



HERBERT ALBERT LAURENS FISHER

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1865-1940

HERBERT ALBERT LAURENS FISHER had a varied and most distinguished life. His parents were both people of rare culture. His mother, daughter of one of the beautiful 'Pattle sisters', had been the model for the heroine in Watts's famous picture of Una and the Red Cross Knight. His father was by profession a barrister, but when a Student of Christ Church he had been tutor to the Prince of Wales and afterwards was for many years his Private Secretary. In later life, by gift of the Prince as Duke of Cornwall, he accepted the ancient office of Vice-Warden of the Stanneries.

Born in 1865, Herbert Fisher was a commoner at Winchester, where he took many prizes; a scholar and Fellow of New College; Vice-Chancellor of Sheffield University; one of the most eminent historians of his day; a Doctor of many Universities; Member of a Royal Commission on the Indian Public Services; President of the Board of Education; Warden of New College; a Trustee of the British Museum; President of the British Academy; and O.M. He died in his seventy-sixth year through being run down by a lorry in the street while on his way to preside at the Appeal Tribunal on Conscientious Objectors to Military Service.

I am entrusted by the Academy with the duty of writing this short memoir upon him, and am glad to do it, though the intimacy of the loss to me personally makes the task somewhat difficult. Fisher and I were lifelong friends. We were elected to our fellowships at New College on the same examination fifty-one years ago. I remember, even before that, being dismayed, when we went to the same lectures, by the comparison of our note-books; mine the ordinary confused litter of imperfect sentences, and his neatly tabulated

under heads and sub-heads, which he somehow miraculously discerned as the lecturer spoke them.

Fisher was a first-class scholar in pure classics, and his chief interest as a young man was in Ancient History. He was advised, however, by a leading authority that Ancient History was by that time a closed field; nothing much more was likely to be discovered: and consequently he turned to Modern History. The prophecy was singularly false. The very next year Evans discovered the Palace of Minos, and year by year new worlds have since been opened up to us among the records of the Minoans, the Hittites, and the various inhabitants of Mesopotamia. However, no one can say that Modern History has stood still. It was that subject that Fisher went on to study at the universities of Paris and of Göttingen. All of us were then deeply under the German spell, and I remember being surprised to find after his return that he had been more impressed by the historical methods of Paris, ranging from the intense technical accomplishment of the *École des Chartes* to the wide and humane genius of Taine and Renan. He has told us since of the engaging frankness with which the learned Germans of that date, under the influence of Treitschke, would explain to their English visitor the hopeless decadence of England and the admirable plans they had formed for its destruction. A love of France and of French literature was a permanent result in him of these student years.

The field of the Oxford Modern History School is alarmingly large. But like many dons he had a relentless conscience about his teaching work, and he felt bound to prepare carefully every period that any pupil might choose to take. This involved undoubted drudgery, but pupils have borne witness to the inspiration of his tutorials, making history, as Lord Acton puts it, 'not a burden on the memory, but an enlightenment of the soul'. At the same time he managed to find leisure for writing. His first work, more difficult perhaps than rewarding, was the revision of Kitchin's *History of France* for a new edition; this was followed in

1898 by a study of *The Medieval Empire*. Meantime, he was working his way towards that intimate knowledge of the non-military side of Napoleon and the Napoleonic system for which he was afterwards famous. *Napoleonic Statesmanship* in 1903 was followed by *Bonapartism* (1908), *The Republican Tradition* (1911), and the masterly little *Life of Napoleon Bonaparte* in the Home University Library in 1913, which has been described by a French writer as the best short life of Napoleon in any language.

Meantime, in 1899, he had married Lettice, the daughter of Sir Courtenay Ilbert, who had been his pupil at Somerville and who was in later days to share so effectively in his intellectual and political interests and preside so graciously over his many-sided hospitality. His volume on the Tudors in the Oxford series on *The Political History of England* was published in 1906. His edition of the essays of his brother-in-law, Professor Maitland, in 1910 showed for the first time his special gifts as a biographer. He could delineate character, not by the lynx-eyed observation of weaknesses which has recently been fashionable, but by affectionate appreciation of what was characteristic.

In 1912 came an interruption to his writing through calls to other and more urgent tasks. He was appointed a Member of the Royal Commission on the Public Services in India, which occupied much of his time until the Report of the Commission in 1915, and in the same year he was elected Vice-Chancellor of the University of Sheffield. The change from intellectual to administrative work came as a rest and refreshment. The University was a new one. The College out of which it grew had been chiefly known for its departments of Applied Science, Metallurgy, and Mining, but in 1905 was launched with a Royal Charter and with four Faculties: Arts, Pure Science, Medicine, and Applied Science. As was the case with most of the provincial universities, much ground had to be made up on the Arts side; this, of course, was work for which Fisher was admirably fitted.

