

**INAUGURAL LECTURE ON
THE STUDY OF HISTORY,
DELIVERED ON WEDNESDAY,
FEBRUARY 7, 1906**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649250226

Inaugural lecture on the study of history, delivered on wednesday, february 7, 1906 by Charles Oman

Except for use in any review, the reproduction or utilisation of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including xerography, photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, is forbidden without the permission of the publisher, Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd, PO Box 1576 Collingwood, Victoria 3066 Australia.

All rights reserved.

Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form or binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

www.triestepublishing.com

CHARLES OMAN

**INAUGURAL LECTURE ON
THE STUDY OF HISTORY,
DELIVERED ON WEDNESDAY,
FEBRUARY 7, 1906**

Inaugural Lecture
on
The Study of History

DELIVERED ON WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 7, 1906

BY

CHARLES OMAN, M.A.

CHICHELE PROFESSOR OF MODERN HISTORY

OXFORD
AT THE CLARENDON PRESS

1906

INAUGURAL LECTURE ON THE STUDY OF HISTORY

It was with a feeling of deep discouragement that I realized on December 18 last, that I was expected within six or seven weeks to face my colleagues of the Modern History School, and the whole University, with an Inaugural Lecture. Such an address ought to be a sort of profession of faith, a solemn setting forth of the views which the newly-appointed professor holds, and the programme which he intends to carry out, so far as in him lies, during his tenure of his chair. I have heard many inaugural lectures; most of them were interesting, some were pronouncements of much importance and high literary merit. And now I have to come before you, not like so many of my predecessors with all the prestige of a reputation gained outside Oxford, not with the glamour of the unknown about me, but simply as a veteran college tutor with twenty-one years of essays and lectures behind me, to say what I must say. How can such a work-a-day being, known personally to almost every one here present, the most simple and comprehensible of phenomena, hope to deliver to you any message that you do not already know by heart? All that I can set forth is the impression which twenty-one years of practical teaching, interspersed with such research as my leisure would allow, has left upon my mind. I have no dreams of revolutionizing the University; I have no 'divine dis-

4 INAUGURAL LECTURE ON THE

content' about me. I have always loved my work, and I think that our present history curriculum, despite certain faults, is on the whole a very admirable compromise between the practical and the ideal. If you expect me to advocate the abolition of our examinations and classes, or the substitution of some systems of *seminars* for the tutor's weekly essay, or the conversion of our Modern History School into a technical machine for training historians, I fear that you will be disappointed. Perhaps my thrice seven years in harness have stereotyped my views and made me short-sighted in my outlook on history at large; perhaps—and this I naturally prefer to believe myself, for man is a hopeful if a fallible being—they have given me some practical lessons, which not every history professor has had the chance of learning. It is for you to judge. I can but give my humble opinion for what it is worth, on what I think that history is, and how I think it can best be taught. The theme, you may say, is trite—we have heard and read far too much about it already. Can I say anything that has not been put in a much better shape by some earlier venter of such harangues? Remember the wisdom of Bishop Stubbs's Inaugural of 1868, the passion of Freeman's declamation, the literary polish that Froude put into his half-ironical apology for himself and his works, the sober eloquence with which the present Regius Professor set forth his plea for the 'historical teaching of history'. What can I give that is worthy to follow on such a series of addresses? Nothing; I have but to deliver the comments of a practical teacher on what he has seen and what he has read during eighty continuous terms of residence in this University.

But to proceed. What have been the messages of the

history professors whom I personally remember? The chair which I myself have the honour to hold has but a short record. This is, I believe, the first inaugural lecture by a Chichele Professor of Modern History that any member of this University has ever attended. When the professorship was founded in 1862, and my dear old predecessor Montagu Burrows was chosen as its first occupant, the custom of delivering such harangues does not seem to have been yet fully established. At any rate, I can find no trace either in the oral tradition of the College, or in written archives—there was no *University Gazette* till 1870—that he thought it necessary to open his first professorial term in such a fashion. If he did set forth his views on history, and the way in which it should be taught, in any formal address, I make no doubt that it was as sensible and patriotic as was every other speech of his to which I listened, during the twenty-two years that we were members of All Souls College together. He was a man who always strove to do his duty, and we may take it that he laid down for himself in 1862 precisely the course that he actually carried out for the forty-three years of solid and unassuming work that followed his election to the chair. In his early days he was a popular lecturer—in his later time audiences had drifted away and historical teaching had taken to developments that were unfamiliar to him. But to the last his terminal lectures were carefully prepared and duly delivered: he always did his best to bring them up to the level of the last modern discoveries: he frequently composed an entirely new course: for he was not one of those professors who are contented to discharge statutory obligations by the constant repetition of a limited number of familiar exercises, in the

