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978-1-107-62558-7 - Behind and Before: Two Essays on the Relation of
History Politics and Eugenist Warnings

W E Heitland

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BEHIND AND BEFORE

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JE fus entraîné vers les sciences historiques, petites sciences conjecturales qui se défont sans cesse après s'être faites, et qu'on négligera dans cent ans. On voit poindre, en effet, un âge où l'homme n'attachera plus beaucoup d'intérêt à son passé. Je crains fort que nos écrits de précision de l'Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres, destinés à donner quelque exactitude à l'histoire, ne pourrissent avant d'avoir été lus. C'est par la chimie à un bout, par l'astronomie à un autre, c'est surtout par la physiologie générale que nous tenons vraiment le secret de l'être, du monde, de Dieu, comme on voudra l'appeler. Le regret de ma vie est d'avoir choisi pour mes études un genre de recherches qui ne s'imposera jamais et restera toujours à l'état d'intéressantes considérations sur une réalité à jamais disparue. Mais, pour l'exercice et le plaisir de ma pensée, je pris certainement la meilleure part.

E RENAN, *Souvenirs d'enfance et de jeunesse*,
1883, p 263.

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TWO ESSAYS ON THE RELATION OF
HISTORY POLITICS AND
EUGENIST WARNINGS.

W E HEITLAND MA



CAMBRIDGE
AT THE UNIVERSITY PRESS
1924

Cambridge University Press

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town,
Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107625587

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First published 1924
First paperback edition 2013

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-107-62558-7 Paperback

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P R E F A C E

IT is customary to praise books and sentiments as being original. Yet I have known a fashionable and gifted critic cite as evidence of a great author's originality an expression borrowed directly from a predecessor. It stood already noted as such in my interleaved copy, and my discovery was not itself new. All students must have, I suspect, many such experiences: a few may have gone astray in much the same manner: I have.

So too with books. Novelty is often no more than a restatement of old opinions from a slightly different point of view. Is it the worse for that? In a long course of very miscellaneous reading I have become more and more distrustful of sparkling paradox, more tolerant of platitudes. And in dealing with matters of human history and politics I do not think that this conclusion is on my part original or even eccentric. The burden of proof seems to lie on those whose attitude inclines toward revolutionary treatment of such topics. Therefore in dressing up old materials in various combinations I stand unashamed. A vast amount of fumbling is in this troubled age going on among those who take interest in political subjects: and academic teaching, carried on by hard-worked teachers, leaves to a number of distinguished specialists little leisure for reconsideration of their general aims.

That I am confessedly dealing in platitudes does not mean that I have taken opinions ready-made out of the works of my betters and patched them together with a paste-brush. As I have said below, the phenomena of

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the war-time set me thinking; wondering how public men with any insight into the present or any knowledge of the past could act as they were acting from day to day. They were however, true to themselves, doing as they had been doing in earlier years. We had suffered them then: was it fair to complain of them now?

Stray facts that leaked out soon betrayed the truth that what the ordinary citizen could detect was but a small part of the confusion that reigned in administrative circles. Apart from the army-organization reforms of Lord Haldane, good but inadequate to the strain of the moment, nothing save the Fleet was really ready: all things had been left to worry along on the tacit assumption that no pressing need for organizing our resources was likely to arise at brief notice. In short, the people had been lulled into fancied security by the time-serving reticence of some of their leaders and the misrepresentations of others. What it cost us in unnecessary bloodshed and huge waste of money to do everything in frantic haste against a fully prepared enemy, we are just beginning to understand. How near we came to disastrous failure, those only know who were then behind the scenes.

As cool observation became possible after years of suspense and alarm, I saw more and more clearly that our pitiful confusion during the war was nothing more than the cruel exposure of our shortcomings in the time of peace. Moreover it was only too evident that as a nation we had not learnt our lesson: as before, we were deluding ourselves with unrealities. Naturally there

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arose the question, is this the inevitable result of what is called popular government? Granting that a perfect adaptation of measures to needs is more than human imperfection allows us to expect, could we not, being what we are, manage our public affairs somewhat better than we do? Is not our success in the world mainly due to the use and development of quite different qualities in our private affairs? Does not that difference consist in the greater value attached to actual qualification for performance of this or that duty, ultimately to education in the widest sense? If so, what have we been doing, and what ought we to do, in the way of equipping citizens, both leaders and followers, for the duties of public life?

