CHARLES HARDING FIRTH

1857–1936

CHARLES HARDING, the son of John Firth,[1] was born 16 March 1857. He was educated at Clifton College (1870–5), under the headmastership of John Percival, later Bishop of Hereford. During his last three years there, he came under the influence of a striking personality and born schoolmaster, William Thomas Dunn, to whom he paid a very warm tribute when contributing reminiscences to a biography privately printed in 1934. He testified that he owed to Dunn 'a greater debt than to any other man. . . . He converted me from a lazy boy into a hardworking one. . . . He taught me to aim at accuracy and thoroughness in all I wrote and to undertake cheerfully any labour needed to attain them'.

In 1875 he went up to Oxford and entered New College as a commoner, but he soon migrated to Balliol, on being elected to a Brackenbury scholarship in modern history. His tutor was J. F. Bright, but a greater influence was Stubbs, then Regius Professor. Firth attended five courses of the professor's lectures and derived the greatest benefit from them. In 1877 he won the Stanhope prize for an essay on the Marquess Wellesley. Characteristically, he was the only competitor, as one of the examiners told him, to give a description of Wellesley's appearance. Firth was always eager to ascertain what historical characters looked like, and acquired a knowledge, at once extensive and precise, of portraits, cartoons, and woodcuts. Later, this made him one of the best informed of the trustees of the National Portrait Gallery (1908–29).

After taking his degree he visited Germany to acquire the language. On his return he married in 1880 Frances,

[1] He belonged to the firm of Thomas Firth & Sons, steel manufacturers, of which his brother, Mark, was head. The last named was the founder of Firth College, which became Sheffield University in 1905.

daughter of Henry Ashington, for twenty-one years vicar of Anwich with Brauncewell, Lincolnshire. His first position as a lecturer was at Firth College. While there he toyed with the notion of a political career, but soon abandoned it when he found that he would need the financial backing of a party or a patron. He returned to Oxford in 1883 and succeeded A. H. Johnson as history tutor at Pembroke College in 1886. He resigned in 1893 because the college was unable to establish a scholarship in history. His best-known pupil was the late W. A. S. Hewins, who acknowledged 'an immense debt, for he taught me sound methods of historical investigation'.[1] His willingness to help students of very moderate ability, provided they were interested and diligent, is well exemplified by one of the Pembroke undergraduates, A. R. Bayley, who was placed in a low class by the history examiners but who eventually produced a most useful volume, *The Great Civil War in Dorset* (1910). In 1901 Firth was elected to a research fellowship at All Souls.

Meanwhile he had been steadily engaged in carrying out his researches into the history of England under the Stuarts. He used to attribute the adoption of the seventeenth century as his chosen field to the interest aroused in him by John Forster's *The Grand Remonstrance* (1860), *The Arrest of the Five Members* (1860), and *Sir John Eliot* (1864). His first considerable historical work was editing the *Memoirs* of Colonel Hutchinson (1885) and the *Life* of Newcastle (1886). These two volumes are not edited as elaborately as Ludlow's memoirs, but the notes are of great value. Both introduction and notes reveal the principles which Firth followed in all his editorial work—full reference to supplementary matter, and a careful estimate of the value of the material and of the trustworthiness of the writers. He was fortunate that his first historical work was editing these memoirs, for in after years he held strongly that the historian should train himself by attempting various kinds

[1] *Apologia of an Imperialist* (1929), i. 19.

of editorial work as well as by writing on different aspects of the period. His mature judgement was that editing a memoir is usually the best for a beginner to try his prentice hand upon. A little later his edition of Dr. Johnson's 'Life of Milton' (1891) showed that from the first he studied literature as thoroughly as history.

