



Photograph by Walter Stoneman

GUY CROMWELL FIELD, 1950

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1887-1955

GUY CROMWELL FIELD, who was born on 15 January 1887, was the second of five children, and the eldest of three sons, of Henry Cromwell Field of Birmingham. On his father's side he was a direct descendant of Oliver Cromwell. His mother was the only child of the Right Hon. Jesse Collings who about 1865 came from his birthplace in Devonshire and settled in Birmingham. He took up politics under the aegis of Joseph Chamberlain, specializing in agrarian affairs and launching upon the world the slogan 'three acres and a cow'; and on 27 January 1886, by carrying an amendment in the House of Commons, succeeded in overthrowing the government of Lord Salisbury. It is not surprising that Guy Field soon displayed an interest in history and politics, and, after an education at Marlborough, gained a scholarship for History at Balliol and went up to Oxford in October 1905. Here his tutors were J. L. Strachan-Davidson, A. D. Lindsay, and A. L. Smith (all three subsequently Masters of the college). He worked first for Greats, in which he obtained a second class in 1908, and during the next year for Modern History. The reading of Plato's *Republic* left an ineffaceable impression upon him but, judging from his later writings, he was not swept away by the philosophical currents between which Oxford at that time was divided. His interests were historical and humanistic, and theory divorced from practical application made no appeal to him. Appointments followed as a Lecturer in History at Balliol (1910-11), and in Philosophy at the University of Birmingham (1911-12); during these years he further obtained the degree of B.Sc. at Oxford with a thesis devoted to 'Modern Developments of Realism'. From 1912 onwards he held a lectureship in Ethics and Politics at the University of Manchester. This post promised to be more permanent, and in 1914 he was living there, sharing rooms with a Balliol contemporary, C. G. Stone. On the outbreak of war he obtained a commission in the Royal Warwickshire Regiment; in 1916 he went to France with the rank of captain, but in June he was taken prisoner. After nearly eighteen months in captivity he was transferred to Switzerland on the ground of serious ill health. In June 1918 he found himself back in England and was given

employment in London at the War Office; this lasted until his demobilization in July 1919. In the autumn of this year his marriage to Miss Agnes Doris Skinner took place. He was now able to return to academic life, and accepted a post as Lecturer in Philosophy at the University of Liverpool. He remained there for seven years, later becoming an associate professor, and Dean of the Faculty of Arts from 1923 to 1926.

At about this time he began to make his mark as a writer on ethics and psychology, and also to concentrate his energy upon a historico-philosophical work dealing with Plato and his background. His first book (1920) was a criticism of the idea of Guild Socialism. In some papers contributed to *Mind* in 1921 and 1922 he criticized the doctrine of instinct maintained by some psychologists, and their use of the conception of 'the unconscious'. *Moral Theory* (1921), which is dedicated to the memory of his two brothers, is a book which must have provided many students with their first introduction to ethics. Aristotle and Kant are taken as classic representatives of two widely different and complementary tendencies, for which the good and the right are respectively the fundamental notions. There are some echoes in this book of Field's undergraduate studies, but on the whole it does not anticipate the theses on which he most insisted in later years.

An interest in the personality of Socrates is not a phenomenon which requires any special explanation. But it may be recalled that a novel view of the whole Socratic problem had been put forward by John Burnet in his edition of the *Phaedo* (1911), while at about the same time he and other leading scholars agreed in recognizing the authenticity of the Seventh and Eighth Platonic epistles, a change which opened the way to a new estimate of Plato's attitude to the politics of his day. Field evidently felt from the first the need to consider the ancient evidence exhaustively and to define his own position. In a 40-page booklet entitled *Socrates and Plato*, which was published in 1913, he replied to A. E. Taylor's first series of *Varia Socratica*, and argued that the traditional picture of Socrates is in all respects better supported by the evidence than one which represents him as a Pythagorean, a mystic, and a maintainer of the Platonic two-world theory. Resuming this debate after the war, he contributed to the *Classical Quarterly* two learned and closely reasoned articles on the Socratic problem in which stress was laid on features of the ancient evidence to which Burnet and Taylor paid insufficient attention. This led on, after an interval,

to *Plato and his Contemporaries*, published in 1930, of which it will be convenient to speak more fully later.

