Looking back at 'The next thirty years'

Stefan Collini *revisits Lord Bryce's Presidential Address of 1917*

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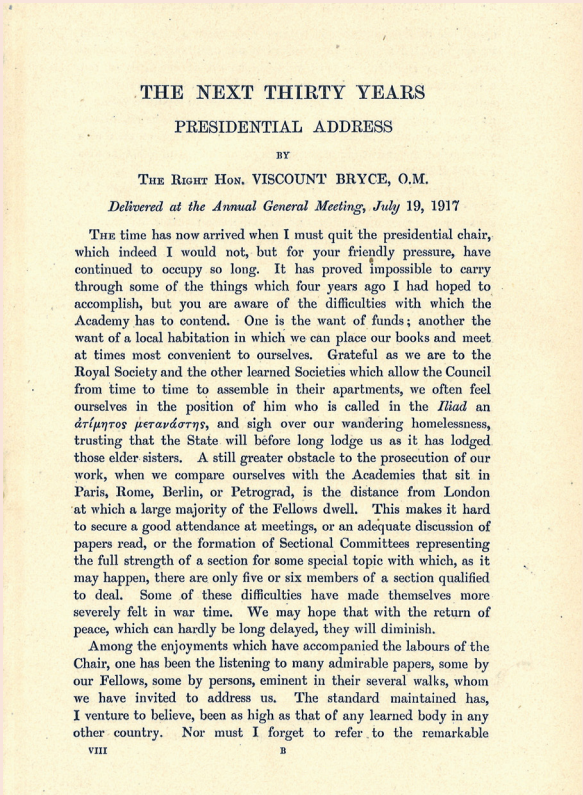
Does any work remain to be done in the disciplines covered by the British Academy? 'Or can we foresee a time when much of our material will have been exhausted?' This disquieting question was posed by Lord Bryce in his final Presidential Address to the Academy a century ago in July 1917.[1] Bryce acknowledged that the fields covered by the Royal Society could confidently anticipate making fresh discoveries and recording new findings, but he wondered aloud whether there might not be whole domains of scholarship (in what it was not yet common to call 'the humanities') where no new sources would be unearthed and no fresh interpretations would be needed. There is, he conceded, 'a *prima facie* case for those who suggest that a time may come when, in some branches at least of the Academy's work, there will be no more work to be done' (p. 6). In order to consider, and ultimately to reject, this possibility, Bryce undertook a quite remarkable task, one it is impossible to imagine any of his successors attempting a hundred years later. He devoted his final Presidential Address to a survey of the state of knowledge in *all of the disciplines represented by the Academy.*

To bring out the full, mind-boggling ambitiousness of this undertaking, it may be worth emphasising what Bryce did *not* do. He did not confine himself to generalities; he did not rely on potted summaries by others; he did not collate reports from the British Academy's subject-based 'Sections'; he did not issue a press release about the importance of the work the Academy had done; he did not list books published by Fellows or prizes won. Rather, he, in his own voice and on the basis (apparently) of his own knowledge, provided detailed analyses



THE NEXT THIRTY YEARS

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

BY

THE RIGHT HON. VISCOUNT BRYCE, O.M.

Delivered at the Annual General Meeting, July 19, 1917

THE time has now arrived when I must quit the presidential chair, which indeed I would not, but for your friendly pressure, have continued to occupy so long. It has proved impossible to carry through some of the things which four years ago I had hoped to accomplish, but you are aware of the difficulties with which the Academy has to contend. One is the want of funds; another the want of a local habitation in which we can place our books and meet at times most convenient to ourselves. Grateful as we are to the Royal Society and the other learned Societies which allow the Council from time to time to assemble in their apartments, we often feel ourselves in the position of him who is called in the *Iliad* an ἀτίμητος μετανάστης, and sigh over our wandering homelessness, trusting that the State will before long lodge us as it has lodged those elder sisters. A still greater obstacle to the prosecution of our work, when we compare ourselves with the Academies that sit in Paris, Rome, Berlin, or Petrograd, is the distance from London at which a large majority of the Fellows dwell. This makes it hard to secure a good attendance at meetings, or an adequate discussion of papers read, or the formation of Sectional Committees representing the full strength of a section for some special topic with which, as it may happen, there are only five or six members of a section qualified to deal. Some of these difficulties have made themselves more severely felt in war time. We may hope that with the return of peace, which can hardly be long delayed, they will diminish.

