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Excerpt

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SOME AIMS AND ASPIRATIONS OF EUROPEAN POLITICS IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY.

BY A. W. WARD, LITT.D.

WE are apt to talk glibly of the ideas, beliefs and aspirations of a 'century'—just as if that term, or what that term conveys to us, not only had hands and feet, but were defined by limits corresponding more or less closely to the literal significance of the word, and as if it thus conveniently covered one of those broader groups or divisions in which for the ordinary purposes of study historical phenomena have to be arranged.

As a matter of fact, however, not many of those chronological divisions which we call centuries are apt to present themselves to the mind of the general student in the light of separate entities (if I may so say), each with characteristics proper to itself. Most of them are too far off to detach themselves to our eyes from the nebulous clusters into which they seem absorbed; others are too near at hand to admit of our surveying their conditions of life and the motive forces which determined them as detached from the surroundings in which we ourselves have our being. Yet it is not always comparative nearness or remoteness which makes one of these conventional divisions of time fitter or less fit for such special treatment. Some centuries seem the mere brooding-times of history, and while watching them we can only speculate as to

'the main chance of things
As yet not come to life, which in their seeds
And weak beginnings lie intreasured.'

H. L.

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Others again appear to us as it were broken up, like the ground near the seats of the oracles of the Gods, by the very magnitude and force of some of the historical movements which have occurred in them, and which have so to speak changed the face of the century itself. You will I think as a rule find that there is some inner reason for a literary usage that effectually establishes itself; and I cannot recall any century which more adequately lends itself to treatment as a whole than the eighteenth of our era, which is constantly on our lips as a term carrying with it a definite and distinct political, intellectual and moral significance. With regard at all events to the political history of Europe and that of other parts of the world whose affairs were brought into direct contact with those of our own continent—notably the New World and the East Indies—in few other centuries do the main issues seem so clear, or does the logic of their connexion with one another appear so palpable; and again in few others, as they pass onwards to their close, is the coming of a new age so unmistakably announced by the downfall of old ideas of government and traditions of social life.

Whether, when a few generations hence—and generations pass rapidly in this little academical world of ours to which we bid all our visitors the heartiest of welcomes—whether, when the time has come to sum up the characteristic movements, and the ideas informing them, of the nineteenth century, they will be found possessed of a coherence of bearing and a definiteness of aim such as I have ascribed to those of its predecessor, I will not now enquire. Of this, however, I am quite sure that we still stand too near to the nineteenth century to judge of it as a whole; that the present stage of dealing with its history should still be primarily one of investigation, and to a large extent not more than tentatively one of criticism. For this reason I look with satisfaction on the programme, full of variety as well as of other elements of interest, which has been prepared for the Historical Section of this Summer

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Meeting, and which I understand to aim at an examination of classified material, rather than to aspire to a premature attempt at a synthesis of results. And this I say without any fear of being misunderstood. The study of quite modern history is in my humble opinion—and if I am guilty of heresy, I am in no great fear of having to go to the stake alone—quite as profitable as is that of any other kind of history, so long as it is carried on with a consciousness of its special drawbacks as well as of its special advantages. Among the latter the chief of course is the quicker insight of the student into the various bearings of the problems presented to him—a readiness inseparable from the greater intensity of the interest excited. On the other hand, the student of recent history is at a relative disadvantage, not so much because much of the evidence he requires is still kept from him, for alas! time and the worm are obscurantists as well as princes and officials; but also because the danger of misunderstanding the evidence actually at hand and the temptation towards perverting it is greatest for those who are inclined to look upon themselves as witnesses. The historian, we know, has prophetic functions; but his prophesying must come to naught if he is in any way personally associated with the inspirations which he reveals.

This experience was not spared to a very high-minded as well as clear-thinking and well-equipped writer who about the middle of the last century undertook to write its history, from the Treaties of Vienna onwards. The name of GERVINUS deserves to be held in honour in England; but my reason for saying this is not the fact that like so many Continental liberals of the second quarter of the nineteenth century he cherished an admiration for our institutions to which not all remained like himself faithful in their later years. At all events his regard for this country and his interest in her public life was not chargeable with the facile enthusiasm of those who, as the Czar, Nicholas I, said—some time before his thoughts of England had changed into gall—because they had paid a single