In 1926 he was appointed Professor of Philosophy at Bristol. It was here that he spent the remainder of his life, deeply influential as a teacher, and taking an ever more prominent part in administration. He also soon became involved in practical work of a wider range. At Bristol he was Dean of the Faculty of Arts from 1929 to 1932, and Pro-Vice-Chancellor from 1944 to 1945 and again from 1947 to 1952. In 1952 he retired from his professorship. He became a very active member of the Association of University Teachers. Not only did he serve for a long time on its Central Executive Committee (1930-47), but during these years he was a member of many committees on special problems and so exercised a decisive influence on policy. In 1936-7 he was President of the Association. From 1940 to 1944 he served on the Tribunal, in the south-western region, which reviewed the statements of conscientious objectors who claimed either total exemption from war service or assignment to some non-military duties. The observations made in this capacity led him to write on *Pacifism and Conscientious Objection* (Current Problems, No. 14: Cambridge University Press, 1945). The book brought him more letters of appreciation than any of his works, and it is obvious from many of these that the writers, often people who had appeared as C.O.'s before the Tribunal, were grateful to him for what they recognized to be exceptional fairness and consideration. At the same time his analysis reveals clearly the inconsistency of many applicants and their superficial knowledge of history.

He enjoyed these administrative activities and was ideally suited to them. He possessed a natural dignity and simplicity, with a nice sense of humour. His memory of detail and recollection of people were excellent. He was a real democrat in his outlook, ready with criticism, but able to express it quietly and in such a way that he never made an enemy. His friendliness went together with a certain reserve and shyness, and in any case administrative work certainly came second in his scale of values to the teaching of his students. To borrow the words of Professor R. L. Brett (*The Times*, 3 May 1955): 'The way in which he maintained an interest in his old pupils made him the centre of a considerable number who looked to him with affection and respect, and who never sought his advice in vain. Field's teaching was characterized throughout by qualities which derived from the study of Plato. . . . It was marked by respect for his

pupils and the refusal to impose his own point of view upon them.'

He also reflected much on the general problem of the teaching of philosophy, and took this for his subject in his presidential address to a joint meeting of the Mind Association and Aristotelian Society in 1937. As he points out, the solution of the problem must depend on a prior question, namely what is the function of philosophy. Having explained that a philosophical inquiry is one which aims at bringing to light and criticizing assumptions which are made, with or without clear consciousness, in ordinary life and in the special disciplines, he records a change in his own view. The lecture, in philosophy, at first appeared to him a mere relic of earlier times, and yet experience shows that there is still a place for it as a means of imparting necessary information which, for one reason or another, cannot be conveniently obtained from books. He also suggests that much more is gained from the tutorial method if students are accustomed to submit their essays to the tutor in advance, leaving the tutorial hour free for criticism.

Something may now be said of Field's writings during his tenure of the chair at Bristol, and of the general position maintained in them. He held that the special task of the philosopher is to bring to light and criticize, and where necessary adjust to one another, the assumptions taken for granted either in daily life and action or in the sciences. He is constantly engaged either in an expansion of this view, or in an application of philosophical method so conceived. His earliest formulation of it appears in an address dating from 1934, to which he plainly attached importance, since he prints it as the introduction to his *Studies in Philosophy*. As he says, such a view is not original, but ancient and familiar. One may ask what is its value as a contribution to the problems of today. Much evidently depends here on the use actually made of the recommended method, and beyond question a reader of these writings will find it exercised in a fresh and vigorous manner and applied with success to some unexpected instances. There are some philosophers today who would wish to water down the criticism of assumptions into a mere study of the form of propositions, in order to avoid mistakes to which we are alleged to be otherwise liable. Field, when he meets this view, dismisses it without much ceremony, holding that what is in question is not form, but correspondence with fact, and that the analysis of form, though important, is never anything but a method and an approach to the main business:

