

INTRODUCTION

When he died on 13 January 1895 in his sixty-first year, Sir John Robert Seeley was a popular historian and a well-known public figure. He was credited by many with having transformed British public opinion from a state of indifference about colonial possessions to one of patriotic attachment to empire. In recognition of this he had been appointed K.C.M.G. barely ten months before his death. He had attracted notice as a spokesman for the Liberal Unionist cause, and as the figurehead of the imperial federation movement. In educational circles his name had long been associated with movements for reform, many of which were bearing fruit at the time of his death. He had, furthermore, presided over the development of the study of history at Cambridge. When he was appointed professor in 1869, the status of history as an academic discipline was inferior and insecure; during the last decade of his life there was general recognition that Cambridge had produced, and attracted to itself, a considerable body of historical scholars.

Seeley's friends and colleagues contributed to a suitable memorial to him in Cambridge: the endowment of the historical library and an annual history prize. Several of them published accounts of their memories of him, and G. W., later Sir George, Prothero compiled a biographical essay which was included in his edition of Seeley's *The Growth of British Policy* (1895). No attempt seems to have been made, however, to collect such items with Seeley's correspondence to form a memorial volume. Lady Seeley, who lived until 1921, was his sole heir and executor.¹ She supervised the publication of two posthumous works and wrote a brief introduction for a new edition of *Lectures and Essays* (1895), but there is no evidence that she discussed the possibility of a biography of her husband. The two-volume *Life and Letters* had almost become a conventional funerary rite for eminent Victorians of this period. Whatever the explanation may be, omission of the rite in

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Seeley's case accounts for later generations' unfamiliarity with the range of his interests, and in part for historians' neglect of him until the 1960s.

For many years the only comprehensive account of Seeley's thought was a book published in 1912 by a German historian, Adolf Rein. Rein was a historian of international relations. His doctoral thesis on Sardinian involvement in the Crimean war, presented at the University of Leipzig in 1910, was published in a series edited by Carl Lamprecht.² Since he had been born in Eisenach and brought up in Jena,³ Seeley's Prussophilia was sympathetic to him. Rein was also interested in Seeley's concept of the significance of the study of foreign policy, and in his theory that historical study should culminate in political prescription. Using extensive quotation from his published work, most of which was not available in German, Rein expounded Seeley's views on the relations of history and politics, and evaluated his historiographical style. He argued, however, that Seeley's most important contribution to British historical studies was the rejection of an insular approach to British history. Rein confirmed the opinion of many of Seeley's contemporaries that in stressing Britain's imperial role he had been responsible for changing official and popular attitudes.⁴ Another of the earliest commentators on Seeley was a Frenchman, Jacques Gazeau, who also treated him as preeminently an imperialist, citing *The Expansion of England* (1883) as the classic doctrine of British imperialism.⁵

Rein's original research consisted of interviews with a number of Seeley's close friends and colleagues, many of whom had already published their impressions of him. Since he also acknowledged the help of Lady Seeley and her daughter, it is curious that he made no reference to their collection of Seeley's letters. He also made some small errors of fact in his biographical chapter,⁶ which suggest that the help he actually received from Seeley's family was very limited. For later students of Seeley, the most valuable part of Rein's work remains the bibliography. This lists seventy-three of Seeley's publications, most of which are lectures, articles and reviews printed in various periodical journals.

Rein's monograph discusses Seeley's work in isolation from its English context. It was, however, an important source for G. P. Gooch's assessment of Seeley as a historian; for R. H. Murray's analysis of the inter-relations of his imperial and religious thought; and for C. A. Bodelsen's discussion of Seeley in his thesis on imperialism.⁷ Historical interest in

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Seeley was generally restricted to *The Expansion of England* until the post-war reinterpretation of mid-Victorian imperialism prompted a reexamination of his social and political views. In 1950 Thomas Peardon took a fresh look at Seeley as a historian, finding much to praise in the work of this 'vigorous and acute' scholar who had single-handedly discovered the 'Super-Powers'.⁸ In 1957 J. P. C. Roach quoted Seeley's views as a Liberal Unionist in illustrating the nature of academic alienation from Gladstone in the 1880s. Ten years later R. T. Shannon illuminated Seeley's work, and demonstrated its unity, by examining it in the context of Broad Church theology. The following year Sheldon Rothblatt threw light on a different aspect of Seeley: his preoccupation with education. Rothblatt discussed his ideas against the background of social and institutional change in nineteenth-century Cambridge.⁹