Among the enjoyments which have accompanied the labours of the Chair, one has been the listening to many admirable papers, some by our Fellows, some by persons, eminent in their several walks, whom we have invited to address us. The standard maintained has, I venture to believe, been as high as that of any learned body in any other country. Nor must I forget to refer to the remarkable

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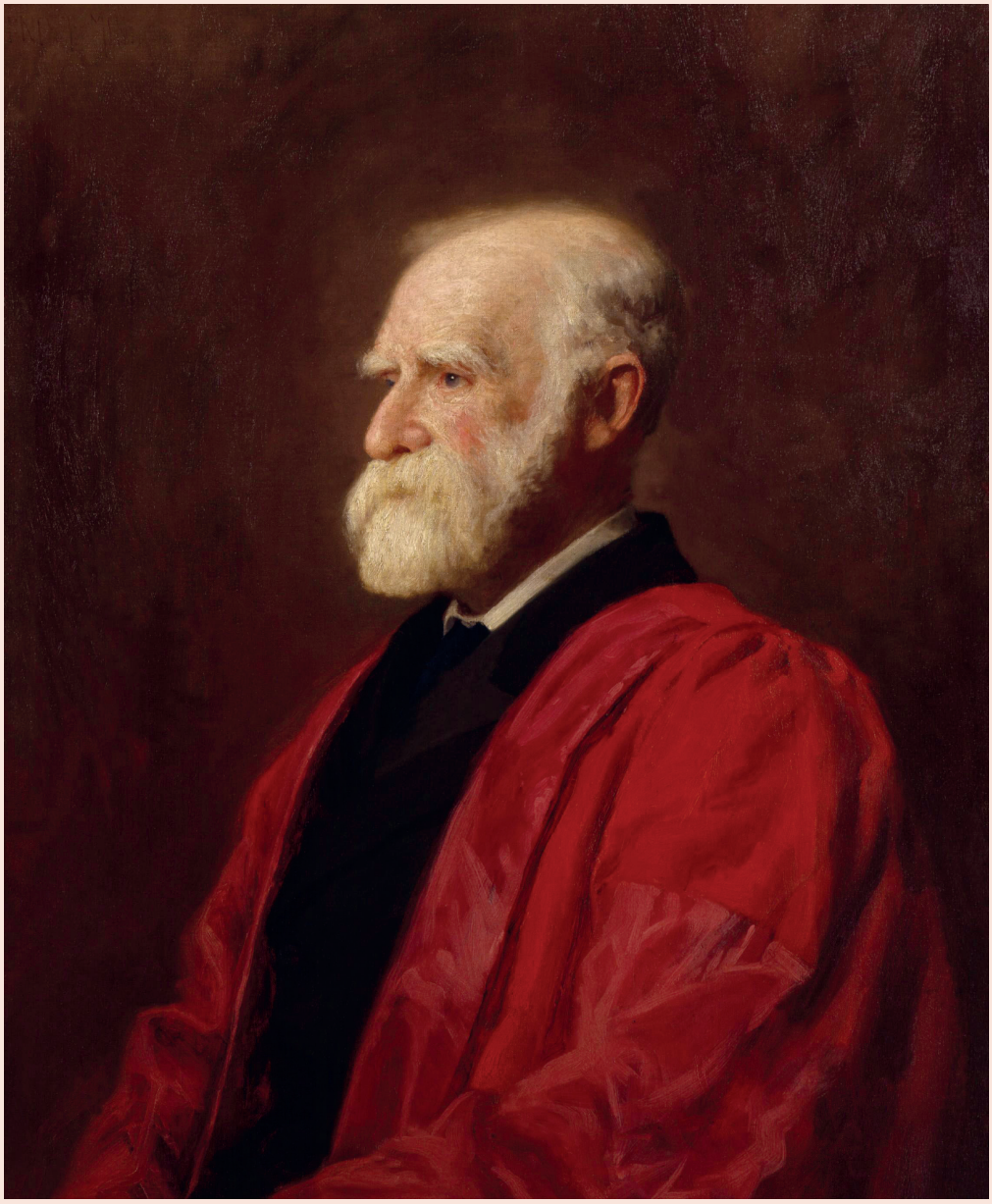
of the state of scholarly understanding in the various fields, not confining himself merely to English-language publications. In the words of his biographer, H.A.L. Fisher (who became President of the Academy in 1928 and was himself no narrow specialist), Bryce's address was 'an extraordinary manifestation of the width of his own knowledge and interests'.[2]