If we are starting on an examination of the assumptions of [political] discussions, any of the considerations that come into play in arriving at these decisions may be relevant material for our study. The pure-minded logician may feel that this would make political theory a mere hotch-potch of verbal analysis, historical information, psychological generalizations and moral judgments. To this we could only reply that that is what politics is, and if we are to make a theory about it we cannot afford to leave any of these elements out, if we are not to distort the whole picture by false abstraction. After all, if each of these elements is to be handed over to a separate specialist, who is there left who can think about their interrelations as a whole? (*Political Theory*, Introduction.)

In his lecture on *Principles and Ideals in Politics*, Field reaches the conclusion that, in most moral or political judgement, standards of valuation of two different kinds are assumed. A decision is justified sometimes by an appeal to principles in which the agent firmly believes, sometimes by reference to the goodness of the result in prospect. An analysis which stresses either of these elements at the expense of the other is bound to be emotionally unsatisfactory. We need a general scheme which will recognize, 'on the one hand, that at any rate some actions have a positive or negative moral quality of their own, and cannot be judged entirely by their relation to an end or result beyond themselves. And, on the other, it must recognize that no action can ever be judged entirely in isolation apart from its accompaniments or results or relations to anything outside itself.' And these requirements are fulfilled if we maintain 'that the only things morally good in themselves, and therefore properly to be regarded as ends in themselves, are certain states of mind of individual human beings.' (This position is similar to that of H. W. B. Joseph in *Some Problems in Ethics*.)

The above-mentioned view of the function of the philosopher is, of course, derived from Plato; but this is not the only point of connexion between Field's view of philosophy and his work as a classical scholar. The circumstances in which he wrote his book *Plato and his Contemporaries* have been briefly mentioned above. Here it is maintained that many opinions of Socrates and Plato which now seem striking or paradoxical were not in fact peculiar to them, but 'simply a natural development of the assumptions of Greek thought and Greek language'. He believes this to be true, for example, of the thesis that virtue is knowledge; and Plato's doctrine of Ideas and description of an Ideal State are already implicit in the unphilosophical use of ἀγαθός as

'good for a purpose'. It can now be seen, therefore, that his purpose in *Plato and his Contemporaries* is twofold: firstly he maintains in opposition to Burnet and Taylor a conservative view regarding the distinction between the historical and the Platonic Socrates; and, secondly, he seeks to justify his estimate of the relation of both Socrates and Plato to the prevailing opinions of their time by a large-scale description of the Athenian scene in the fourth and fifth centuries B.C. The book does not issue in a critical account of the philosophy of Plato, to which it is intended as a preliminary. And there is one important aspect of the intellectual background which Field at this time did not try to delineate. The whole subject of the mathematical studies of the age and of Plato's interest in them, and of his influence upon posterity in mathematics and natural science, was left aside. He took up this subject later in a lecture on 'Plato and Natural Science', which was reprinted in his volume of *Studies in Philosophy*, and in a chapter of his book on the philosophy of Plato in the Home University Library. His chief purpose was to reply to scholars who have pilloried Plato as a metaphysician hostile to science, in contrast to the supposed pioneer of experimental method, Hippocrates. It is a matter of history, he argues, that Greek science, far from languishing in the period after Plato, reached its zenith at that time, and that some pupils of Plato developed, with encouragement from him, an interest in the phenomena of nature. Nor ought this to surprise us, for what Plato himself tells us in his dialogues is that knowledge of nature is a second-best knowledge, but not that it is so contemptible that it can be ignored without loss. He regards it as a stepping-stone to knowledge of the Ideas, and gives it a humble place in the scale of activities which constitute the good life (*Philebus* 62b). Those who insist most on the need for experiment have sometimes forgotten that the method by which science has advanced since the Renaissance has been one of hypothesis allied to observation, not of observation alone; and it is significant that the founders of modern science regarded Plato and the Pythagorean school with deep respect precisely because they foresaw the application of mathematical methods to the study of nature.