His next historical work appeared in the *Dictionary of National Biography*. He was not among the contributors to Volume I, and did not know the editor, Leslie Stephen. He noticed, however, that in the first volume there was a tendency to insert lives of very unimportant individuals provided they had left some literary remains, whereas certain men of action were excluded because they had not written any books. This criticism he sent to Stephen and thus initiated a friendship only ended by death. He also renewed the acquaintance, formed at Balliol College, with Stephen's assistant, Sidney Lee, who became, and remained till his death, one of Firth's closest friends. His first article was on the parliamentary general, Sir William Balfour; the last was on the poet, Sir Francis Wortley. The most important article was the life of Oliver Cromwell, which is the fourth longest in the *Dictionary*. This remarkable article established its author's reputation forthwith. To-day, when nearly half a century has passed, very few changes are necessary, and the additions that can be made are mainly due to Firth's own later discoveries. Perhaps the most astonishing feature is the skill with which the somewhat tortuous career of Cromwell is traced through the years 1646 and 1647, for, as the article states, there was then available extremely little information for Cromwell's life. A few years afterwards Firth had discovered the importance of the Clarke papers, which threw a flood of light upon the proceedings of the army council and Cromwell's share in them. And yet Firth's insight into Cromwell's character had enabled him to infer almost exactly what later evidence proved.

In all, he wrote about two hundred and twenty-five

articles, nearly all dealing with the lives of seventeenth-century personages. This work, invaluable to students, was highly beneficial to Firth, for it gave him an accurate, detailed knowledge of all sorts and conditions of historical characters. Working continuously on these biographical tasks, his researches into this or that life provided a growing body of material on the lives yet to be written. Therefore, some of the later lives involving extensive research were not, in fact, worked up for the occasion, but were written largely from knowledge previously accumulated. As John Morley[1] stated, Firth's articles in the *Dictionary* 'shew him, besides much else, to know the actors and the incidents of the civil wars with a minute intimacy commonly reserved for the things of the time in which a man actually lives'.

During the nineties he was occupied with many important publications. At Worcester College were the papers of William Clarke, the secretary to the Council of the Army, 1647–9, and to General Monck in Scotland, 1651–60, and Firth soon perceived their value. These constituted the most important single contribution made to the authorities for the period since Carlyle had produced his *Letters and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*. The late S. R. Gardiner wrote:

> Taken altogether, these *Clarke Papers* bring strongly out the conservative and hesitating side of Cromwell's character, whilst they also bring us, as we have never been brought before, into the very heart of that army, in the midst of which Cromwell lived and moved, and enable us to trace the movements of political thought which afterwards developed themselves in the constitutional experiments of the Commonwealth.[2]

In all, four volumes were edited for the Royal Historical Society (1891–1901), and included valuable prefaces. In addition, the papers of William Clarke furnished the majority of the documents edited for the Scottish History Society in *Scotland and the Commonwealth* (1895) and *Scotland and the Protectorate* (1899). In each of the books the intro-

[1] *Oliver Cromwell* (1900), prefatory note.

[2] Preface to *The History of the Great Civil War*.

duction furnishes a full account of the English administration in Scotland.

To these busy years also belongs the edition of the *Memoirs of Edmund Ludlow* (2 vols., 1894). Firth was wont to say that the *Memoirs* were over-edited, and there is an element of truth in that statement; yet Ludlow, though a man of sterling honesty, was a very harsh judge of those he thought unfaithful to his own rigid republican ideals, and it was necessary to correct his bias by citing or indicating other evidence. The number of sources, both manuscript and printed, laid under contribution in the footnotes, is immense. In 1896 he published the *Journal of Joachim Hane*, an agent Cromwell employed in France to investigate the strength and feelings of the Huguenots in 1653–4, when there was a likelihood of an Anglo-French war. In 1901 he edited the *Narrative of General Venables*, a leader of the abortive attack on San Domingo in 1655.

In addition to the many editorial tasks so thoroughly accomplished, Firth found time for some original writing. He contributed five military studies to the *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 1897–1903. The first corrected the accepted accounts of the battle of Marston Moor in some vital points. Another showed that the battle of Dunbar was fought in a way and position different from the received notions. Two dealt with the raising of the Ironsides and their later history. The fifth described the royalist and Cromwellian armies that fought against each other in Flanders.

