

**AN INAUGURAL LECTURE
DELIVERED IN THE DIVINITY
SCHOOL, CAMBRIDGE, ON
JANUARY 26, 1903**

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An inaugural lecture delivered in the Divinity school, Cambridge, on January 26, 1903 by J. B. Bury

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BY

J. B. BURY, M.A.
REGIUS PROFESSOR OF MODERN HISTORY

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THE SCIENCE OF HISTORY.

IN saying that I come before you to-day with no little trepidation, I am not uttering a mere conventional profession of diffidence. There are very real reasons for misgiving. My predecessor told you how formidable he found this chair, illuminated as it is by the lustre of the distinguished historian whom he succeeded. But if it was formidable then, how much more formidable is it to-day! The terrors which it possessed for Lord Acton have been enhanced for his successor.

In a home of historical studies where so much thought is spent on their advancement, one can hardly hope to say any new thing touching those general aspects of history which most naturally invite attention in an inaugural

lecture. It may be appropriate and useful now and again to pay a sort of solemn tribute to the dignity and authority of a great discipline or science, by reciting some of her claims and her laws, or by reviewing the measures of her dominion; and on this occasion, in this place, it might perhaps seem to be enough to honour the science of History in this formal way, sprinkling, as it were, with dutiful hands some grains of incense on her altar.

Yet even such a tribute might possess more than a formal significance, if we remember how recently it is—within three generations, three short generations—that history began to forsake her old irresponsible ways and prepared to enter into her kingdom. In the story of the nineteenth century, which has witnessed such far-reaching changes in the geography of thought and in the apparatus of research, no small nor isolated place belongs to the transformation and expansion of history. That transformation, however, is not yet complete. Its principle is

not yet universally or unreservedly acknowledged. It is rejected in many places, or ignored, or unrealised. Old envelopes still hang tenaciously round the renovated figure, and students of history are confused, embarrassed, and diverted by her old traditions and associations. It has not yet become superfluous to insist that history is a science, no less and no more; and some who admit it theoretically hesitate to enforce the consequences which it involves. It is therefore, I think, almost incumbent on a professor to define, at the very outset, his attitude to the transformation of the idea of history which is being gradually accomplished; and an inaugural address offers an opportunity which, if he feels strongly the importance of the question, he will not care to lose.

And moreover I venture to think that it may be useful and stimulating for those who are beginning historical studies to realise vividly and clearly that the transformation which those

studies are undergoing is itself a great event in the history of the world,—that we are ourselves in the very middle of it, that we are witnessing and may share in the accomplishment of a change which will have a vast influence on future cycles of the world. I wish that I had been enabled to realise this when I first began to study history. I think it is important for all historical students alike—not only for those who may be drawn to make history the special work of their lives, but also for those who study it as part of a liberal education—to be fully alive and awake to the revolution which is slowly and silently progressing. It seems especially desirable that those who are sensible of the importance of the change and sympathize with it should declare and emphasize it; just because it is less patent to the vision and is more perplexed by ancient theories and traditions, than those kindred revolutions which have been effected simultaneously in other branches of knowledge.

History has really been enthroned and ensphered among the sciences ; but the particular nature of her influence, her time-honoured association with literature, and other circumstances, have acted as a sort of vague cloud, half concealing from men's eyes her new position in the heavens.

The proposition that before the beginning of the last century the study of history was not scientific may be sustained in spite of a few exceptions. The works of permanent value, such as those of Muratori, Ducange, Tillemont, were achieved by dint of most laborious and conscientious industry, which commands our highest admiration and warmest gratitude : but it must be admitted that their criticism was sporadic and capricious. It was the criticism of sheer learning. A few stand on a higher level in so far as they were really alive to the need of bringing reason and critical doubt to bear on the material, but the systematized method which distinguishes a science was

beyond the vision of all, except a few like Mabillon. Erudition has now been supplemented by scientific method, and we owe the change to Germany. Among those who brought it about, the names of Niebuhr and Ranke are pre-eminent. But there is another name which historical students should be slow to forget, the name of one who, though not a historian but a philologist, nevertheless gave a powerful stimulus to the introduction of critical methods which are now universally applied. Six years before the eighteenth century closed a modest book appeared at Halle, of which it is perhaps hardly a grave exaggeration to say that it is one of half-a-dozen which in the last three hundred years have exercised most effective influence upon thought. The work I mean is Wolf's *Prolegomena to Homer*. It launched upon the world a new engine—*donum exitiale Minervae*—which was soon to menace the walls of many a secure citadel. It gave historians the idea of a systematic and minute