The revival of interest in Seeley has been further marked by the publication in 1969 of a new edition of *Ecce Homo* for Everyman's Library. *The Expansion of England* was brought back into print in 1971 in the Chicago University Press series Classics of British Historical Literature, with an introduction by John Gross. In 1973 G. Kitson Clark paid a tribute to the contribution Seeley made to historical studies at Cambridge in a centenary lecture on the tripos, while in *Churchmen and the Condition of England, 1832–1885*, he included Seeley in a discussion of the response of the Victorian church to the advance of secularism. In the same year Peter Burroughs examined Seeley's significance as an imperial historian in the light of recent studies of his work in other areas.¹⁰

These historians have amply demonstrated that to treat Seeley first and foremost as a publicist for imperialism, as earlier writers did, is to oversimplify to the point of misrepresentation. Seeley had, undoubtedly, an important influence on late-nineteenth-century attitudes to imperialism – the extraordinary impact of *The Expansion of England* would make a fascinating study in itself – but it is not the purpose here to assign Seeley his place in the general history of British or European imperialism. Indeed, his influence cannot be properly assessed without regard to other aspects of his life and work. Equally important were his efforts as an educational reformer and the impetus he gave to the study of history in universities. Throughout a varied career, as schoolmaster, university teacher and writer on religion, he was consistently interested in the idea of the organic nation state, and it was as a development of this theme that he first took up the subject of Britain's relations

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with her colonies. This is a book about his career as a whole, and his writings on the empire are seen in the context of his view that the uses of history were to foster national unity and provide direction to politics.

None of the historians mentioned above had access at the time he wrote to the most important source for this study, the collection of correspondence here called the Seeley papers. This was left in 1954 by Sir John's daughter, Frances Seeley, to her cousin, Philothea Thompson. Miss Thompson, whose attic had already been 'raided' by Frida Knight in the course of research for her biography of William Freund, *University Rebel* (1971), generously gave access to this archive. It consists of a miscellany of offprints of Seeley's articles, press cuttings about his publications and some 320 letters, 70 of which are 'out' letters returned to Frances Seeley.

It is not known to what extent Seeley or his widow deliberately edited these papers before their daughter took pains to preserve them, but it is clear that some destruction took place after his death. Almost all his lecture notes have disappeared. In the preface to his edition of *Introduction to Political Science* Henry Sidgwick explained that 'Lady Seeley consulted me as to the desirability of giving to the world some part of the numerous sets of lectures which her husband had left behind completely written.'¹¹ He selected for publication two courses on political science. It is not known what happened to the originals of these, or of the other lectures he referred to. After Henry's death, Eleanor Sidgwick returned to Lady Seeley three parcels of Sir John's notebooks 'which were among my husband's things'.¹²

Seeley's library has unfortunately not survived intact either, although much of it has been absorbed by the library which commemorates him. In October 1895, the librarian of the Cambridge History School Library reported to the History Board that about one hundred books, 'a selection from Sir John Seeley's library', had been purchased.¹³ Lady Seeley received a cheque for £33 for books that year.¹⁴ Subscribers to a fund to establish a memorial to Sir John Seeley were told in February 1898 that, the fund being insufficient to found a 'Seeley Studentship', the income from it was to endow the History School Library 'on the understanding that the Library is called henceforth the Seeley Historical Library'. The committee reported that, after deductions for expenses and of £44.7s for some more of Seeley's books, £656.0s.6d was to be handed to the University for this purpose.¹⁵ It is to be regretted that the titles of the books bought from Lady Seeley

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were not in any way recorded in the records or catalogue of the library.

In G. M. Trevelyan's words, Seeley was 'a fine old Victorian of a fighting, dogmatic breed'.¹⁶ Like so many of those who dominated English intellectual life in the Victorian period,¹⁷ he was brought up in the tradition of Evangelical churchmanship. His father and grandfather were both pillars of Evangelical society in London. Leonard Benton Seeley set up in London as a publisher and bookseller in 1784, a trade which his father had pursued in Buckingham from at least 1744.¹⁸ Leonard Seeley was a friend of several leading Evangelicals whose works he published. He was an agent for the Bible Society, and in its early days the committee of the Church Missionary Society met in his office at 169 Fleet Street. Robert Benton Seeley, John's father, entered the family business as a boy. After his father's death he continued the firm in the same tradition until 1857, when he gave his share to his second son Richmond and embarked on an apparently unsuccessful venture as newspaper proprietor in partnership with his eldest son, Leonard.¹⁹