Meanwhile, in 1901, appeared *Oliver Cromwell and the Rule of the Puritans in England*. This, the only full-length biography Firth ever wrote, has been universally acclaimed as the best life of Cromwell. Firth had many qualifications for his new task. In the *Dictionary of National Biography* he had already shown that he possessed a complete mastery of the sources, to which he had recently made notable contributions. He had published a number of studies connected with Cromwell.[1] He had hereditary sympathy with the

[1] See *A Bibliography of the Writings of Sir Charles Firth* (1928), p. 10.

finer elements of puritanism and had a warm admiration for the great hero of militant independency. He shared his subject's dislike of narrow religious creeds or rigid constitutional forms, of impractical doctrinaires or self-seekers. Yet his treatment was objective and the faults of Cromwell were not concealed or even extenuated. The book has in a high degree the merit of being very well arranged. Its plan was adopted only after some experimentation. In particular, the last chapter, on Cromwell and his family, was an addition, though much of its substance had previously been scattered through the book. Such criticism as can fairly be made springs from the twofold danger that besets the biographer of a great man of action, that the life may be unduly overshadowed by the history of the age or that too little history may fail to provide a proper background. There is no doubt that Firth avoided the first danger. His hero bestrides the pages like a colossus, just as emphatically as Cromwell bestrode puritan England. The second danger may not have been eluded altogether, for others have shared the view expressed by S. R. Gardiner: 'One would like to find Mr. Firth looking a little more backwards and forwards, and placing the movements he describes in a wider setting'.[1] There is this reason at least for the wish that Firth had devoted more space to the creation of atmosphere—when he did find room for full descriptions of the scenes in which Oliver Cromwell played his part, they are uniformly excellent. The chapter on Ireland is a model.

He was appointed to deliver the Ford lectures in 1900 at Oxford and published them in 1902 as *Cromwell's Army*. Some good judges have expressed the opinion that this is one of Firth's best contributions, and on one occasion the opinion was told him. All he said, however, was, 'I think it's not a bad book. There is a great deal of work in it'. Certainly it is easily the best book on an army in the English language. The most remarkable feature of it is its mastery

[1] *English Historical Review*, xv. 803–4.

of detail. Not only are there elaborate accounts of how the soldiers in the New Model army were recruited, equipped, paid, disciplined, fed, and looked after when sick or wounded, but also there is a careful analysis of religion and politics in the army. In addition, an astonishing knowledge is displayed of the lower officers and even of the rank and file. Apt examples of the actions or sentiments of the under-officers or the men they led are drawn from literally hundreds of out-of-the-way sources. The one omission is that there is no adequate description of the civilians and civilian bodies associated with the army. When this was suggested to him Firth acknowledged that the book should have had an additional chapter dealing with these subjects, but explained that at the time he was writing this would have been a task of almost insuperable difficulty, because the parliamentary ordinances were not then collected in *Acts and Ordinances of the Interregnum, 1642–1660* (1911). *Cromwell's Army* brings to a glorious conclusion the most productive decade in Firth's life.

During these arduous years he formed so fine a library that it was rarely necessary for him to leave it to carry on his researches elsewhere, especially as he employed copyists in Oxford and London to transcribe manuscripts for him. Many of the choicest items will form a permanent memorial to him in Oxford, at the Bodleian Library, where the Firth collection will contain the books he gave during his lifetime and the generous and wholly appropriate donation[1] Lady Firth made after his death.

It had been Firth's intention to follow his Cromwellian studies by a large-scale history of the reign of Charles II. He saw that the gap between Gardiner's history and Macaulay's needed bridging, and he felt that the austerity of the then recent biographer of Charles II had done less than justice to that king. From time to time he worked hard at the post-Restoration period, especially at the years of Clarendon's dominance, and at foreign relations, of

[1] Described in the *Bodleian Quarterly Record*, vol. viii, no. 90.

which he used to complain that their worst feature was their futility. Events intervened, however, and prevented his writing more on 1660–85 than a chapter on 1660–7 in the *Cambridge Modern History*, v (1908).

In 1904 he succeeded his late friend, York Powell, as Regius Professor of Modern History. He owed his appointment solely to his own merits. Mr. A. J. Balfour, the Prime Minister, had read his *Oliver Cromwell*, and had been greatly impressed, especially with the chapter on Ireland, in which, as former chief secretary, he was naturally interested. He was probably influenced by the strong recommendation which John Morley, entirely unsolicited by Firth, sent him. It is likely, too, that he consulted Sir William Anson, Warden of All Souls College and Parliamentary Secretary to the Board of Education, but the chief credit for the appointment is the Prime Minister's.