The moral and political philosophy of Plato has suffered an eclipse in recent years, and Plato himself has been regarded not as a discoverer and analyst of widely held assumptions, but as the mouthpiece of a ruthless and reactionary minority. Socrates has sometimes been contrasted with Plato, sometimes inculpated

in the charge with him. From what has been said above it is obvious why Field could not capitulate to any such views, and he expressed his dissent with his usual firmness. In his retirement he prepared for the press the lectures on political theory which he had given, during forty years, in the various universities in which he had taught. He decided that a complete rewriting was necessary in order to remove, as far as possible, traces of the lecture style; very fortunately this revision was completed just before he died. The book appeared posthumously in 1956. He loved the companionship of the Common Room at Bristol, and after retirement was still constantly to be found there. During the winter of 1954-5 he was for a time in very poor health, but as spring approached his condition improved, and he attended meetings as usual, including a conference in March at which he was one of the principal speakers. On 28 April he died suddenly of coronary thrombosis.

Plato urges that his prospective dialecticians should spend a certain period in going over again the studies they have acquired separately in youth, to give them 'a synoptic view of their affinity to one another and to reality'. These words, so familiar to G. C. Field, admirably express what he set out to do. At a time when philosophy has seemed to be dwindling into a specialized discipline, he saw the importance of keeping in view those basic questions which concern the interrelation of the studies and sciences, and the various departments of theory and practice. He was a man of extensive knowledge and a wide range of interests, which are only partially revealed in his published work.

Mr. M. H. Carré and Professor S. Körner of Bristol, Professor L. J. Russell, Professor John Orr, and Sir George N. Clark have all generously assisted the writer of this memoir with advice and information.

D. J. ALLAN

PRINCIPAL WRITINGS OF G. C. FIELD

(Reviews of books and contributions to discussions are not included)

SOCRATES AND PLATO. (1913)

GUILD SOCIALISM. (1920)

MORAL THEORY. (1921, 2nd ed. 1932)

PLATO AND HIS CONTEMPORARIES.¹ (1930)

¹ Includes two articles which had already appeared in the *Classical Quarterly*.

PREJUDICE AND IMPARTIALITY. (1932)

PACIFISM AND CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTION. (1945)

THE PHILOSOPHY OF PLATO. (1949)

POLITICAL THEORY. (1956)

STUDIES IN PHILOSOPHY (1935), which includes the following previously published papers:

The Examination of Assumptions. (1934)

Faculty Psychology and Instinct Psychology. (1921)

The Psychological Accompaniments of Instinctive Action. (1922)

Is the Conception of the Unconscious of Value in Psychology? (1922)

Ancient Philosophy and Modern Science. (1926)

Some Modern Proofs of the Existence of God. (1928)

The Value of Ethical and Political Philosophy in Practice. (1930)

Is Moral Progress a Reality? (1931)

Kant's First Moral Principle. (1932)

The Place of Definition in Ethics. (1932)

Plato and Natural Science. (1933)

Plato.¹ (1934)

THE INFLUENCE OF RACE ON HISTORY AND POLITICS. *Hibbert Journal*, January 1923.

THE ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF PLATO'S THEORY OF IDEAS. *Proc. of Aristotelian Society*, Suppl. vol. viii (1928), pp. 1-30.

THE TEACHING OF PHILOSOPHY. *Ibid.*, Suppl. vol. xvi (1937), pp. 1-19.

SOME PROBLEMS OF THE PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY. *British Academy Philosophical Lecture*, 1938.

PRINCIPLES AND IDEALS IN POLITICS. No. 18 in *Hobhouse Memorial Lectures* (1948).

WHAT IS POLITICAL THEORY? *Proc. of Aristotelian Society*, vol. liv (1954), pp. 145-66.

DEMOCRACY ANCIENT AND MODERN. *Cambridge Journal*, Nov. 1949; also reprinted as an Appendix to *POLITICAL THEORY* (1956).

¹ Contribution to a series of articles on Great Thinkers.