John's mother, Mary Anne Jackson, 1809–68, was also described as 'an earnest Evangelical'. Her brother, John Henry Jackson, was a partner in the publishing business. She had two first cousins who were contemporaries of her own children: the Rev. Alfred Church, 1829–1912, for many years a schoolmaster, was a well-known translator and editor of classical texts for schools, many of which were published by Seeley and Co. His brother, Sir Arthur Church, 1834–1915, was Professor of Chemistry at the Royal Academy of Arts from 1879 to 1911. Two more of Seeley's cousins through his mother were William Jackson Brodribb, co-translator of Tacitus with Alfred Church, and the Rev. Henry Latimer Jackson, 1851–1926, respected in his day as a progressive theologian.²⁰ John's eldest brother Leonard, 1831–93, was elected a Fellow of Trinity College in 1854 and was called to the bar at Lincoln's Inn the following year. He wrote popular lives of Horace Walpole, Mrs Thrale and Fanny Burney. Two of his sisters, Harriet and Bessie, served successively as Secretary to the Mission of the British Syria Schools in Beirut, between 1870 and 1881.²¹ Another sister, Mary, ran a 'school for young ladies' in South London from 1858 to 1865, and was a regular author of children's stories and homilies for the Religious Tract Society and for Seeley and Co.²²

John Seeley's marriage, in August 1869, to Mary Agnes Phillott linked this middle-class Evangelical trading family with one of Unitarian ministers and academics. She was the granddaughter of

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William Frend, 1757–1841, Fellow and tutor of Jesus College who became a Unitarian in 1787; and of Sarah Blackburne, granddaughter of the Archdeacon Blackburne of Richmond who led a petition of Parliament in 1772 to abolish subscription to the Thirty-Nine Articles for university graduates.²³ Two uncles of Sarah Blackburne, Theophilus Lindsey and John Disney, were founders of the London Unitarian body and ministers at the Essex Street chapel.²⁴ William Frend's eldest daughter Sophia married Augustus De Morgan, Professor of Mathematics at University College London from 1828 to 1866. Mary Phillott was the daughter of Frend's second child Frances, 1810–1912, and Arthur Phillott, a surgeon. Mary was educated at Bedford College, which her aunt Sophia De Morgan had been instrumental in founding.²⁵ She was probably brought up as a Unitarian; Harriet Seeley made an attempt 'to convert her' in 1866.²⁶ She is said to have been excited by the reputation for *avant-garde* views on religion which her future husband enjoyed as author of *Ecce Homo*; one imagines that she was a little disappointed to discover how conventional his beliefs really were. He was adamant that he had not denied the divinity of Christ as critics of that book supposed, and was rather proud to have 'heard of one man who has been converted from Unitarianism by it'.²⁷ Frances Phillott, as William Frend's daughter, expected apostasy from her son-in-law, and is said to have disapproved of him for remaining a member of the Church of England.²⁸

Several writers on Seeley have noted the close parallel between his leading ideas and those of a fellow member of the mid-Victorian cultural elite, Matthew Arnold. H. A. L. Fisher commented that where Arnold used the term 'Philistinism', meaning the 'uninspired . . . conventional, worldly life', Seeley used 'Secularity' in the same sense.²⁹ Both Shannon and Rothblatt notice the similarity between Arnold's desire to establish culture in a national institution, and Seeley's expectation that morality would become part of the province of the state.³⁰ It was R. H. Murray, however, who made most of the fundamental resemblance between the two writers. He saw them both as moralists who set themselves to the task of humanising their civilisation. They both thought political questions were inseparable from religious ones, and were ardent defenders of the union of church and state: 'neither man could conceive of the permanent existence of the State apart from religion'. They both taught that Goethean self-culture could be married with the Christian practice of self-sacrifice; and while neither was strictly orthodox, Murray claimed that their efforts to revitalise un-

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dogmatic religion had indeed revived, and been adopted by, orthodoxy.⁸¹