James Bryce (created Viscount Bryce of Dechmont in 1914) had already enjoyed several successful careers before he succeeded Sir Adolphus Ward as President of the Academy in 1913. Born in 1838 of Scottish and Ulster

1. The Right Hon Viscount Bryce, OM, 'The next thirty years', Presidential Address delivered at the AGM, 19 July 1917, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 1916-17, pp. 1-31. (Hereafter page references to this Address are given in the text.) Bryce's Presidential Address can be read in full via www.britishacademy.ac.uk/presidential-addresses

2. H.A.L. Fisher, *James Bryce, Viscount Bryce of Dechmont O.M.*, 2 vols (London: Macmillan, 1927), p. 278.



James Bryce, painted by Ernest Moore, 1907. This portrait hangs on the walls of the British Academy, on loan from the National Portrait Gallery.

descent, educated at Glasgow and Oxford, he had made his mark early with his remarkably precocious study of *The Holy Roman Empire*, a synoptic account that ranged from the 5th century to the 19th, published when he was only 26. Thereafter, he mixed academic life with various forms of public service. From 1870 to 1893 he was Regius Professor of Civil Law at Oxford, but from 1880 to 1906 he was also a Liberal MP, rising to be Chief Secretary for Ireland in 1905-6. He wrote on a wide variety of subjects, he supported numerous liberal causes, and he was an indefatigable traveller. A series of strenuous journeys across the United States underwrote his three-volume *The American Commonwealth*, published in 1888, which long remained the classic account of the working of American political institutions. It was partly on the basis of the high regard that this book won for him in the USA that he was appointed British Ambassador to Washington in 1907, a post he held till 1913.

Increasing age seems not to have diminished Bryce's zest for gathering first-hand information. When preparing his large-scale survey, *Modern Democracies*, eventually published in two volumes in 1921 (when its author was 83), he followed what Fisher described as the method used in *The American Commonwealth*, 'that of personal observation coupled with the systematic interrogation of trustworthy witnesses':

> He consults 'impartially-minded French friends'. 'An eminent and fair-minded Swiss citizen' gives him information on one point. 'A careful and experienced observer' writes to him from Australia on another. He cites answers to questions about the judiciary in the United States put to him in Kentucky in 1890 and in California in 1909. He makes a special

> journey to Switzerland in 1919 to clear up diverse points. Books, of course, are consulted, but they are subordinate to these first-hand sources of information.[3]

Little wonder it has been observed that 'as a political scientist his genius largely consisted in an infinite capacity for taking trains'.[4]

Bryce, in concert with his good friend, Henry Sidgwick, had played an active role in the discussions that led to the establishment of the British Academy in 1902, and he became one of its founding Fellows, serving as the initial chair of the 'History and Archaeology' Section. Such was his standing in both the political and scholarly worlds (by the time of his death he had received degrees from 31 universities) that he seemed an obvious choice to become President of the Academy on his return from Washington. He, always a keen walker, remained physically and mentally vigorous, though a century later eyebrows might be raised at the appointment of a man who would be 79 when he finished his term of office. His age did mean that he was essentially a Victorian figure, one of those 'lights of Liberalism' who had come to political maturity in the 1860s and who retained an unshakeable confidence in intellectual progress.[5] His Presidential overview of scholarship has some of the sweep and grandeur of, for example, John Stuart Mill's celebrated 'Inaugural Address at St Andrews', which had been delivered exactly 50 years earlier. It is certainly possible that some of the younger specialists in the various fields Bryce surveyed may have found his characterisation of the issues in their own discipline simplistic or antiquated: even the admiring Fisher conceded 'it may be said that his knowledge of any one civilization was below the standard of the specialist', but nonetheless his concluding judgement saw the Address as marked by 'a masterly ease and command of detail'.[6]