Firth's inaugural lecture was entitled, *A Plea for the Historical Teaching of History*. It began with a brief discussion of the question, 'Is history a science or an art?' The answer was that one half of the historian's business is the discovery of the truth, which is a scientific process, and the other half its presentation, which is essentially artistic. After demonstrating that the Oxford History School needed some changes in order to afford a good general education, he showed that it did virtually nothing to train men capable of adding to knowledge. The student who had taken his degree in history lacked both the scholar's equipment and his mental habits.

> He has remained too long the passive recipient of other men's knowledge. He has been taught results instead of methods; not how to find out, but what to remember. The literary side of his training has been almost as defective as the scientific. The test for which he has been prepared is to compose a number of short historical essays.

This was a poor preparation for the task of writing history. In conclusion, Firth pleaded for a change in the state of affairs which had incurred 'the deliberate verdict of

Oxford's greatest historian, that "the historical teaching of history has been practically left out, in favour of the class-getting system of training"'.[1]

The lecture aroused the opposition, even the indignation, of many of the history tutors, and for many a long day they frustrated most of Firth's efforts towards reform. Fifteen years later his opinion was that a change was essential 'not merely in the machinery of our historical education but also in its aims and its spirit'. He felt that revision of the statutes could accomplish little unless candidates for tutorships and fellowships in history were required to produce evidence of some training in method and some original research. Nevertheless, although he could not effect at the time the reforms he advocated, to-day most of them have been adopted. The great activity of the present generation of Oxford historians and the number of their contributions to knowledge brought him encouragement in the evening of his life.

Unfortunately for him, the consequence of the earlier conservatism of Oxford was that very few of the students reading for the history school were interested in any advanced courses. Firth gave lectures on the bibliography and sources of English history during the seventeenth century, but found that they were throughout very badly attended. He also had a small class of four or five men studying Stuart England and composed almost exclusively of candidates for the degree of Bachelor of Letters. Nearly all of these came from outside, for so far as history was concerned the B.Litt. at first failed to attract Oxford graduates. Nevertheless, these advanced classes led to a number of theses full of promise. The fulfilment of that promise was checked by the Great War.[2]

He was never quite at his ease when lecturing to a large audience, and was at his best with a small class. His almost inexhaustible fund of knowledge was put freely at

[1] *Letters of William Stubbs, Bishop of Oxford*, ed. W. H. Hutton (1904), p. 264.

[2] A. Robertson and G. B. Tatham were killed.

the disposal of his audience, and his criticisms of papers nearly always contained suggestions for further reading. He was an ideal critic of a thesis, for not only could he suggest sources of which the writer had never heard, but also he could effect many improvements in arrangement. He attached great importance to the form of presentation, and often suggestions for the improvement of a work made it more readable, just as the additional sources he indicated made it more scholarly.

Perhaps his influence was still greater in an even more informal way. His successor in the professorship, H. W. C. Davis, remarked in his inaugural on the tendency of small groups of advanced students to gather round some scholar to study his methods and work on a problem he suggested. Davis continued:

> What can be effected in this way, Sir Charles Firth has shown us for more than twenty years. He alone knows how many solid contributions to British history have been planned in his private library, and how many teachers have qualified themselves for independent work through studying his example and following his precepts. The number must be very large, and he has every right to be called the father of this new development.[1]

In addition, scholars from literally all parts of the world came to consult him, especially from the United States, and most of the books written during the last thirty years on the seventeenth century benefited by his advice.