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visit to London, heard something about *Magna Charta*, and shaved with an English razor, could thenceforth never turn away their thoughts from our incomparable constitution. Gervinus was, as I need not remind many of my hearers, deeply imbued with the spirit of Germanic literature which in his eyes found its supreme embodiment in Shakspeare, and not less profoundly with that of Germanic Art, of which as he held a true type was with the same certainty recognisable in Handel, whom we may without presumption claim as an Englishman by adoption. These things we are not likely to overlook—least of all in this University, where we take pride in following the great teacher of history whom we have recently lost in believing that historical progress is not most conclusively traceable in the domain of politics. To the principle, ignored by some of Gervinus' successors, that political history cannot, and ought not to, be isolated from the history of general national and human progress, he steadily adhered in his great work, which may thus claim to be a contribution to the philosophy of history as well as a successful digest of a large section of its political material, besides furnishing an abundance of characterisation, and thus illustrating that imaginative side of historical composition which vindicates one among the uses of the study of Shakspeare and his precursors. But of the work itself I must not essay to speak within the narrow framework of my present address, nor can I more than allude to the causes of its having been broken off at what might seem the height of its progress. The eighth and last volume of the *History of the Nineteenth Century* deals with the July Revolution of 1830 and its immediate consequences, including the severance of Belgium from Holland—the removal, in Louis-Philippe's phrase, of that stumbling-block of Europe which her representatives at Vienna had in their fear of France thought to set up once and for ever. Yet it was not the Revolution of 1830 or its sequel of 1848—9 which troubled Gervinus; but his knowledge that at home in Germany—at the beginning

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of that era of which most of us have been contemporaries—events were taking a turn contradictory to the ideals of self-development and self-reorganisation to which as a historian and as a politician he had so consistently adhered. But though no writer of history is called upon to exclude himself from taking part in the making of it, he ought at his peril to keep the two functions distinct from one another.

And in truth I was on the present occasion thinking less of Gervinus' *History* itself than of the Introduction to it—an essay once so well known that I have felt a kind of familiar tremor in turning over its well-marked pages—which meant so much more to us than they ever can mean to you of a later generation. Yet, for all that, this brief but pregnant dissertation might, perhaps, taking it as a whole, prove not less interesting and useful to an enquirer into the historical sequences of the century as a whole, than it could have been to Gervinus' first readers, placed like himself in the midst of its eddying currents and conflicting interests. The great truth which this essay teaches, and which to my mind it succeeds in enforcing without any pedantic insistence upon the momentousness of any particular step in the argument, is that, from the point of view of political growth or development, the nineteenth century is, like all the periods which have succeeded one another since the Middle Ages drew towards their close, itself but a stage—an act, if you will, in the drama—of one great and still unfinished struggle. This struggle may be summarised as concerned with the transference of power from the few to the many, with the contention in other words between the democratic and the oligarchic principle—absolute government or monarchy proper intervening again and again in the conflict, siding now with the one and now with the other combatant, at one time seeming to accelerate the movement towards a final solution or settlement, at another, with the aid of many instincts and interests contriving to block the path, but without ever ultimately proving itself more than a passing phase in the history

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of the unending strife. Though this great struggle between principles of government, by which almost every kind of social principle is likewise largely affected, might have seemed to be approaching its termination towards the end of the eighteenth century, it renewed itself with fresh impetus in the nineteenth, after the transitory phase of the Napoleonic era—transitory even to contemporary eyes that remained undazzled by the sun of Austerlitz. What may be the prospects of solution, what may be the issue which so many voices are proclaiming to us as plainly written on the wall, it may or may not be for the historian of the twentieth century to determine. In the meantime, the most instructive portion of Gervinus' essay is beyond all question that longer portion of which I fear many an impatient hand will in this age (in no sense the age of introductions) incline rapidly to turn the pages—where in a masterly survey of the general progress of modern history since the close of the Middle Ages the author shows how each succeeding century has a share in the movement, without deflecting its main current, or preventing it from a nearer approach to the unseen goal.

But Gervinus was well aware, and indeed he explicitly reminds his readers, that though such a movement is discernible by those capable of surveying the entire course of modern political history—much as an analogous current was observed by Aristotle in the political life of the ancient Mediterranean world—yet it is not thus that it would be either possible or expedient for the historical enquirer to look upon the briefer periods, with which he has in the first instance to deal, and of which it behoves him to make clear to himself the significance. In such periods as these it is necessary for him in the first instance to distinguish clearly what may be described as the successive oscillations of ebb and tide; and there are still narrower limits, yet limits beyond which the consciousness of those whose lives fall within them often fails to range, in which a single potent force, one group

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of ideas and conceptions, perhaps the influence of one great individuality, seems irresistibly to direct and control the life and progress of a nation or a group of nations. More than ever are we impressed by the fact of such periodical predominances in an age like our own, in which political ideas, intellectual tendencies and artistic conceptions assert their mastery over the whole civilised world with the mysterious rapidity of a panic terror or a new fashion in millinery. The historian of modern times is privileged to command a wealth of material of every kind; and his first task is to find the true signature of whatever period, however short it be, which is immediately under his ken. The true history of the English Commonwealth and of the Great War which brought it forth, could as their late venerated historian Samuel Rawson Gardiner well knew, never be written truthfully until it had been written carefully, and until it had been followed through each of its successive stages, year by year. How much more must this be the case with the history of the quickly-moved and quickly-moving times near to our own, to whose immediate impulses the oldest and most self-contained of us must perforce in a large measure respond.