The areas Bryce discussed included Archaeology and Anthropology, History (ancient, medieval, and modern), Philology, Literary History, Mental and Moral Science, Economics, Jurisprudence, and Political Science. These then-conventional labels may conceal the true scope of some of these subjects from the modern reader: under 'Philology', for example, was to be found the greater part of work in Classics and later European literatures as well as Linguistics; 'Mental and Moral Science' embraced Psychology as well as Metaphysics and Ethics; and so on. It may now seem unthinkable to try to range over all these disciplines with any authority, but Bryce was clearly undeterred. Characteristic of his confidence are statements such as this: 'Another topic which needs more investigation than it has yet received is the influence upon racial character and aptitude of environment, and especially of contact with other peoples, as compared with what may be called the inherited quality of the race' (p.8). Or this: 'Among other subjects, the careful study of which is needed, may be mentioned the Greek kingdom of Bactria and its relations – indeed the relations of Greek culture generally – with India, North-Western India, and the Far East, the kingdom of the Nabathaeans, and that of the Ephthalites or White Huns, the early history of Arabia and above all of Mohammed and his surroundings' (p. 15).

And in case that might not be enough to keep several Sections occupied, he pronounced no less authoritatively on other desiderata of scholarship: 'So also we need a history of Iceland, a subject on which little has been written, except in Danish, since the days of Konrad Maurer.' Similarly, 'On the ecclesiastical side of history … much still remains obscure. So also some of the mediaeval heresies and sects (in particular those Bogomils whose origin and westward extension raises interesting questions) need to be further investigated and the relations between them cleared up' (p.15). The business-like briskness of 'need … to be cleared up' catches Bryce's positivistic assurance: though scholarship was not likely to soon be exhausted, many matters could be definitively settled.

Although Bryce's range may have been remarkable, his intellectual tastes were, as the tone of that last remark may suggest, somewhat narrower. His commitment was to *Wissenschaft*, systematic knowledge (he and his contemporaries could still use 'science' as the English equivalent without qualms), and he understood genuine scholarship to rest on thoroughly empirical foundations. Temperamentally, he was devoted to energetic fact-finding (that endless quizzing of the locals that marked all his travels), and he had little taste for philosophical speculation. But he was also influenced by what he considered to be the appropriate mode of enquiry for subjects deserving of recognition by the Academy. On these grounds, he lodges a mild reservation about 'the mental sciences such as Psychology, Ontology, and Ethics' where 'we enter a field only one part of which can be said to deal with concrete facts capable of being studied by the ordinary methods of science' (p.22). Similarly with literature, where

> we treat the material from a point of view different from that of the literary critic. The more any question tends to become a question of taste and the

3. Fisher, *Bryce*, p. 266.

4. Stefan Collini, Donald Winch and John Burrow, *That Noble Science of Politics: A Study in Nineteenth-Century Intellectual History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 243.

5. See Christopher Harvie, *The Lights of Liberalism: University Liberals and the Challenge of Democracy*, 1860-1885 (London: Allen Lane, 1976).

6. Fisher, *Bryce*, pp. 307, 278.

> interpretation of an author's genius, and the less it is a matter for elucidation by history, so much the more does it seem to fall outside the domain of this Academy. (p.20)

A century later, Literary Criticism, Art and Music, Metaphysics and a whole host of theoretical enquiries are now included in the British Academy's embrace, but Bryce spoke with the accents of late-19th-century positivism in being hesitant to include such enterprises under a body set up to represent (in the terms of its Charter) 'Historical, Philosophical, and Philological Studies'.