His tenure of the regius professorship inevitably diminished Firth's output of historical work. Its quality, needless to say, showed no decline. In 1908 he edited for the Navy Records Society *Naval Songs and Ballads*. The period covered extends from the sixteenth to the middle of the nineteenth century. The value of the collection is greatly enhanced by the long introduction, which enumerates and quotes from many ballads for which no space could be found in the volume. The study of ballads was one of Firth's major interests. He had a fine collection of originals, both printed

[1] *The Study of History* (1925), p. 8.

and manuscript, and owned nearly every book in which ballads were reprinted. His knowledge of them was prodigious and he could quote lines, often verses, from hundreds of them. Of English historians only Macaulay can compare with him in knowledge of the rude rhymes of the populace, and Macaulay's knowledge was limited to a much shorter period. In various numbers of the *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* he wrote a ballad history of England from the reign of Henry VII to that of Charles I. His contribution on Elizabethan ballads to *Shakespeare's England* (1916) is one of the best articles in the whole work. In addition, he collected in *An American Garland* (1915) ballads relating to America, 1653–1759.[1]

In 1909 appeared *The Last Years of the Protectorate*, which covered the two years that terminated with Cromwell's death (3 September 1658). In the preface it is stated that this work was intended to be a continuation of S. R. Gardiner's *History of the Commonwealth and Protectorate*, which its author's death left incomplete. It was undertaken in accordance with Dr. Gardiner's wishes.

That the younger historian should have acceded to the dying wishes of the older was natural. They had been friends for nearly twenty years, and the ungrudging assistance Firth gave is most handsomely acknowledged in the preface to the *History of the Great Civil War*. The assistance was mainly of two kinds. During the composition of his *History* Gardiner would request specific information, or seek an opinion on some vexed point. During his visits to Oxford he and Firth used to meet and discuss the seventeenth century as familiarly as if they were living in it. When the book was set up, proofs were regularly sent to Firth.

Any attempt to make a final appraisement of the merits of these great historians would be out of place, but some comparisons can be suggested. When Firth wrote that he lacked 'the comprehensive knowledge' and 'the perfect equipment' Gardiner had possessed, he was thinking, in the first case, of

[1] See also the section on ballads in *A Bibliography*.

the knowledge that Gardiner had acquired by his prolonged study of the fifty years that preceded the protectorate, and by the lengthy visits he had paid to foreign archives. In the second case he was thinking of his inferiority to Gardiner as a linguist, particularly in his knowledge of the Scandinavian tongues. However, he read French, German, and Italian with ease, Spanish fairly readily, and Dutch with some difficulty.

He himself was a great admirer of S. R. Gardiner's work, although not unaware of its defects of arrangement and presentation, particularly in the earlier volumes of the *History of England*. He saw, for example, that in Volume III Gardiner had got imbedded in the Stygian bog of the Spanish match and exhausted too much time before regaining firm soil. In general, he felt that Gardiner in his earlier volumes had followed a chronological order too mechanically and might with advantage have compromised with a subject-matter arrangement, but he staunchly defended his friend's methods and posthumous reputation.[1] Firth once drew a comparison, in part, that, whereas Gardiner was more interested in general movements, he himself was more interested in the actions of individuals. Indeed, it is likely that he would have attached more importance to the influence of great men upon history than Gardiner would have wished to do. He was a better judge of historical evidence than Gardiner, who was occasionally apt to try to reconcile irreconcilable evidence. He detected that Clough's narrative describing John Hampden's last hours was spurious, though Gardiner (like Macaulay) had accepted it as genuine.[2] Another difference is that, while Gardiner was content for the most part to confine himself to political, constitutional, and religious history, Firth was keenly interested in social and economic questions. He pre-

[1] See, for example, the obituary notice in *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 1903–4, pp. 295–301.

[2] Cf. *History of the Great Civil War*, i (1886), 178–9, and ibid. i (1914), 152–3; T. B. Macaulay, 'Lord Nugent's Memorials of Hampden'.

pared, about 1902, a course of lectures on the social history of the protectorate, to be given as the Lowell Lectures at Harvard, but his appointment as Regius Professor prevented their delivery. They survive, but only one will be printed—that on the royalists in England. The others, he thought, needed to be reconstructed and revised.