The task which the student of nineteenth century history has before him is therefore a laborious one; but it is not labours such as these which weary the mind alive to interests of which none is alien to it. May I, within the half hour during which I may still venture to trespass on your patience, attempt to recall a passage or two in the history of nineteenth century Europe, exhibiting the contemporary political world, or prominent sections of it, as intent upon a settlement, more or less final and complete, of its problems, and hopeful of a consummation which alas! it needs no prophet looking backwards to announce to us as unachieved? My observations will almost entirely refer to the earlier half of the century and for the most part to a single stage of that period, partly because of the exigencies of time, and partly because I know that it is the later half which is to be chiefly discussed in

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a full and well-arranged series of special lectures that are to follow.

If, then, as we are surely justified in doing, we regard the Napoleonic age as the necessary complement of the Revolutionary, and accept the position in which Napoleon himself was willing to acquiesce, that with his first overthrow the period of the fundamental unsettlement of Europe was at an end, we can have no difficulty in understanding the hopes and expectations with which her populations watched the assembling of the Congress of Vienna in 1814. The process of disenchantment was no doubt to be rapid; and under the dictatorial influence of an epigram or two posterity has been inclined to minimise not only the actual results of the Congress but also the labours by which those results were produced—as if at any time the real work of a large assembly were done by more than a small and select body; and the necessary few were not wanting at Vienna. I doubt whether more than one or two of the names of the statesmen who were the real working-bees of the Congress would carry any particular significance to modern ears; but such is often the fate of those who are content to take a continuous part in the constructive work of statesmanship and to forego the applause which as a rule must inevitably attach itself to the arena. At the outset of the Congress, the hopes set on the issue of its deliberations were unprecedented alike in their height and in their variety. While the pacifications concluded within the last twenty years had, as it were, but dotted the surface of the sea of war, none of those earlier compacts which had long been accounted landmarks in the political history of Europe—not even the Treaties of Westphalia or the Peace of Utrecht—had attempted more than to regulate the relations between a definite number of important States; at Vienna every country in Europe, with the sole exception of Turkey, knew that its interests would be drawn under discussion. It is true that the bases of the territorial

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resettlement had already been laid down at Paris, though Talleyrand, whose influence thus made itself felt even before the assembling of the Congress, had managed to have them kept secret in order to spare the susceptibilities of defeated France; and on the other hand it was not known how far from complete was the agreement which had been reached, and how questions were still left open, destined in the very midst of negotiations for peace to bring the chief Powers to the verge of a new war. Thus it came to pass that not only romantic journalists—and in the early decades of the nineteenth century there were romantic journalists who occupied posts of honour in their profession and in contemporary literature—but practical politicians reckoned on the establishment by the Congress of a system of States, capable of maintaining a positive balance of power, and not merely of satisfying that quasi-negative interpretation of the term which means a combination against the preponderance of any single Power,—be its name Habsburg, or France, or Russia. Such hopes as these were undeceived by the operations of the Congress itself, or rather by those of the Committee of Powers acting on its behalf, who speedily enough made it evident that their scheme of territorial reconstruction began and ended in patchwork; and that even as to the negative principle of not leaving France too strong they were prepared for compromise. It is too much to say, as has been repeatedly said, that the principle of territorial readjustment followed in the Vienna Treaties was statistical or more properly speaking numerical only—*i.e.* that the apportionment of dominions and the assignment of frontiers was made out by a comparison of the number of subjects or ‘souls’ allotted to each government. Still it was numerical almost or quite as much as it was historical or linguistic or religious or, to use the word of magic sound in whose significance that of all the rest is wont to enter—national. Thus the Congress accorded its sanction to a long series of arrangements which seem to us to fly in the face of

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that principle of nationality destined so soon to become one of the active forces of European politics, but which were in reality by their very arbitrariness and rigour to help to hasten the assertion of that principle. If we turn to the South, we find Austria securing to herself an uncontested compensation in that Lombardo-Venetian Kingdom which a government far worse than hers might under other conditions have far more easily conciliated to its rule. If we pass to the North, we see Norway, cut off from Denmark, who spoke her tongue, and coupled against her will with Sweden, while Denmark is thus driven to seek to make up for her loss by forcing her German Provinces into political union with herself; or we see Finland apathetically left in the grasp of Russia, which in our own day is in defiance of historical tradition, and in defiance of sworn rights, at last closing upon the victim of tendencies against which neither protest nor scruple seems of avail. Or again, if we glance at the Northern border provinces between France and Germany—the Belgian and the Dutch—which after separating from one another in the hour of common stress had come to agree to differ in their material interests, in their religious traditions and in other respects, we find them, to no real purpose so far as the peace of Europe was concerned, forced into an arbitrary union. Everywhere the settlement was a settlement *de par le Congrès*—and often one palpably opposed to history and against kind.

But the Congress had been expected to accomplish other things besides the establishment of that comprehensive political system of States which, as Gentz had the sublime assurance to declare, only missed being perfected by it because Napoleon chose to break loose from Elba. I need not dwell in particular on the expectation of a systematic encouragement by the Congress of constitutional forms of government, due not so much to the wishes of the leading statesmen of the Congress itself, as to the situation of which European public opinion regarded them as the trustees. Metternich, to do him justice,