

# Canon Sanday on 'International scholarship after the war', May 1918



Questions about the appropriate roles and behaviours of academics when nations are embattled were raised in a curious episode in British Academy history one hundred years ago.

In early May 1918, the First World War was still very much in progress – with the Spring Offensive having recently won spectacular successes for the Germans. But thought was already being given to what things could be like after the war, whenever that might be. In British academic circles, the question was being asked of what would be the appropriate stance to take in relation to their German counterparts. The Revd Canon William Sanday, Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity at the University of Oxford, and a founding Fellow of the British Academy, had been invited by the Academy's President, Sir Frederic Kenyon, to prepare a paper on 'International scholarship after the war,' and he presented it at a meeting of the Academy on 9 May 1918.

## A question of personal bearing

Sanday described the issue of 'International scholarship after the war' as being 'a question of conduct, of personal relations and personal bearing. It is the question, How are we to behave?'

The nearest analogy would be that of the behaviour of individuals after a serious quarrel, a quarrel in which one of the disputants had right on his side and in which he had great cause to be aggrieved. How would a gentleman behave after such a quarrel had been brought to an end?

Under normal conditions (i.e. in the case of an ordinary war) there would be a period of mutual coolness, of rather severe silence and inaction, of somewhat studied reserve. Each side would probably wait for the other to take the first step.

And the chances are that the first step would be not a big one but a little one. Some small practical point would arise which would have to be settled one way or the other. So relations would begin, and once begun they would continue. The broken thread would be taken up, and not dropped. There would be no eagerness and no haste; it would be a matter of time; decisions would be slowly and gravely taken. Still they would be taken; and one step would lead to another – until in the end a certain amount of cordiality began to enter in. Relations would once more become friendly – and increasingly friendly – by degrees.

Such I suppose is the kind of course that things might take under what I have called normal conditions, i.e. where both parties to the transaction were gentlemen, guided by the code and instincts of gentlemen. All that it would be necessary to do would be to apply these on the larger scale.

However, Sanday went on, the present circumstances were not at all normal. The war 'has been, by universal consent, the worst war ever waged by Powers calling themselves civilized.' Great bitterness had been caused on the British side by the Germans' use of 'what is called by euphemism "unrestricted submarine warfare" and the air-raids and bombing of cities and towns with the destruction of working-class quarters'. And whereas the British retained 'the spirit of chivalry and fair-play' – 'We're sportsmen, whatever else we may be' – Germany 'must be regarded as a State with a stain upon its character, which is not to be washed out in a day.'

1. At the start of his lecture, Sanday thanked Mr Edwyn Bevan for his help in providing him with up-to-date information. During the War, Bevan worked in the department of propaganda and information and in the political intelligence department of the Foreign Office. But he would subsequently pursue his own academic career, as a scholar of Hellenistic history and literature; and he would himself be elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1942.

### The Lichnowsky revelations

But Sanday thought there was a glimmer of hope for the future because ‘a new situation has been created by the Lichnowsky revelations.’

Prince Lichnowsky had been the German ambassador to Britain at the outbreak of the war. He had regretted that the conflict had not been prevented; and in 1916 he had privately circulated a pamphlet entitled *My Mission to London, 1912–1914*, in which he criticised the conduct of his own government and contradicted official German claims about British responsibility for causing the war. This document had recently become more widely available in Germany, and also in Britain (in a translation containing a preface by Professor Gilbert Murray, Fellow of the British Academy, a classicist, who as a public intellectual had written much about the war).

For Sanday, ‘The disclosures will act as a touchstone for the moral conscience’ of the German people – ‘but primarily for the conscience of its moral leaders’. And Sanday hoped that distinctions could now be drawn in terms of culpability.

How far are we to hold the German people as a whole, and in particular the learned classes, the thinking classes – the classes corresponding to those which we represent ourselves – responsible for acts and principles of action which are to be referred in the first instance to the German Government and Higher Command. Our concern is especially with the learned classes.

### Hope for the future

Looking ahead, ‘There is no doubt that the end of the war must be followed by a great constructive effort all over the world, especially in the fields of law, politics, morals and religion’. And it would be ‘out of the question’, argued Sanday, to boycott the contribution of the distinctive German scholarly mind from these matters of ‘high debate’ – ‘the world as a whole cannot afford to do without it’.

But Sanday had a more immediate and ambitious agenda in mind, in the light of the Lichnowsky revelations, and ‘it is to the scholars that we are now looking’. He picked out for special mention Professor Ernst Troeltsch of Heidelberg, Professor Adolf von Harnack of Berlin, and Professor Friederich Loofs of Halle as scholars capable of writing ‘with weight and breadth of view’.

We ask ourselves, What attitude will men like these assume in the strong new light which has now been thrown upon the events which led up to the war? Will they speak out with frankness and candour and at long last tell their people the truth? It is a great opportunity – the greatest that has ever fallen to a learned class of making itself felt on the course of history since history began. ... The learned class is the proper

guardian of historical truth, the proper exponent of sound doctrine in politics and morals. Now is the time when the German people urgently needs the lead which they are best able to give it. [If the roles were reversed] I have little doubt that members of this Academy would be among the foremost in speaking out and giving a lead to the country; and I believe that, in such a case, the country would follow the lead.