One marked advantage Firth certainly possessed over Gardiner: he had a far wider knowledge of literature. His interest in literature was due partly to a genuine love of it for its own sake, and partly to his conviction that it was essential for a historian to know the literature of the period he was studying. All his life he was an insatiable reader. In his old age he wrote, 'From my youth until now it has been my practice to read any printed matter within reach unless it was absolutely uninteresting or unintelligible'. Within six months of his death he averred, 'I am very curious, and eager to read things new or old'. What was once read was rarely forgotten, whether history or fiction. In discussions that ranged over many hundreds of books, the present writer knew him to make only two mistakes. He was wrong in some details of the plot of Samuel Warren's *Ten Thousand a Year*, and he forgot momentarily that there were a few letters of James, Duke of York, in Tom Brown's *Miscellanea Aulica*. He did not often deal directly with literary questions, but his relatively few contributions are of outstanding worth. Here it must suffice to mention two of them. His introduction to Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* is the best ever written.[1] In his paper on 'The Political Significance of Gulliver's Travels'[2] his familiarity with the politics of the early eighteenth century enabled him both to make new identifications in the voyages dealing with Lilliput and Brobdingnag, and to throw much new light on the third and fourth voyages.

[1] J. L. Lowes, *Of Reading Books* (1930), pp. 38–9.

[2] These two papers, together with others both literary and historical, will be included in a volume of Firth's essays to be printed by the Clarendon Press.

The study of literature also benefited him in another way. His own style of writing improved and he gave more thought to arrangement. Whoever compares the halting style of the preface to the *Memoirs of Colonel Hutchinson* with the mature writing in *The Last Years of the Protectorate* will appreciate the difference. He acquired the rare gift of felicitous quotation. He often quoted from memory and not infrequently made minute errors, but he rarely, if ever, altered the meaning. In all he wrote, the expression of the truth as he saw it was the first consideration; form was secondary. It goes without saying that he disliked the 'new' biography. Asked what he thought of *Eminent Victorians* he replied, 'I think Lytton Strachey's a very bad style in which to tell the truth'.

In 1910 he published *The House of Lords during the Civil War*. The book appeared during a violent constitutional struggle about the privileges of the upper house, but it is not polemical. Chapters i–vi cover ground familiar to readers of Gardiner's work, but they do bring out more clearly than previous historians had done that the House of Lords often held the balance of power between king and House of Commons. Chapters vii–ix are more original, and contain many valuable illustrations of the political theories then current respecting a second chamber.

During his regius professorship his energies were often diverted from historical or literary studies by the active share he took in many reform movements. His efforts were directed towards the improvement of teaching and, particularly, towards furthering research work. To this end he devoted much time and wrote many pamphlets. He used to say, 'I am the last of the pamphleteers'. He prepared many memoranda as well, dealing with plans to improve the system of instruction in history, English, modern languages, and geography.

He was keenly interested first in the creation of the School of English Language and Literature in 1894 and then in its progress. He played a very prominent part in the

development of the English School, acting in concert with Walter Raleigh, in whose appointment as Professor of English Literature he had a large share, and with his brother Yorkshireman, Joseph Wright, close friend and ally in University politics for forty years. These three, with some help from A. S. Napier, were responsible for the establishment of the English fund, in 1908, which virtually transferred the direction of the English School to the professoriate. Their individual contributions to the English School may be described as follows: Raleigh by his gifts as a lecturer and his attraction largely increased the number of students; Wright supplied abundant energy and profound mastery of finance; and Firth established standards of scholarship for the research degrees. The great success here achieved gave him lasting satisfaction. Previous to his appointment as Regius Professor, Firth used to lecture[1] and take pupils for the English School, and to the last he was willing to act as an examiner, or as supervisor or adviser of students for the degrees of B.Litt. or D.Phil.

His concern with modern languages was to some extent historical, for originally part of the regius professor's duty was to promote their study. He was active in helping to start the Honour School of Medieval and Modern Languages, established in 1903. When the post-war need for extending facilities for the study of modern languages became urgent, he threw himself heart and soul into the struggle for the extension of the Taylorian Institute which housed the library and lecture rooms for teaching and research in modern linguistic studies. He felt strongly that the Taylorian Institute should not vacate premises occupied for over eighty years and should be permitted to expand along St. Giles'. When congregation voted to the contrary he compiled *Modern Languages at Oxford, 1724–1929* (1929), tracing the history of the teaching of modern languages at Oxford and stating its present position. He

[1] Among the subjects he lectured on were ballads, Milton, the Restoration, and history and literature.

lived to see the University permit the extension, on the site in St. Giles', of the Taylorian Institute—a result due in part to his booklet. Similarly, he did all in his power to promote the study of geography at Oxford, advocating that an Honour School should be established, as it now is.