Mr. W. M. Gibbons, Registrar of Sheffield University, writes:

He did not proceed to redress the balance to the detriment of Applied Science—on the contrary by the contacts which he made with industrialists he gave it an impetus; but he set himself to develop studies and research in the other Faculties.

His quick grasp and adaptability were perhaps best shown in what he did to encourage the application of Science to Industry—a sphere of work in all probability foreign to his previous experience. He set up a University Scientific Advisory Committee whose function was to direct manufacturers, experimenters and inventors to scientific and technical literature bearing upon the difficulties with which they are presented in dealing with new problems and to put manufacturers into communication with suitable scientific and practical expert opinion. . . . Further, he sponsored the formation in the University of a Delegacy for the promotion of research in Glass Technology. This enterprise, truly pioneer in character, has borne abundant fruit. The Delegacy has now a large staff whose scientific researches have won a reputation in many parts of the world.

Fisher visualised the University as a sort of central power station of the intellectual life of its diocese. Under his influence Sir Henry Stephenson endowed a Chair of Civic Art. He guided with much wisdom the arrangements for giving effect to the will of a prominent Sheffield citizen (Mr. Edgar Allen) who left a legacy of some £40,000 for the foundation of scholarships. No society, however small, concerned at all for the social or cultural life of the community appealed for his help in vain. Indeed, he successfully moulded a civic University to the requirements of the district it was intended to serve, never compromising University standards or the ideals which should inspire an academic community.

A tactful, dignified, and witty speaker, Fisher soon won respect and popularity in the city of Sheffield as well as the University. He made each great institution take pride in the other. He brought about the birth of a good bookshop, worthy of a university town. He continued to encourage greater co-operation between the scientific and literary departments of the University, when the nature of the problems before him was changed by the outbreak of the World War in August 1914. He acted at once with the

Mayor and the Master Cutler in the great work of getting the cutlery industries adapted to the needs of the War. For instance, when a demand arose for iron helmets, objects practically unknown since the seventeenth century, a Sheffield manufacturer whom he had approached said: 'Helmets? Well, I make dish-covers. It is the same idea.' And helmets were duly made.

In the midst of these activities he was suddenly invited by Mr. Lloyd George in 1916 to join his Ministry as President of the Board of Education, and without further preparation entered the House of Commons as a Minister. He seemed instantly at home. He knew his subject; he had always been a keen and well-informed politician; he could take on the work of a Cabinet Minister as easily as that of a Vice-Chancellor. His maiden speech in the House was actually on the Education Estimates and occupied a full two hours. It has been described, in Aristotelian terms, as a perfect *Mimesis* of the Front Bench manner, slow and urbane, with nothing donnish or professorial about it, and garnished with a few decorous jokes not too difficult for his audience.

It had been a brave experiment of the new Prime Minister's to select for that Cinderella of Ministries not merely an outsider of first-rate ability, instead of one of the many respectable mediocrities who lay to hand, but also a man who knew his subject and was on fire with zeal for it. The Board at that time was staffed by men of quite exceptional intellectual power, some of whom, like Sir E. K. Chambers or Professor Mackail, are much better known for their independent literary work than for their services in a Government Office. Fisher had remarkable collaborators. He worked hard at visiting schools and getting to know the various parts of the vast educational machine of which he had not had experience. He was impressed by the great scope given in our system to originality and experiment, and by the ability with which it was used. Of the London elementary schools he once said that there was more difference between the worst of them and the best than there was

between the best and Eton or Winchester. He encouraged the enlightened tendencies of the Board when brought into danger by the war fever. He persuaded certain municipalities that to forbid the teaching of German was not a useful form of patriotism; when a cry was raised about the grain-eating habits of sparrows and a proposal pressed on the Board that prizes should be given to children for the heads of birds, at so much a dozen, he replied gravely that the Board was not convinced of the educational value of the decapitation of sparrows. But of course he will be chiefly remembered for his Education Bill.

One of the paradoxes of war-time is that a nation, just when it is most hard pressed for money, is often more ready to undertake bold and expensive reforms than in periods of peace and prosperity. In 1916 the country had suddenly realized the deficiencies of our national education, and Fisher made skilful use of the opportunity. He succeeded in introducing a system of percentage grants, by which three-fifths of the salary expenditure on teachers was to be found by the Board of Education and only two-fifths by the locality. By this scheme the average salary of the elementary teacher was doubled, and later on the provision for pensions was greatly increased. The whole position of the elementary teacher was raised both in dignity and in comfort. For the secondary schools also he provided some improvement in salary and pension, and made easier the path to the university by the establishment of a system of State scholarships and by special grants for advanced courses. He also succeeded in substituting for the fifty-five separate entrance examinations which gave access to as many different black-coated occupations a single general examination, the School Certificate, which is accepted by all.

