

**A STUDENT'S GUIDE TO THE
MANUSCRIPTS OF THE
BRITISH MUSEUM; HELPS FOR
STUDENTS OF HISTORY, NO.31**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649251964

A Student's Guide to the Manuscripts of the British Museum; helps for students of history, No.31
by Julius P. Gilson

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JULIUS P. GILSON

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HELPS FOR STUDENTS OF HISTORY. No. 81

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A STUDENT'S GUIDE TO
THE MANUSCRIPTS OF
THE BRITISH MUSEUM

BY

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LONDON

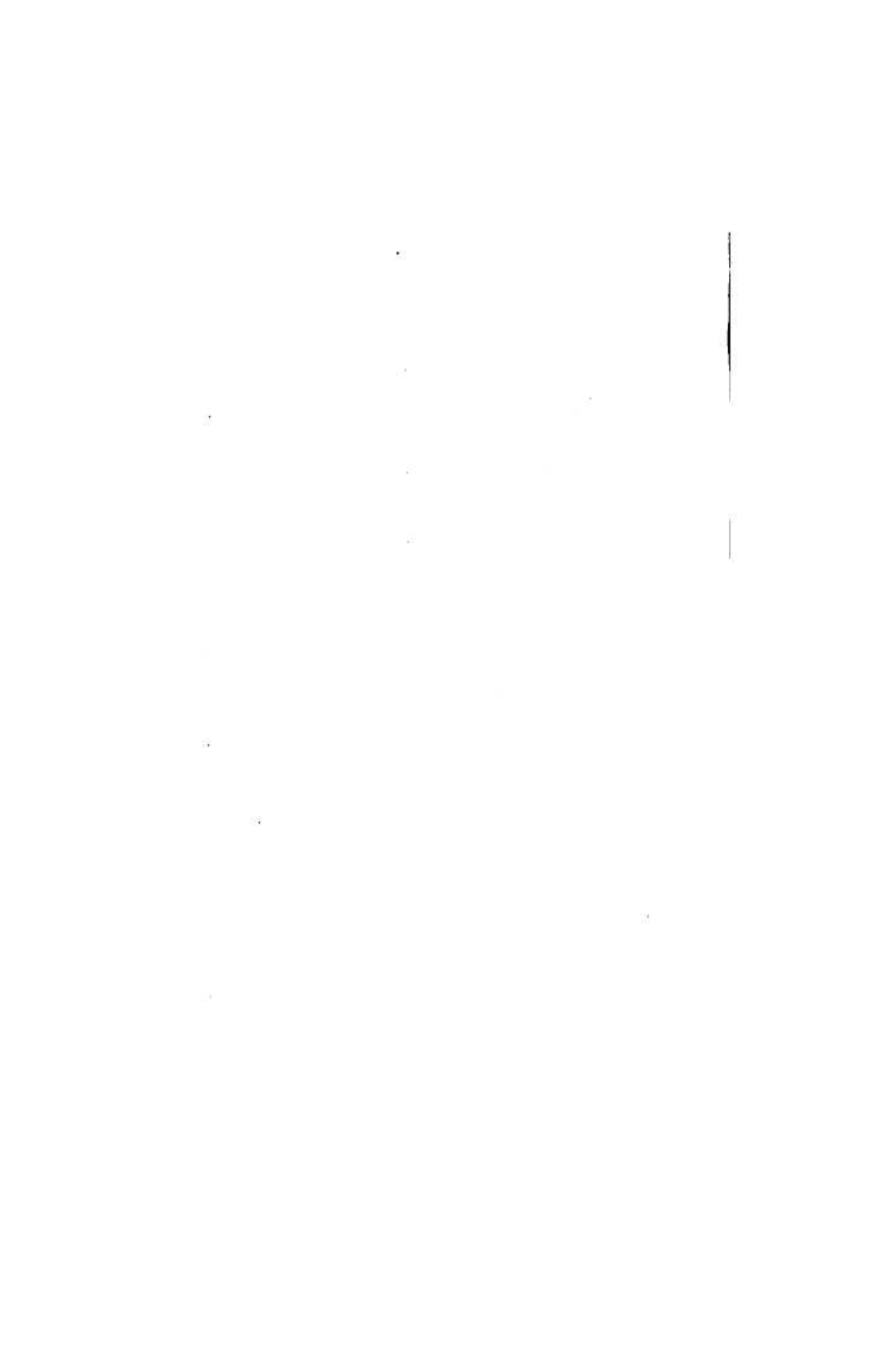
SOCIETY FOR PROMOTING
CHRISTIAN KNOWLEDGE
NEW YORK: THE MACMILLAN COMPANY

1920

65

CONTENTS

	PAGE
WHY MANUSCRIPTS MUST BE STUDIED - - -	7
WHAT AND WHERE ARE THESE MANUSCRIPTS? - -	8
ORIGINS OF THE BRITISH MUSEUM MANUSCRIPT COLLECTIONS - - - - -	14
LATER HISTORY OF THE MUSEUM MANUSCRIPT COLLECTIONS - - - - -	18
WHAT TO EXPECT TO FIND IN THE MUSEUM MANUSCRIPTS	21
HOW TO FIND MANUSCRIPT MATERIAL IN THE BRITISH MUSEUM - - - - -	25
APPENDICES :	
A. LIST OF COLLECTIONS IN THE MANUSCRIPT DEPARTMENT - - - - -	41
B. ROUGH LISTS OF SOME STATESMEN AND OTHERS WHOSE PAPERS ARE TO BE FOUND IN THE DEPARTMENT -	44