He was almost as active outside Oxford as inside in promoting the cause of sound learning. In 1910 he was appointed to the Royal Commission on Public Records, and the three volumes of reports, 1912, 1914, and 1919, attest his diligent attendance and frequent contributions of memoranda.[1] He is generally recognized to have been the strong man of the Commission. He was president of the Royal Historical Society, 1913–17. Having previously delivered a paper on the development of the study of seventeenth-century history in the past, he devoted his first presidential address to the development of the study in the future. He surveyed the field and pointed out some of the tasks that needed doing in order to complete our knowledge of Stuart England. The choice of subjects for the next three addresses was influenced by the war. They dealt with the relations of England and the Low Countries, the study of English foreign policy, and England and Austria. In addition, he made the Creighton Lecture for 1917 a comparison between the war with Napoleon and the Great War, entitling it *Then and Now*. These papers illustrate the all-roundness of Firth's knowledge, and two in particular demonstrate his capacity for surveying long periods and picking out with unerring hand the factors guiding English foreign policy.

He was the first president of the Historical Association (1906–10) and president again during 1918–20. As has been well said, he was keenly interested in the Association for two reasons: 'Through it something could be done to improve the teaching of history in the schools; and it could bring the general reader into contact with the results of research'.[2]

[1] A list is printed in *A Biography*.

[2] E. S. de Beer, *History*, vol. xxi, no. 81, p. 2.

During 1913–15 appeared the illustrated edition of Macaulay's *History of England*. Because the great Whig historian often referred to engravings and pictures to illustrate descriptions of persons and places, Firth sought for the illustrations that Macaulay had used, and more besides. Reproductions of ballads, broadsides, frontispieces of books, maps, and the handwriting of famous men give visual impressions of contemporary life as vivid as Macaulay's descriptions. The editor's extensive knowledge of the pictorial art enabled him to harmonize the illustrations with the text. Firth's intention was to follow the illustrated edition of the *History* with a commentary on it. Some of this was completed in final form; the rest never got beyond a first or second draft. The general plan is to select various topics, describe Macaulay's treatment, criticize it, and then to show how far evidence published since Macaulay's time has confirmed or modified his statements. It is hoped to publish this commentary, with such additions as its incomplete state renders necessary.

In 1917 he contributed to the *English Historical Review* an article on 'Modern History in Oxford, 1742–1841', and followed this in 1920 with 'Modern History in Oxford, 1841–1918'. These two papers were partly inspired by the hope that the previous record of the regius professorship and of the study of history at Oxford would facilitate the passage by the University of reforms he held to be necessary. They were also due in part to the natural pride he felt in the position he held and his desire to make it more useful in fostering historical research. The end of his long struggle to promote reform was at hand. He resigned his professorship in 1925, when the University conferred on him an honorary degree of Doctor of Letters and made him professor *emeritus*. Five British universities had previously conferred doctorates upon him, and in 1922 he had been knighted.

At a farewell dinner given in his honour by his fellow historians at Oxford he quoted a sentence from the

conclusion of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*: 'I see myself now at the *end* of my Journey, my *toilesom* Days are ended'. There is no doubt that he felt relief from the burden of teaching and some disappointment that he had not achieved in its entirety the programme of reform he had advocated for twenty years. Yet he was not embittered or soured, much less worn out or disposed to abandon history in search of other diversion. He at once began to assemble the notes he had been making for forty years on the regimental history of Cromwell's army.[1] It is likely that he found this the most congenial task he had ever attempted and that this labour of love was a kind of relaxation. A first draft was completed in three or four years, but the revision went much more slowly, and was never finished. In particular the history of the English regiments serving in Ireland proved singularly elusive. Indeed, it is doubtful if the material exists or has existed since 1660 for a consecutive narrative. He was content, therefore, to add notes in the margins and to indicate here and there the revision which he thought necessary. Towards the end he realized that he could not hope to finish this *magnum opus*, but fortunately he left it in a sufficiently advanced state to be completed and published.