Among the other schemes of progress laid up in the pigeon-holes of the Board there were two noticeable tendencies. Was it better simply to raise the universal age of education up to fifteen, or to provide part-time continuation schools up to eighteen? The former plan looked attractively democratic

and equalitarian; but Fisher unhesitatingly supported the latter. A grave flaw in our system, he considered, was that after enjoying the whole-time care of conscientious teachers up to fourteen, a boy was at that age suddenly flung loose into industry, with no care for his conduct and no provision for his intellectual interests. 'At fourteen they are well-behaved intelligent little boys; by sixteen or seventeen they are utterly changed.' The great error is the sudden break. Up to fourteen nothing but education; after fourteen no education at all. Surely, he argued, what was needed was a more gradual shading off; a provision of some continued chance of studying the subjects, not necessarily technical, in which a boy takes an interest, and some continued association with teachers whom he has learnt to like and respect. This part of the Fisher Bill, for reasons over which its author had no control, was never put into force. It involved expense; it called for a great additional number of teachers; various other post-War difficulties stood in its way. But it remains on the statute book, pointing an essential road for the future development of our educational system.

He remained in the Cabinet until the fall of the Lloyd George government in 1922, but kept his seat in the House of Commons as Member for the Combined English Universities till 1926. During these years his occupation in active political life necessarily interrupted his academic study of history and restricted his literary output. When there was a question of his becoming a Professor of History, he did not wish it; he considered he was not up to date in his reading. Perhaps he did not realize that his experience of public affairs more than compensated for that deficiency. There are already signs of this in the *Studies in History and Politics* and the essay *An International Experiment*, published in 1920 and 1921 respectively. He took part in the 'International Experiment' as a British Delegate to the Assembly of the League of Nations for two years.

There is no doubt that he took naturally to practical politics. He had long enjoyed the friendship of many leading

statesmen, particularly those of specially intellectual or academic leanings, such as John Morley, Lord Rosebery, A. J. Balfour, and Asquith; Lloyd George was of a different type, but Fisher fell rapidly under the charm of his lively genius and quick sympathies, and an affectionate intimacy between the two men remained till death. When after six years as Minister and four as a private member he retired from the House and became Warden of his old College, he could not help—what historian could?—casting sometimes a ‘longing, lingering look behind’ towards that ‘pleasing anxious being’ which he had enjoyed so long in Parliament. An historian cannot but be fascinated by seeing the processes by which history is made and taking an occasional hand in making it. He is interested to note the small slips that have disastrous consequences and the great errors which sometimes do no particular harm; the casual decisions which matter so much more than the large formal agreements; the hidden strifes and tensions, the habitual victories of the second-best over the best. He is like a zoologist who, after being trained entirely in museums, is suddenly introduced, I will not say to the jungle, but let us imagine to some great American reservation, and enabled to see how the live animals really behave.

Of all forms of training history is, no doubt, far the best introduction to politics. Not mathematics; a mathematician’s mind has too sharp outlines. Not physical science; science knows too little of human beings. Not philosophy; philosophy has standards which are not those of the ordinary man. The historian is interested in the world as it actually is and moves, and judges human beings by human standards. Fisher’s chief love was history. It was as an historian that he was elected Fellow of the British Academy in 1907. He served on the Council 1915–18 and again 1927–8, and was President from 1928 to 1932. He gave only one Presidential Address, on leaving office in 1932; but his Raleigh Lecture in 1928 on *The Whig Historians*, in which he paid special tribute to Macaulay and Sir George Trevelyan, began with a section on the work of the Academy in that year.

But though principally an historian, he had a remarkably full knowledge of the progress of all the various studies that are called 'humane', the sort of knowledge that beseeemed the President of the Academy and was often tested in the Editor of the Home University Library. He understood foreign nations. He could well have been a great ambassador, like Bryce, or a distinguished governor-general, like John Buchan. One can judge from the effect of his speeches on great gatherings in South Africa and the United States or on French audiences in Canada. The same genuine understanding of human nature gives value to his biographies of Bryce and Vinogradoff.

