

HENRY CHARLES LEA

1825-1909.

HENRY CHARLES LEA, who died in October, 1909, at the age of eighty-four, had long been recognized as the leader among American historical scholars. The length of his period of production, the subjects he had chosen for investigation, the independence, originality, and extent of his work, and the vigour of his thought had given him an influence in America and a reputation in Europe equalled only by the group of writers of narrative history, consisting of Prescott, Parkman, Bancroft, and Motley, who had long before passed from the stage. And yet Lea stood distinctly apart from other historical students of his time. He was for many years engaged in business as a publisher, and was never connected with any educational or learned institution; he had no training of a formal kind for his work, and took but little share in the combined effort for the progress of historical study that has characterized American scholarship.

Lea's career as an historian must therefore be considered as peculiarly an individual experience, not typical of any special period or group. He was born in Philadelphia in the year 1825, and was never away from his native city more than a few weeks or months at a time. He was well trained in Greek, Latin, French, and the fundamental branches of education by private tutors in his early youth, but did not attend any school, college, or university. At eighteen years of age he entered his father's publishing house and remained engaged in active business for thirty-seven years, until his retirement in 1880. Even during the twenty-nine years that remained to him he kept up a partial connexion with the family publishing house, and devoted considerable time to the management and careful investment of his large fortune. His historical work was therefore done after the business day was over, on Sundays and occasional holidays, in one or two periods of enforced abstinence from more active exertion, and during those last three fortunate decades of vigorous and relatively undisturbed age allowed him by the fates for the continuance of his labours.

In Lea's study and writing three periods are clearly distinguishable. As a very young man he wrote and published in various journals

many articles on literary and scientific subjects. His literary interests gathered largely about the Greek classics and contemporary English poetry. These obviously arose from his reading. His scientific studies, which ranged from the analyses of certain chemical salts to the classification of freshwater bivalves, were a reflection of the interests of his father, Isaac Lea, a naturalist of some distinction.

Then there was a period when he read largely in history, especially in the early modern chroniclers. Through them he was gradually led back in time to the Middle Ages and in subject to the field of mediaeval social and legal institutions. Naturally inclined to production, the results of ten years or more of these studies appeared in a small volume, first published in 1866 and frequently reissued with additions, under the title 'Superstition and Force'. It was a careful and original study of four forms of mediaeval judicial trial—compurgation, the wager of battle, ordeals, and torture. In this book appeared clearly one of the characteristics of his work already noted, his absolute independence of other studies in the same field. There had been at the time but little investigation of mediaeval law; but what had been done he either did not know of or disregarded. Instead, he sought his materials in his own way in the mediaeval codes, commentators, and chroniclers, and worked out his own results from them. This remained true of his work during his whole life. He was singularly little influenced by secondary writing, strikingly devoted to the search for and use of the sources. This neglect of other modern writing was undoubtedly uneconomical of time, and laid him open to certain dangers which might otherwise have been avoided. It gave him, on the other hand, a detachment and distinctiveness which added much to the interest and value of his work. All of his writing has that note of directness and simplicity which is usually associated with the early stages of a science and is almost impossible to be attained by those who have thought much about its controversies.

Another requirement of his subject and method of working was the collection of a library of his own. No collection existed at that time in Philadelphia or indeed in America that could furnish the original materials for the study of such a subject; and Mr. Lea's engagements and inclinations alike prevented him from going to Europe to obtain the necessary works. Fortunately, he had abundant means, and he began, soon after the middle of last century, acquiring collections of printed sources, the writings of mediaeval theologians and lawyers, and such other books as he gradually came to require in the course of his study. Patient watchfulness and persevering search through

many years, aided by the efforts of book-dealers throughout the world, put him in possession of a surprising body of material, much of it of the most recondite and even obscure nature, but none without applicability to his investigation. Ultimately, the impossibility of making a satisfactory study of certain subjects without the use of unprinted materials became evident, and he met this difficulty by having considerable bodies of manuscript copied in Spain, France, and Italy. Certain original manuscripts also he was able to buy. Besides these materials, the University of Oxford allowed him to borrow from the Bodleian Library such manuscripts as he might need. He continued to add to his library, until at the time of his death it amounted to something over ten thousand volumes, corresponding closely to the successive phases of his work. It is a matter of gratification that this highly specialized and complete library will remain intact, having been bequeathed by him to the University of Pennsylvania.