Firth's greatness as a historian was due to a combination of several qualities. During the eighties and nineties, especially, he had lived laborious days, reading almost everything pertinent to the subject in which he was interested, and he remembered nearly all he had read—a feat the more remarkable inasmuch as he was an extremely rapid reader. This capacity to extract the heart of a book quickly enabled him to acquire a wide knowledge of history, English and foreign, from the sixteenth century onwards. He was also greatly interested in American history, and, to a less extent, in Indian and colonial history. He knew English literature almost as well as English history, and

[1] Some of these were published in the *Journal of the Society of Army Historical Research*. See *A Bibliography*, pp. 10–11.

read foreign classics, especially French. He was not only a superb judge of historical evidence, but also took great pains to demonstrate the value to be attached to his authorities.

The most elaborate example he has left of the critical examination of a source is the analysis of Clarendon's *History of the Rebellion*, which appeared in 1904 in the *English Historical Review*. He showed how Clarendon had dovetailed what he had written between 1646 and 1648 into what he had written between 1668 and 1671, and produced the *History of the Rebellion*. Firth pointed out that the author changed his plan when he resumed, in his second exile, the task of completing what he had begun in his first exile, and that 'some portions were designed merely to relate the great events he had witnessed, others were intended to relate and vindicate his own career'. Firth carefully analysed the authorities Clarendon had at his disposal during his first exile (and published several of them), and discriminated between passages well documented and those written during the second exile and based on nothing more reliable than Clarendon's treacherous memory. The result of Firth's labours is that the student knows what precise degree of credit to assign to Clarendon's account of any particular event. Similarly, though less elaborately, Firth evaluated Burnet's *History of His Own Time*, in an introduction he wrote for T. E. S. Clarke and H. C. Foxcroft, *Life of Gilbert Burnet* (1907). In both these instances he had before him Ranke's criticisms (*History of England*, vi). He had a high opinion of the German historian's pioneer work, but his own examination of Clarendon and Burnet is far more comprehensive and scientific.

Holding that there is no finality in historical writing, he was always extremely careful to distinguish between facts and inferences. However, he had entered so thoroughly into the temper of the seventeenth century and had such a clear insight into the characters of the personages then

living, that the inferences he was occasionally forced to make through lack of evidence have nearly always been strongly confirmed whenever new evidence has come to light. Although a very quick worker, so far as his first drafts were concerned, he was always anxious that his words should express the exact truth as he saw it. He paid much attention to arrangement, partly because he felt that a well-ordered narrative had greater veracity than a disorderly narrative whose reader is left in doubt where the emphasis should fall, and partly because his keen artistic perception made him anxious to write as well as he could. Two of the prose writers he admired most were Macaulay and Swift. For his own writings he preferred the lucidity of Swift to the rhetorical periods of Macaulay.

In private life he was simple, even austere, in his habits. By nature he was sociable and liked good conversation. He seemed to prefer dining at high table, where only men were present, to private dinners where the company was mixed. He never tried to dominate the conversation and had no fondness for the role of raconteur. Generally he eschewed epigrams and all artificialities of speech, and his language, like his conduct, was forthright. Intrigue was abhorrent to him, and any one suspected of perpetrating a job forfeited his regard. He disdained compromises, perhaps too much. Long-winded pretentiousness was especially obnoxious to him, but any sincere searcher after the truth, however incompetent, always received an encouraging word. He was extremely generous, not only of his time and his knowledge, but also of his private means. Loyalty to his friends was second nature to him, and he deeply resented any attempt to belittle them. He suffered keenly, too, if any of them produced unworthy work, not understanding how a scholar could fail to give of his best. Although naturally reticent and outwardly stoical, he was very devoted to those he loved and singularly kindly and sympathetic to the afflicted or unfortunate. In politics he began as a

liberal, but was a conservative during the last twenty-five years of his life. In religion he was a protestant, but he had no *odium theologicum*—'In my Father's house are many mansions'.

GODFREY DAVIES