In answer, I have attempted to indicate the dangers that beset our haphazard system or lack of system, starting from the assumption that, with men as they are, the operations of popular government must and will have a certain haphazard character. I have tried to discover how far and in what ways a knowledge of past history can be of use and benefit to a functioning citizen. Abler pens than mine have long insisted on its usefulness: that we may perhaps take for granted. But as to the way in which such knowledge can operate usefully there is less general agreement. I have tried to think my own way to a conclusion from consideration of important illustrative cases. This provisionally reached, I consulted a large number of good authorities, reading with a strong bias inclining me to attach most weight to the views of those writers who had themselves had experience

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of the responsibilities of public duty. My reading has been discursive and various, and it has modified little, and fortified much, in the conclusions at which I had arrived.

The method followed is naturally productive of platitude, for I did not and do not suppose that I have a stock of real novelties to vend. There is nothing in what I have written that makes pretence to be 'arresting', as the modern cant phrase has it. But, however stale my thesis may be, there remains the fact that we need more trained intelligence in our public policy, and that this need seems now (1923) quite as pressing as it was in past years. Now it is tacitly assumed, and sometimes openly asserted, that the supply to meet this demand must to a great extent come from the Universities. And yet we may note that men of full academic training now and then shew themselves liable to the same sort of errors as those not so trained. Therefore I have timidly ventured to ask whether this academic training may not be abdicating some of its usefulness by attempting too much.

The recent growth of biological criticism applied to sociological and political questions is a phenomenon of grave importance. To a non-scientific reader it is in its present stage apt to bring unqualified alarm: in a sympathetic and impressionable mind it may breed a sort of moral paralysis. It is however not irrelevant to remember that any medical treatise is apt to alarm the unprofessional reader, making him fancy himself the victim of many maladies in incurable forms, while he

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puts little trust in rules or suggestions of treatment. Now in this politico-biological inquiry we have as yet only attempts at social pathology pure and simple: of a therapeutic scheme we have only a passing hint here and there. And such hints only amount to this, that human conduct must be different from what it is now. Perhaps no general conclusion is so ancient as this. But the fact of its being now reached by genuine men of Science gives it new point and urgency. It is the therapeutic side that calls for development; for a people that idly lapses into chronic pessimism is lost. I have therefore tried to indicate not only certain criticisms in which some exaggeration may possibly be suspected, but also some points in which the criticism may be felt to lack completeness. For the future of the human race, and the British part of it in particular, seems to be at stake, if the Biologist critics are right, and it would be madness to waste effort in misdirected striving after what is ideally desirable but not feasible.

That such inquiries as these have a bearing on the value of historical studies, I have no doubt. The fascination of a purely antiquarian interest is great, and it shews no sign of slackening. But meanwhile the world is moving on to better or worse. If History is not to become a record of hopes unfulfilled and errors unredeemed, historians will have to keep an eye on the imminent as well as on the past. This they are beginning to do, influenced by social and anthropological researches as well as by the political phenomena of peace or war. The economic point of view is already fully recognized:

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even ethical considerations now and then put in a timid claim. But surely there is a long road to travel yet. In particular, the behaviour of mankind in masses and groups is now being studied as not identical with that of the same number taken as individuals. It is found to have special characteristics, and philosophers are aiming at discovering the principles on which a sort of Psychology of Peoples can be founded. This movement is at present in its infancy, but no one can tell how far it may be destined to go. At all events it is closely connected with the study of history, and on historical study as a source of equipment for statesmen and citizens it may exercise an immense influence. Already it shews itself boldly in the many critical utterances of recent writers on Germany old and new. In this case they have enjoyed exceptionally full opportunities of tracing notable effects to adequate causes. But they will not, can not, stop there; and Russia (not to mention minor states) is already furnishing them with rich and significant material.

I hope therefore that considerations relative to the use of history may, however stale to the expert eye, not be irrelevant in the present atmosphere of world-problems, when self-government is on its trial in many countries. And the mention of self-government reminds me that the use of practical means is often quite as important as agreement on desirable ends. In this connexion I have ventured to offer a few remarks on the efforts of some religious bodies to join forces for the promotion of human welfare, and to express some doubts as to the probable effectiveness of their present methods. This I

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do with much diffidence, but I could not shirk it altogether.

The Appendices are devoted to the consideration of several topics which seemed to require special treatment. That on *Body Politic and Body Natural* is a gleaning of the opinions of a number of highly qualified judges on a question of theory important to students of History. Perhaps I need not apologize for dealing at some length with the views of certain American writers on important problems of national life and welfare. In treating of such questions they are more free than Europeans, less hampered by the pressure of stale conditions inherited from a tangled past. The United States may stand aloof from Europe sick and suffering; Europe, and Great Britain above all, cannot ignore the experiences and action of the United States.

But I must apologize for the length of this Preface. The structure of the book seemed to call for some sort of explanation. I have only to record my thanks to Mr E A Benians for reading the manuscript and for giving me kindly comfort and advice.

W E H

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