This comparison does not extend to the manner in which they expressed their ideas, where contrasting personalities determined radically different approaches. Each felt that he was a man apart, with a unique mission to convert a secular, insular and unheeding generation. Seeley cultivated a grievance that the two books he regarded as his most important, *Stein* and *Natural Religion*, had been poorly received.⁸² However, while Arnold resigned himself to, even enjoyed, his stance as detached, ironic critic, Seeley was of such different mettle that he could not confine himself to the role of prophet without honour. Shannon has accurately described Seeley's 'deliberately direct intellect' and his expression which was 'never subtle, obscure, surprising or wayward', as the antithesis of Arnold's. With abundant intellectual self-confidence and belief in positivist history, Seeley dedicated himself to finding practical solutions to national problems, and, at least to his own satisfaction, to resolving confusion or ambiguity about values and policies. It was these very qualities which gave Seeley, in J. R. Tanner's opinion, 'transcendent merit' as a teacher. The clarity of his conclusions, the authority with which he delivered them, the striking new use he frequently made of old material, together ensured that his lectures were, and remain, stimulating and provocative.

While it will be seen that Seeley displayed great confidence in certain of his own ideas, it would be wrong to conclude from this description of his cast of mind that he was assertive or intellectually arrogant. On the contrary, he was known to be highly self-critical, and an exceptionally reserved and reticent man. One consequence of this reserve is that there is now very little evidence available from which to gather an impression of his personality. The few recorded anecdotes about him illustrate his capacity for solitary study, the extent of his reading, or the seriousness with which he regarded his own work. It was rumoured in Christ's College that as a Fellow Seeley read every night from 7 p.m. until 3 a.m.⁸³ His familiarity with Shakespeare and Milton, Goethe and Dante impressed many.⁸⁴ Coming from Oscar Browning, it was praise indeed for Seeley to be remembered as 'one of the very few supremely learned men whom I have ever known'. Browning also recounted that he was the first to hear of Seeley's idea for *The Expansion*, when on holiday with the Seeleys in Pontresina in 1879: I remember his coming to me one morning full of the scheme which had been revealed to him the evening before, treating it as if it were something

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outside himself, as if he dreaded the responsibility which had been laid upon him to work it out. Deep and far-reaching, he said, were the issues involved . . .⁸⁵

Another instance of the significance with which Seeley invested his writing was recorded by Lady Jebb. Sir Richard Jebb, then Professor of Greek at the University of Glasgow, once asked Seeley whether he intended to write the study – projected in the preface to the first edition of *Ecce Homo* – of the divinity of Christ: ‘The answer, most unexpected, was to the effect that he had fulfilled this intention already. On being pressed for an explanation, he said that he meant his *Life of Stein!*’⁸⁶

Friends from Seeley’s youth described him as ‘always somewhat grave, somewhat austere’ but ‘the truest of friends and most invigorating of companions’ and remembered ‘his vividness, his brilliance, his intellectual keenness’.⁸⁷ It also appears that, while his intellectual interests underwent a complete reorientation during his middle years, a comparable sea-change came over his physical appearance. Contemporaries remarked on the alteration in looks and manner which accompanied the change from young Fellow to Professor. John Dalton, who had been Seeley’s pupil in 1861, wrote that he had then been ‘small, spare, quick in his movements, and in many respects rather a contrast to what he was in later years’.⁸⁸ John Venn said that those who had not known Seeley in 1860, as he had, would find it hard to identify his then ‘slender nervous alert frame’ with ‘the familiar figure of recent years’ to whom ‘ill-health had brought an almost excessive gravity of deportment and a bearing which at first sight might be almost mistaken for hesitation or inertness’.⁸⁹

George Prothero also referred to his ‘somewhat lethargic exterior’ in later years. His account presents the picture of a reserved and solitary individual who was handicapped by incapacity for mental relaxation: ‘It was his misfortune that he never acquired the art of lying fallow.’⁹⁰ Mandell Creighton, a colleague from 1884, depicted Seeley as

by nature and temperament a student, a man of thought with all the disadvantages which necessarily attend on such a temperament. A certain amount of lethargy, a certain amount of unreadiness, a certain difficulty in gathering himself together – these are the necessary characteristics of the man who thinks. But Seeley overcame these natural tendencies by the absolute simplicity and genuineness of his personal and human sympathy.⁴¹

Adolf Rein reported that Seeley became increasingly melancholy and

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withdrawn with age.⁴² This change can be attributed to the ill-health and attendant insomnia which dogged Seeley throughout his adult life. Edwin Abbott wrote of his 'habitual sleeplessness' in later life that it made 'some of his intimate friends wonder how he contrived to work at all'.⁴³ Oscar Browning said enigmatically that Seeley's use of drugs to counteract the effects of sleeplessness 'was not always judicious'.⁴⁴

In middle life Seeley was heavy-handed in company and in personal relations. His natural seriousness was unrelieved by a sense of humour. His prose was often ironic, and his conversation in the company of close friends was 'infallibly brilliant and epigrammatic, and abounding in apt and humorous illustration',⁴⁵ but it is clear to the reader of his books and letters that Seeley lacked a light touch. Sir George Prothero's unpublished diary provides some examples of the kind of impression Seeley made on a younger colleague.