Yet, easily as he moved in the political world, he was not quite 'of' it. It is a world in which push and self-advertisement are not out of place; one cannot imagine Herbert Fisher ever pushing or ever advertising. It is a world where pugnacity is a very valuable quality and the externals of compulsory courtesy may not unprofitably be accompanied by some toughness of moral fibre within. Fisher's courtesy came from the heart; it was part of his nature. He was a living model of the great Wykehamist principle that 'Manners Makyth Man'. In some respects there was a touch of the eighteenth century about him, the polish, the classical culture, the combination of wit and dignity. There was a touch of Gibbon. He remembered well the old counsel of Epicharmus: Νᾶφε καὶ μέμνασ' ἀπιστεῖν 'Be sober, and remember to disbelieve.'

These wider interests did not distract him from his duties as Warden. On the contrary he added a great ally to the remarkable group of able and progressive Heads of Houses who used their various war-time experiences in guiding Oxford after the World War. His knowledge of the larger world made him a stimulating friend and a useful guide to undergraduates. He was a valuable member of the Hebdomadal Council. His rebuke to an undergraduate who, without being exactly vicious, was wasting his time, deserves to be quoted as a model. 'Mr. X, there are forty-two applicants

who have had to be refused a place in the College; I think some of them would make better use of it than you.'

Besides various lectures, such as those on *The Whig Historians* (1928) and *Common Weal* (1924), he wrote during these years one of his most adroit and charming books, *Our New Religion* (1929), being a study of the movement called Christian Science and the life of its founder. Seldom can destructive criticism have been delivered with greater urbanity. The effect may be compared with that of Eduard Meyer's historical study of Mormonism. Another brilliant piece of satire is his contribution to the collection called 'If . . .', on the theme 'If Napoleon had escaped to America'. But he had the happiness to be working, and working efficiently, up to the end of his life, and his last serious work, the *History of Europe*, finished in 1936, is not only his longest but, by common consent, his best.

Professor George Trevelyan writes to me:

I think the peculiar quality of Fisher's historical work, which placed him on a level with the very foremost historians of his time in any country, was the combination in him of scholarship and literary power. The weapons of his scholarship he had perfected early in his life by his studies at the Sorbonne. The literary power was traditional in his English and Oxford surroundings. And for both literature and scholarship he had great natural gifts.

His Napoleonic and other studies manifested these qualities throughout his life, but the crowning work, without which he might have suffered oblivion which he now escapes, was his *History of Europe*. He wrote it late in life, but he could hardly have written it much sooner, for it has in it a long life's accumulation of sad experience and wisdom, and wide and scholarly study. The serious part of the reading public at once appreciated what he had given—what no one else in Europe could have supplied—a lucid and nobly written story of the development of European civilisation from the beginnings down to the era of its present danger. Others recently have tried the task, but some have been below Fisher in scholarship and knowledge, others in balance of mind or in power of style. None, I think, has succeeded nearly so well. If the dispassionate study of history by the public survives the present storm, Fisher's book will have a long life before it, simply on its merits.

If it is not impertinent to add to these remarks of a distinguished historian the impressions of a mere man of letters, I would say that I feel Fisher's *History of Europe* to be specially interesting in two ways; for one thing, he writes, especially in the modern period, as one who has practical knowledge of the workings of governments; for another, his book seems, at this strange and disquieting period of the history of mankind, to be a definitive utterance of a certain philosophy or *Weltanschauung* or faith, whichever we choose to call it, of which our chaotic generation has largely lost hold: the spirit of Liberalism among forms of thought, of Great Britain among nations, of the nineteenth century among the ages. We call it 'pre-War', hardly realizing the full meaning of that pregnant phrase; it belongs to the time when men's minds had not yet been disorganized by the constant presence or menace of that disastrous influence and the moral and material world alike might be called a Cosmos rather than a Chaos. It was a time when we were actuated by hope rather than by fear, when we believed that men were as an ordinary rule influenced by reason, that justice was the great healer of social troubles and the natural aim of wise statesmanship; a time whose normal standards of conduct, public and private, often seem to us now like ideals no longer attainable. The book, as Professor Trevelyan suggests, may well stand as a monument from a saner time; it may even be an instrument towards the restoration of sanity.

The word 'great' is an adjective with many meanings and shades of connotation. If Lord Acton is right in his dictum that 'all power corrupts' and that 'no great man can be a good man', I shall deny Herbert Fisher the title of greatness, for what comes out most clearly in my thoughts of him is not his administrative success, not his intellectual and literary powers, great as these were; but the unfailing highmindedness and sincerity of his character. He has lived such a life as we would all desire to live, and has earned that Peace which belongs to men of good will.

G. M.