

**THE CLAIMS OF THE STUDY OF
COLONIAL HISTORY UPON THE
ATTENTION OF THE UNIVERSITY OF
OXFORD; AN INAUGURAL LECTURE
DELIVERED ON APRIL 28, 1906**

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The claims of the study of colonial history upon the attention of the University of Oxford; an inaugural lecture delivered on April 28, 1906 by H. E. Egerton

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No one can have read the suggestive colonial chapters contributed by Mr. Edward John Payne to *The Cambridge Modern History*, or the singularly attractive little volume on colonies and colonial federations, published not very long before his death, without recognizing that Mr. Payne possessed the priceless gift of seeing things as a whole in broad and simple outline, and of compelling the reader to see them from the writer's standpoint, which is the secret of successful teaching. The pages of the little book on the colonies glow with a passionate patriotism, which is none the less noticeable because it is of necessity held under control.

As I understand, this foundation has two main objects in view. It is desired on the one hand to spread farther the dry light of knowledge, and on the other hand to kindle a beacon, which shall attract young men, the trustees of the next generation. It will not be expected that I should enter upon the discussion how far the Oxford school of history can teach research. It is obvious that a child must learn to walk before he can run, and it may be some time before much can be done in the way of research by students of Colonial history; although I believe, that something in this direction has been already begun. At the same time, it is a humiliating reflection that hitherto we have had to depend for the most part upon American scholars for researches into the early history of the British American Colonies; although the volumes of Mr. Doyle on *The English in America* have become as much a standard authority in the United States as in England. One other piece of excellent work English scholarship can also boast in this connexion. The Colonial Series of the Calendar

of State Papers, edited first by Mr. Sainsbury and since his death by Mr. John Fortescue, have brought to the light of day an immense mass of information with regard to the history of the colonies, from the earliest times to almost the beginning of the eighteenth century. The series is invaluable, from the large scale on which its summaries are planned. A comparison between these and the brief notes contained in Brymner's valuable reports on the Canadian archives will bring out the full merits of the English publication. Moreover the volumes are preceded by introductions, which are most stimulating to the student of Colonial history. Much, however, remains to be done in bringing to fuller knowledge transactions, which exigencies of space forbid to be dealt with adequately in a summary. Mr. Sainsbury, in one of his introductions, himself called attention to a need, which in time Oxford might do something to supply. How many forgotten worthies are there in English history, who, in their day, were most loyal workers in the building of Great Britain? Is it too much to hope, that, late in time, some recognition may be made of the work of such men? We know the limits within which such a series as the one on the Builders of Greater Britain, edited by my friend Mr. H. F. Wilson, or the more recent series on the Makers of Canada, is of necessity confined. Financial considerations and reasons of convenience have inevitably the deciding voice. It is difficult for a writer to break virgin soil in a short volume, which is intended for popular reading. On such grounds the lives of men, who have already received adequate treatment, are again and again dealt with, while other great men stalk majestic through the shades of history neglected and

unrecorded. For example, Lieutenant-Governor Simcoe was a very able and conscientious official, to whose labours Ontario will always be grateful; but it seems curious that he should be commemorated by at least two biographies, whereas his superior, Sir Guy Carleton, afterwards Lord Dorchester, remains without any record of his life. Every student of Canadian history will, I think, admit that Carleton was amongst the most eminent architects of British Canada. His fame has been neglected not because of disbelief in his greatness, but because the materials for dealing with his life lay in obscure places, and the handling of them would have involved much labour and time. It should be the aim of an endowed school of historical research to take care that work of this kind should receive its proper encouragement.

But while the aims of this foundation will not have been fulfilled, unless and until it has done something to promote research into the past, it has a more practical part ready to hand. We have to justify the teaching of Colonial history as a branch of study making for practical edification. It has been said, I believe, that the trade of the politician is the only one for which no practical training is required. But surely the day is past when, even here, we can trust to the self-confident optimism of the amateur. The study of history may not supply ready-made examples which can be blindly followed; but at least it helps to create the habits of mind which will generally lead to just judgements.

But while the study of history can be supported from a practical standpoint, there are clear reasons why the study of Colonial history seems especially desirable.

Shut off for the most part from the field of foreign politics, the questions with which it mainly is concerned are precisely those constitutional and economic questions which bulk large in the public life of to-day.

But that this study may be useful, there is one caveat which must be entered. At present the Oxford curriculum, I understand, deals with English history only as far as the accession of Queen Victoria. What value there is in this rule, as far as English history by itself is concerned, I am not competent to say. I presume that the object is to keep clear of the field of party politics. But in fact party prejudices are the product of temperament, and the temperament, which makes the party man, can find food as much in the struggles of Cavalier and Roundhead, and of Whig and Tory, as in the issues of to-day. You know that in the early days of the Second Empire, when the press censorship was severe, brilliant writers managed to expound their views on current politics in disquisitions apparently intended for very different objects. You can only trust to the honour and good sense of a teacher that he will not unfairly bias his pupil in a party direction. It is not the thing taught but the manner of the teaching which matters, and I cannot imagine the somewhat critical attitude of Oxford intellectual life permitting that this tendency should here find much encouragement.

But whatever be thought as to this, it is at least clear that the year 1837 is an impossible date in Colonial history. It leads you in Canada to the brink of the rebellion, and then closes the book just when the dénouement is beginning, to which the history of the immediately preceding years had been the some-

what dreary and squalid prologue. Assuredly, unless you are prepared to follow the procession of Canadian history, through the rebellion, Lord Durham's mission, his epoch-making report, the attainment of responsible government, to the incidents which led to confederation, and the accomplishment of the Dominion, for practical purposes Canadian history may be better left alone; for the sufficient reason that it will leave no clear impression on the reader's mind. Or take the case of Australasia. What rhyme or reason is there to deal with the foundation of Western and South Australia and stop abruptly before the colonization of New Zealand? What profit is there in dealing with the feeble beginnings of constitutional government in Australia, unless we can continue the story of the development of representative institutions and their culmination in full responsible government? What lesson is there in the melancholy history of transportation, unless we can go on to the better day; which perhaps it rendered possible? The same moral holds good in the case of South Africa. It is surely ludicrous to close the page with the *trek* of the Dutch farmers, and ignore the large results both to Great Britain and to world-history which sprang from these small beginnings. Or if you are interested in the history of systematic colonization, the year 1837 cuts your subject by an unmeaning line. It includes the instructions issued by Lord Goderich with regard to the granting of Colonial lands and the House of Commons' Report of 1836, while it excludes the subsequent development of the same policy. That policy is represented by the name of Edward Gibbon Wakefield, but in his life 1837 is a meaningless date. Similarly, it is idle to follow the break up of the mer-