12 March 1875: '... walk with Seeley, brilliant man ...'

7 February 1885: '... discussion dinner at the Creightons – Gardiners and Seeleys etc. – not very bright, for Seeley kills anything'.

15 March 1885: '... in evening to Seeley's to meet [W.E.] Forster – dull time; the Seeley's bad at entertaining'.

19 May 1885: 'Federation League Committee at Seeleys' ... wasted much time owing to Seeley being Chairman ...'⁴⁶

It is possible to interpret Oscar Browning's remark as a hint that Seeley became dependent through overuse on some addictive, but commonly used, sleep-inducing medicine like laudanum; an interpretation which would seem consistent with his melancholy, lassitude and excessive gravity. Since no other record of his use, or abuse, of drugs has been traced, however, and Frances Seeley made no mention of the subject when telling her cousin about him, such an explanation of his ill-health is highly improbable.

It is perhaps more relevant that the Seeleys were widely suspected of being unhappily married, with the sympathy being concentrated on Sir John. Mary Seeley, whose forceful personality still forms a part of Cambridge legend, has been described as a 'scold'. The depth of antipathy to her amongst her extended family can be measured by their likening her to George Eliot's representative marriage-poisoner, Rosamond Lydgate.⁴⁷ Visiting Seeley during his last illness, George Prothero thought that 'his wife bullies him'; later in the same year he noted: 'Seeley very ill ... his wife and Fanny left him a fortnight ago, the brutes.'⁴⁸ Mrs Prothero, on the other hand, making almost the only

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recorded charitable remark on the subject, ‘thinks Lady S. better than they make her out to be’.⁴⁹ In a family letter, Lady Jebb also described Seeley shortly before he died:

All worldliness and ambition had quite faded out of what was always a fine character, and latterly he was most lovable... I don’t like Lady Seeley, who I fear was, in the patience she demanded, one of his stepping stones to heaven; but his daughter was a great comfort to him so that in her he had some domestic happiness.⁵⁰

John Hales, the Professor of English Literature at King’s College who had known Seeley since they were undergraduates together, brought to light in an obituary article an aspect of his life which this ‘intensely reserved... and peculiarly sensitive’ man had allowed to be obscured: his great love of literature and early attempts at poetry and literary criticism.⁵¹ He described the little-known volumes of verse, published under a pseudonym by his father’s firm when Seeley was about twenty-five.⁵² The poems in the *David and Samuel* collection (1859) are heavily dependent on the work of Matthew Arnold, ‘the sweetly sadly laboured song/ From Oxford sent’, and of ‘Eversley’s warm clerk’.⁵³ Many are about the struggles of Old Testament and historical heroes; themes of battle and dreams of peace predominate. Interestingly, they indicate that the young Seeley was satisfied with a romantic approach to history, but they are not otherwise revealing, being characteristically restrained in emotion. In 1866, Seeley himself said of them: ‘Those poems I really do not want revived. They were good in metre & strong in style, but crude in theory & nothing in imagination.’⁵⁴

Hales referred to Seeley’s extensive knowledge, even as an undergraduate, of the great English poets, which, in an age when modern literature had no formal place in the education of boys, was considered remarkable. Seeley was later to give much attention to the question of teaching English in schools. In 1862 he light-heartedly planned to write a history of English literature, and at about this time he was consulted by William Aldis Wright who was editing the Cambridge Shakespeare.⁵⁵ In 1874 he contributed a paper on *Hamlet* to the New Shakespeare Society. His interest in the literature of the day also seems to have been paramount during his only recorded conversation with Gladstone, in March 1885. Seeley had been invited to spend the weekend with Lord Rosebery, and the Prime Minister was also present. Seeley told his wife: ‘I had a good deal of talk with Gladstone, about