A STUDENT'S GUIDE TO THE MANUSCRIPTS OF THE BRITISH MUSEUM

WHY MANUSCRIPTS MUST BE STUDIED

A DISTINGUISHED historian not very long ago asserted that it was impossible to write history from manuscripts. We may be sure, however, that he would have been among the first to accept the converse half-truth, that it is impossible to write history without the aid of manuscripts. Further than this, it would probably be safe to say that no historian can acquire the truly scientific spirit necessary for the proper handling of material and the making of broad and true generalizations if he has not himself had some first-hand knowledge and experience of work upon the manuscript sources with which he has to deal. In the biological world the mass of facts to be studied is so great that no leading generalizations are to be expected from a naturalist working purely upon his own examination of species. So it is in history, at any rate the history of civilized peoples in the last eight hundred years. He who would study the interaction of facts and the thoughts and actions

8 A STUDENT'S GUIDE TO THE

of men will find so vast a mass of evidences to work upon that he cannot rely purely upon his own reading of sources. He needs archivists and monograph-writers to act as his middle-men, to put into print in a concise and digested form the result of years of minute study. Whether or not such middle-men may themselves be entitled to the name of historians we need not stay to discuss. They are as necessary to the work of the master-historian as the builder is to the architect. But the point to be noted here is that just as Darwin attributed the success of his generalizations in biology in no small degree to his prolonged training in the minute and detailed description and classification of barnacles, so the greatest historians have felt the need of work at original sources to enable them to value correctly the results obtained for them by others, to judge when they may accept such results without verification and when they must regard them as open to suspicion of inaccuracy or prejudice.

WHAT AND WHERE ARE THESE MANUSCRIPTS ?

Granted that the study of manuscript sources is indispensable to the historian, where are these sources to be found ? The answer must depend upon the individual historian's view of history, but it is difficult to conceive of any view of history which will not find much of its material in a great collection of manuscripts. It is more than possible, it is wise to protest against a conception of history

based purely upon the study of official archives, because it tends to ignore or undervalue the importance to human happiness and human progress of art and literature, the knowledge and ideals, the beliefs, the desires, and the passions of a people. But all these, it is scarcely necessary to say, are reflected in written as well as printed words, and often more clearly in the less formal medium, just as we may often get a better idea of past times from an old dwelling-house than from a cathedral. Nevertheless, even the most convinced disciple of J. R. Green will not deny that the study of administration constitutes a necessary part of history—indeed, it may well be said that Green's greatest service to history was in calling attention to the insufficient study of some departments of administration, other than national, which was a defect of the historians before his day. Let us, then, begin with the history of government in the widest sense of the term. Primarily, according to modern ideas, archives are the proper place of deposit for documents preserved for administrative purposes, relating to any department of national or other public affairs. National, ecclesiastical, municipal, manorial, local, and private archives are all receptacles for the accumulation of documents of high importance to the historian, and each of these classes will doubtless be the subject of one or other of the books in this series, but they are not the sole nor always the ultimate repositories for the documents which the historian needs. The science of archive-keeping, so far as it is

10 A STUDENT'S GUIDE TO THE

directed to instructing the remote future, is comparatively modern, and even when a more restricted point of view has been kept in mind, the practice of the art has always fallen far short of the ideals of the time. Especially the idea of a centralized and comprehensive national archive-house has been very slow of realization. Speaking generally, our archives have come into being to meet the practical and immediate needs of the departments of government with which they are directly connected, and have continued for the greater part of their history to be in the custody of those departments. As the forms of government alter, however, it is easy for the departments of it to lose their identity or change their functions, and for this reason they may have come to neglect the preservation of such of their documents as they no longer have any reason to consult. Changes of handwriting and of the language or forms of documents have sometimes conduced to this neglect by rendering the documents illegible or unintelligible to the successors of those who wrote them. Too often, also, the custody of the archives has been allowed to remain in the hands of the individual administrators, instead of the office. They have thus been regarded as the administrator's private property, and have been subject to all the accidents incidental to the preservation of private property from one generation to another. One or other of these causes has lost for the historian millions of documents of inestimable value for his purposes, and scattered hundreds of thousands of others in