In 1867 appeared his 'History of Sacerdotal Celibacy', and in 1869 his 'Studies in Church History'. The subjects of these works indicated a still more definite restriction of his study to those institutions especially connected with the Church. His choice of this field marks the third period of his historical work, which continued during the rest of his life and resulted in the publication of 'The History of the Inquisition of the Middle Ages', in three volumes, in 1888; 'Chapters from the Religious History of Spain connected with the Inquisition' in 1890; 'A Formulary of the Papal Penitentiary' in 1892; 'The History of Auricular Confession and Indulgences,' in three volumes, in 1896; 'The Moriscos of Spain, their Conversion and Expulsion' in 1901; and above all the 'History of the Inquisition of Spain', in four volumes, 1906 and 1907, and its sequel 'The Inquisition in the Spanish Dependencies' in 1908. He had early begun a history of witchcraft, and had resumed work upon it shortly before his death.

Besides this extensive historical output, Mr. Lea wrote many articles in journals and published a number of pamphlets, most of which had reference to current questions of American policy, which he discussed in the light of historical origins or analogies. He was deeply interested in the Civil War, and later in municipal reform and international copyright; and the only part he ever took in public affairs was in connexion with these interests.

He received many academic honours, including the degree of LL.D. from Harvard, Pennsylvania, and Princeton, that of Doctor of Theology from Giessen, and the honorary membership of more than thirty learned societies. Of all these there was probably none in which he took

more pleasure than in his fellowship of the British Academy. His inveterate habit of remaining at home probably prevented his reception of other academic degrees which are never conferred except on the recipients in person. He had, however, a wide group of correspondents in various countries, including Lord Acton, Mr. Lecky, Mr. Bryce, M. Salomon Reinach, Professors Sabatier, Molinier, Döllinger, and Frédéricq, and many other historical scholars in America and England, and on the Continent. He was also President of the American Historical Association and Honorary Vice-President of various learned bodies.

The subjects of Lea's writings lay in fields in which diversities of opinion are many and conflicts unavoidable. Controversy was largely obviated by his habit, already referred to, of paying little attention to modern writings; but this did not of course preclude criticism. On the whole, however, he was moderate in his attitude and more interested in facts than in opinions. He seldom expressed general theories; his judgements were usually cautious, and his statements so well fortified by reference to his sources that they could hardly be controverted. There is, and of course must be, differences of opinion about the results of investigation in such fields, but the portion of his work that has been adversely criticized, even by those who would naturally be expected to take a different view, is remarkably small in proportion to the whole.

It may be of interest to follow in some detail the method of work pursued by a self-trained scholar who achieved such substantial results. In seeking material for the work he had in hand, he went continuously through such original sources as he could discover, copying, translating, epitomizing, classifying names, calculating numbers, or following such form of abstract as seemed most desirable. The books and manuscripts in his library are full of the annotations he made in them during this process. He thus amassed a great amount of manuscript largely uncorrelated, but containing all the material he expected to use in the preparation of the final work. This was then re-read and arranged. Finally, sometimes after years of such preparation, writing was begun and the book constructed from the materials thus gathered and in the light of the views that had gradually taken shape in the process of collecting, reading, and re-reading the material. In this process of investigation and writing one can hardly fail to see the effect of two external influences, one the orderly and somewhat formal habits carried over from mercantile business, the other the objective and systematic cast of mind resulting from those studies in natural

history with which Lea had begun his career. The business man or the naturalist, when he becomes an historian, is just as likely to develop a characteristic method of work as the man trained in some particular school of methodical research, or the one who is under the influence of the dominating personality of some teacher.

But personality and native genius counted in his, as in so many cases, for more than training. His practice of investigation and subsequent publication, dating from early youth, indicated him as one of those men whose creative impulses are strong. The form such creative impulse takes is more or less a matter of chance. His habit of steady work, day after day, and year after year, concentrated, persistent, and intelligent, always with the general end in view, but never neglecting the immediate detail, was again a personal characteristic. He was also one of that group of historians whose life and undiminished ability were prolonged to a late age. Like Ranke at ninety, Mommsen at eighty-six, and Léopold Delisle at eighty-four, Lea at the same age as the French historian was still studying and writing; and he was in the midst of his work on the history of witchcraft at his desk in his library when he laid down his pen, less than a week before his death.

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