Sanday believed that – apart from the High Command which at that moment would ‘be elated by their recent apparent successes’ – ‘at bottom Germany really wants peace’. And in pursuit of that,

let the learned class take up its parable – this class which has so long been in the background and content simply to follow in the wake of the powers that be. Let it gird itself for this double task: on the one hand, for bringing home to its countrymen the real truth; and on the other hand, for working out the problem which that truth entails. It would be for this class, on behalf of the nation, to make the amends that are due from it, in the first instance by stating the plain unvarnished truth and doing justice at least to the honourable aims of the nation’s adversaries. And then, its next duty would be to work out the problem of bringing Germany back again into line with the moral conscience of the world.

And, Sanday concluded, ‘if the learned and thinking class in Germany sets itself to work out anything like the programme that I have sketched for it, the question as to the relations of International Scholarship after the War will very soon lapse and be forgotten.’

### Reaction

The presentation of this paper was reported in *The Times* the following day (10 May). It passed no judgement on Sanday’s argument. But it did report some qualifying remarks by Kenyon, the Academy’s President, who as chair of the meeting had stressed that

the discussion of the subject was not to be taken as a sign of any weakening on the part of British scholars with regard to the war. On behalf of the Academy he could affirm that they believed as firmly as ever in the righteousness of the war, and in the necessity of fighting until an honourable peace was secured. It would be impossible to resume intercourse with German scholars until they had renounced the crimes against civilization which Germany had committed. But if such a change of mind should take place when Germans discovered the truth, British scholars might assist the process of conversion by which alone Germany

could win readmission to the fellowship of civilized nations.<sup>2</sup>

That same day, another Fellow of the British Academy who had been present at the meeting, Sir William M. Ramsay, fired off a letter to Kenyon. He urged that Sanday's paper should not be published by the Academy. It had been far too remote from its supposed subject matter – 'far too political-moral'. Ramsay also believed 'the purport and tone would offend a very large body of feeling in this country, and I confess that I was in less sympathy with my old friend than I have ever been with anything he has said and printed.' And as for Sanday's hope that the Lichnowsky memorandum would change German public opinion, Ramsay thought that 'really too childlike'.

Indeed, Sanday's hopes seemed to receive a severe blow the very next day (11 May), when *The Times* reported that Professor Troeltsch – in whom Sanday had wished to place such trust – had recently published some very unreconstructed views about the war, suggesting that the German offensive could cause France to be 'over-run and forced into a peace', and England 'driven from the Continent'.

In the following days, *The Times* published criticism of Sanday's position from fellow Oxford professors – on 13 May from J.A. Stewart (moral philosophy) who protested against any talk of peace with 'the professorial agents of the German Government', and on 17 May from C.S. Sherrington (physiology) who recalled a damning conversational exchange with Troeltsch in 1907.

On 13 May, the Foreign Office wrote to the British Academy to ask for a copy of Sanday's text: 'we shall have to decide what line to take about it, and whether it is desirable to lay stress upon it in our Propaganda.' A few days later, having read the paper, the Foreign Office sent its response. The official credits Sanday's 'fine and generous attempt' to appeal to German scholars. But: 'Personally I have little hope of any good effect of such an appeal on the established leaders of German thought; they seem to me to have gone too far to recede.' And there was a danger that it might give the impression that Britain could be looking to negotiate a peace based on the current state of the war, 'and this would give a false idea of the mind of England'.

### Conclusion

The British Academy itself was coming to a view as to what to do. On 23 May 1918, former President of the Academy, Lord Reay, sent in his considered opinion. 'It seems to me quite clear that the B.A. should not take any steps *at this present time* to ask German scholars to reconsider their opinions.' One particular reason was that 'in French learned circles it is considered that any contact

with German savants is to be avoided', and any conciliatory initiative 'would be very much resented in France'. In Germany, it would be misinterpreted.

It must be clearly understood that it is Professor Sanday's individual opinion not that of the B.A. and I do not think the Department in charge of propaganda should disseminate it in neutral or belligerent countries. ... I thoroughly appreciate the high motives which inspire Professor Sanday's proposals, but – in their present mood the Germans are unable to grasp our attitude towards our enemies ... We must make it clear to them that all civilised races look with horror on the effects which their Kultur has had.

Kenyon duly wrote to Sanday. On 3 June 1918, a contrite Sanday replied.

I must thank you very sincerely for your most kind and considerate letter. I agree with it entirely & shall be not only willing but more than willing that my paper should not be published at present. Ever since the paper was read I have felt that every thing has been going wrong for me. The very next day after the report appeared in *The Times*, came the summary of Troeltsch's last article, then Sherrington's Notes, & since these successes in France & the detestable bombing of hospitals &c. I'm not a bit of a pacifist really, & I quite agree that the only thing to do is to go on fighting.

I don't think I blame myself much. I might perhaps have known rather more about Troeltsch – but I only said that he was capable of better things ...

Events might have gone in a way in which my paper might perhaps have been of real use. ...

So long as you & others don't think the paper was a discredit to the Academy or to myself, I am well content. But I should rather like it to be kept on record.

And his typed, unpublished text has lain in the Academy's archives ever since.<sup>3</sup> ■

'From the Archive' research by Karen Syrett,  
British Academy Archivist and Librarian.  
Text by James Rivington.

2. An undated note in Kenyon's handwriting, possibly a memo for the remarks he gave on this occasion, reveals his evolving thinking. It includes the sentence: 'It is right to make it plain that British scholars are heart and soul in the war, that their determination is not slackened, because we feel that we, with our allies, are the trustees of civilisation.'

3. This brief account is drawn from material in the British Academy's own archives. The episode has been written about elsewhere, including by Mark D. Chapman in his book *Theology at War and Peace: English theology and Germany in the First World War* (2016), Chapter 6, 'The Sanday, Sherrington and Troeltsch affair: Theological relations between England and Germany after the First World War'.