If his intellectual or methodological sympathies were somewhat restricted, his linguistic and geographical range was impressively catholic. Commenting on the difficulties involved in using the 'appalling profusion of material' represented by journalistic sources in the modern period, he remarks: 'To use it for historical purposes would seem hopeless had not the thing been done, as for instance by Mr James Ford Rhodes in his history of the United States, by Aulard and de la Gorce, and, in a lesser degree, by Häusser and Treitschke and Lamprecht, as well as by Spencer Walpole and other English writers' (p. 12). Bryce not only read widely in several languages: he also knew many of the leading scholars of the day. Discussing what might still need to be done in Roman history, it seemed natural to him to begin a sentence thus: 'The last time I saw Mommsen I asked him whether he could hold out any hope that he would carry down his history from Julius Caesar at least to the days of Constantine' (p. 14). Such acquaintance also enabled him to feel he had a finger on the pulse of the scholarly world in the present, as when he informed his Academy audience: 'A book on Witchcraft was occupying the most learned of all American historians, Mr Henry C. Lea, at the time of his lamented death, and what he had done toward it will shortly be published, with the additions of a highly competent scholar' (p. 16). It should be no surprise to learn that, in gathering material for his treatise on *Modern Democracies*, Bryce had corresponded with Lea about the details of municipal government in the United States.[7]

Some of Bryce's observations still seem uncannily topical. For example: 'Of all the departments of enquiry that have sought to describe themselves as sciences none is today in such disorder as Economics' (p. 24). But others seem almost unfathomably remote. He devotes a surprising amount of space to 'the reform of the spelling of English' as one of the 'practical problems which claim the attention of our philologists'. 'Bringing the spelling of our language into accord with its pronunciation' is treated as a self-evidently desirable aim, and whatever the practical obstacles 'the thing will have to be done some time or other, and it grows no easier by postponement' (p.20). Although spelling reform remained a fashionable topic in the inter-war period, energetically championed by George Bernard Shaw among others, it has disappeared from the Academy's pre-occupations in the past half century. Forecasting the future direction of scholarly enquiry is always a hazardous business, but it is at its most vulnerable where presuming that a demand or impulse external to scholarship itself will long continue in its current form.

And of course it is especially risky to pronounce that nothing new is to be expected in a given area of scholarship. Though in general Bryce celebrated the prospect of large scholarly territories yet to be explored, he did venture one such valedictory judgement:

> One branch of work which long occupied many acute and learned scholars shows signs of coming to an end. It is the emendation of the texts of the Greek and Roman classics. Those of all the greater authors have now been brought to a state in which little more remains to be done, there being practically no new light to be expected from the recension of old MSS or the discovery of any others. (p. 21)

This judgement, however defensible at the time, may now, arguably, seem a little premature in the light of Classical scholarship in the intervening century.[8]

But perhaps the most striking feature of Bryce's address when viewed from the present is its lack of defensiveness. His is a survey of scholarship that feels no need to attempt to placate the assumed hostility of those who do not understand the nature of that activity. Nor does his prose exhibit any of the nervousness or boosterism displayed by attempts to justify such scholarship in terms of its putative contribution to some quite extraneous, and often irrelevant, practical purposes. Bryce writes as the president of a learned society, a body confident of the value of learning, not as the anxious spokesman for an institution under pressure to claim a social and economic efficacy it may not in fact possess. And that, a century later, may not be the least salutary aspect of his address. As Fisher noted of Bryce: 'He believed in the Academy, and by his belief and his ungrudging willingness to spend himself in its service he did more, perhaps, than any other Fellow to raise it to its rightful position and to secure that it should fill worthily the position which such a body should hold in the world of organized learning.'[9]

7. Fisher, *Bryce*, p. 266.

8. See, for example, the recent comments on the continuing story of textual emendation in the Introduction to C.S. Kraus and C.A. Stray, *Classical Commentaries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

9. Fisher, *Bryce*, p. 279