6 INAUGURAL LECTURE ON THE

style of the barrel-organ. Nor did he ever—like some other distinguished professors that I remember—announce series of lectures on out-of-the-way subjects and at inconvenient hours, to which nobody came, and nobody was intended to come. Many of those who were wont to speak over-lightly of him might have learned a lesson from his conscientious discharge of his duties according to his lights, under circumstances which in his later years were enough to dishearten a much younger man. Many forgot his very considerable literary output: he had published more than a dozen books, small and great, of which several—for example his *Life of Lord Hawke*—have remained the standard authorities on the subjects with which they deal unto this day. Oxford might be considered happy if all her professors attained to his standard of duty and his level of performance.

If Montagu Burrows never delivered an inaugural address, the custom which made such lectures permissible, and then practically obligatory, came in not many years after his preferment to the Chichele chair. I have read that which Dr. Stubbs delivered in 1867, and I have heard with my own ears those of his four successors. Burrows, you will note, in his forty-three years of office, saw no less than six Regius professors in occupation of the other historical chair which this University maintains, and all six of them men of mark. Dr. Stubbs's inaugural lecture started with a eulogy on King George I—rather an unpromising subject for panegyric, though that prosaic monarch deserved a moment's praise as the founder of the Regius chair. But the main thesis of his address was the praise of history for its own sake: it is curious to note that in 1867 it would seem to have been necessary to defend the study as a thing on its trial as an

educational training, and still derided as such by some of the academic thinkers of that generation. We are far from the time when Dr. Stubbs had to declare that 'History is not well used: it is taught as a task for children, it is valued only as an instrument to strengthen the memory: it is undervalued in its true character of mental training: it is learned to qualify men to make effective speeches to ignorant hearers, and to indite brilliant articles for people who only read periodicals: it has been begun from the base of ecclesiastical or political partizanship: it is made the embellishment for wordy eloquence, a source of subjects for pictorial talent that evolves grouping, features, and circumstances from its own consciousness, and then goes to its dictionary to look out names and dates for its figures: it is written for readers already known, courted, and pandered to. What wonder if there are few who love it for its own sake, when there are so few who know it as it is!' In 1867 that great man thought it necessary to defend history from the charge of being the mere handmaid of political or ecclesiastical controversy, to declare that it should be studied as an end in itself with no ulterior motives. How he would have been surprised to find that, less than forty years later, the apologetic tone of historians would be so much a thing of the past that a Cambridge Regius professor could declare that history, considered as history, has no more to do with morals than it has to do with literature, and seem almost to deprecate any attempt either to strive to make it readable, or to draw any moral deductions from its study. Stubbs believed, and most of us (I think) still believe to-day, that the science which we love is not merely concerned with the stringing together of facts in their correct order and the reconstitution of annals, but with

something more. We must draw the moral, whether we will or no: conscious that much nonsense has been talked under the name of 'the philosophy of history', that nothing is so cheap and so easy as to knock together ingenious theories from insufficient data, we yet hold that history has its lessons, and that they can be discovered and taught. 'The experience of the past,' as Stubbs wrote, 'can be carried into the present: study gives us maxims as well as dry facts.' The teacher who contents himself with arraying the facts in due order has only accomplished half his task. He must take the risk and endeavour to deduce the inner meaning of the annals that he has set forth, content to err if err he must. The fear of being detected in a mistaken conclusion, which keeps some men from drawing any conclusions at all, is a craven fear. What matter if we are proved wrong, provided that truth is advanced? All men are liable to error: true greatness of spirit is shown not by the man who assumes the pose of infallibility, but by him who joyfully accepts correction, and turns it to immediate account.

I did not hear Dr. Stubbs's Inaugural Lecture—being then a small schoolboy—but I did hear that of his successor Freeman, and those of the three professors who followed Freeman in the Regius chair. I retain a very clear remembrance of each of them, and have refreshed my recollections by looking up the records of them in contemporary periodicals. Freeman's address in October, 1884, was in the main an impassioned harangue in praise of what he called the 'Unity of History'. His thesis was that it is useless to draw a line at the year 476 A.D., and to call what goes before 'Ancient' and what comes after 'Modern': that every one who desires to study history must range freely