewhat different mould, James Frederick Ferrier of St Andrews?¹

And what is more, the course of thought which rose and flowed onwards since the beginning of last century to our own day, has been so continuous and so marked in feature and character as to have deserved and received the name of a School of Philosophy; a school which has influenced the speculative mind alike of France and America, which mainly helped to raise the academic thought of France in the early part of this century above the husks of sensationalism and materialism, and to elevate and beautify it with a sense of the dignity of man, and the feeling of a true spiritualism.

Now I am not here to stand up for every conclusion of this school or of any school. Nor am I prepared to say that it does not require supplement, widening, in some respects courage and elevation. I do not believe in traditionalism in philosophy any more than I believe in stagnation in human life. What we gain in philo-

¹ These and other facts in the history of the Scottish universities were stated by the present writer in two contributions to *Mind*, Nos. v. vi., January and April, 1877.