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THE GROWTH
OF
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J R Seeley

THE GROWTH
OF
BRITISH POLICY

AN HISTORICAL ESSAY

BY

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AND HONORARY FELLOW OF CHRIST'S COLLEGE.

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DEDICATED

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TO

HER MAJESTY THE QUEEN

MEMOIR.

JOHN ROBERT SEELEY was born in London on September 10, 1834. He was the third son of Mr Robert Seeley, the publisher, a man of great mental and bodily energy, and of no mean literary skill. Mr Seeley was a contributor to Fraser's Magazine and a leader-writer for the Times. A strong churchman, and an evangelical, he published a volume of essays, which passed rapidly through several editions, in defence of the Establishment, and he was one of the founders of the Church Pastoral Aid Society. Late in life he wrote a work on Edward the First, entitled "The greatest of the Plantagenets," which has the merit of being among the first books to do adequate justice to that king. He was fond of good novels, and made his boys acquainted with Scott, Dickens and Thackeray at an early age.

From his father Seeley imbibed a love of books, a bias towards history, and a habit of thinking about religion. He learnt unusually young to read, and he read eagerly and widely. As a child he went to school under the Rev.

J. A. Barron, at Stanmore. No prizes were given at this school, but there was a master who infected his pupils with a taste for English poetry. Here Seeley acquired his first love for Milton and Pope.

After a while he was sent to the City of London School, then under Dr Mortimer. The school was already making a name for winning scholarships at the Universities. Seeley, being a precocious boy, was pushed on so fast that he entered the sixth form when little over thirteen. His two elder brothers were in the sixth at the same time, the eldest—afterwards a fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge—being captain of the school. To keep up with the work of the form involved a great effort in so young a boy. The lessons had to be prepared at home. No attention was paid to games, and the only exercise which Seeley got, as a rule, was the daily walk between Bloomsbury and Cheapside.

This pressure told upon his health, and there can be little doubt that he never wholly recovered the strain. For a time he had to leave school and to give up all work. He passed a year in the family of the Rev. F. Fitch, Vicar of Cromer. Latin and Greek were prohibited, but he spent much time in reading English. In later life he delighted in recalling this year of enforced idleness, for he owed to it (he said) most of his knowledge of English literature.

In 1852 Seeley went up to Cambridge, entering as a scholar of Christ's College. Among his contemporaries at Christ's were several who were afterwards to attain distinction—Calverley, Skeat, Peile, Sendall, Besant. He was soon remarked as among the ablest of an able set. In conversation he already displayed great analytical skill and the power of epigrammatic expression. He had a faculty for pricking bubbles, and his quick perception and

dialectical subtlety made him a redoubtable opponent. But though he did not shrink from controversy, he had no fondness for it, nor did he seek to assert himself. He joined the Union; but appears to have been a silent member. Naturally somewhat shy and reserved, he nevertheless attached to himself during this time of life not a few warm and constant friends.

He read classics with Mr Robert Burn, and afterwards with Mr Shilleto. With a great admiration for accuracy and fine scholarship, he yet paid comparatively little attention to philology in the narrower sense, but rather set himself to grasp classical literature and history as a whole. Ill health still pursued him, and he was forced to defer his degree for a year. He graduated in 1857, when his name appeared in a bracket with three others, at the top of the Classical Tripos. His superiority was more marked in the competition for the Chancellor's Medals, in which he came out senior medallist. The prize was then given to the best classical scholar of his year, who had qualified by taking at least a second class in the Mathematical Tripos.

In the following year he was elected a fellow of his college, and appointed to a classical lectureship. This post he held for two years, when he gave it up to accept the position of chief classical assistant at his old school. It was during the years immediately following his degree that he began the serious study of German. He spent one of his Long Vacations at Dresden, living with a German family. French he had already learnt at school: a knowledge of Italian he acquired later.

In 1859, while still at Cambridge, he made his first literary venture—a volume of poetry, published by Messrs Seeley, Jackson and Halliday, under the title "David and

Samuel; with other poems, original and translated. By John Robertson." This volume consists of a poem on the choosing of David; the "psalms of Moses, David and others, versified"; "historic sketches"—chiefly monologues by historical personages, Nero, William the Silent, the Prince of Orange in 1672, and others; and "miscellaneous poems." The contents show that his mind was at this time busy on the two subjects which interested him most deeply through life—religion and history. But the religious subjects are all chosen from the Old Testament, and the aspect of history presented is more personal than that which attracted him in later years.

In 1863 Seeley was appointed Professor of Latin in University College, London, as successor to Mr Frank Newman. Here he remained for six years. In 1865 he published the best known and in some respects the most remarkable of his works—"Ecce Homo." The book at once attracted attention, perhaps not less through its crispness of style and limpidity of expression, than through the interest of the subject and the novelty of its treatment. Deliberately uncontroversial, it yet roused a storm of controversy. Its restriction of the view of Christ to the human side of his life and teaching was attacked by many as implying the non-existence of any other side. Avoidance was regarded, without warrant, as negation. In the preface to a later edition Seeley made a spirited answer to these attacks. They hardly touched the main gist of the book, and only distracted attention from the author's chief aim—to draw attention to a side of the subject which in the heat of controversy on other points had been unduly neglected. The book was published anonymously, but the authorship soon became an open secret.

It was expected that the author would publish a sequel

to "Ecce Homo," dealing with the questions which that work put aside. But the sequel—if so it may be called—when it did appear, disappointed these expectations. "Natural Religion," published in 1882, after a lapse of sixteen years, was not so popular a book as "Ecce Homo." It had the same charm of style as the earlier work, but its subject was abstract instead of personal, and the attitude adopted by the author was one which appealed to comparatively few minds. The attempt to reconcile religion and science by relegating them to entirely different spheres is not often satisfactory, and is perhaps least likely to satisfy when the religion advocated is as devoid of the supernatural as the science from which it is distinguished. It ought, however, to be said that here again, as in "Ecce Homo," the author expressly guards himself against the assumption that, because religion may exist without a supernatural element, the supernatural has no existence. And his chief object was probably, after all, not so much to advocate any particular form of religious belief, as to show that much should be regarded as religion which current conceptions exclude from it.

In 1869 Professor Seeley married Miss Mary Agnes Phillott. While on his wedding-tour he received Mr Gladstone's letter offering him the Professorship of Modern History at Cambridge, then vacant through the resignation of Charles Kingsley. The post was a congenial one, for his interest in history was greater than his interest in the classics, while the work of the chair was not such as to preclude his paying considerable attention to other, more or less cognate, subjects.

As a lecturer, he had already made a reputation. At Cambridge his lectures achieved great and immediate success. For many years—in fact, till illness began to

incapacitate him towards the close of his life—his classes were very large, and were recruited from many other departments besides his own. The lectures were carefully prepared, and were delivered at first from notes only: latterly they were written out in full. The originality of his treatment, the clearness of his views, the terseness and vigour of his language, the artistic form which he gave to each address, combined to make Professor Seeley one of the most impressive and stimulating of lecturers. To many of those who heard him when he began to teach at Cambridge, his views and methods were nothing short of an inspiration, and left a mark which time and experience have only deepened.

Before the introduction of the new statutes, the income of the Modern History chair was very small, and marriage had brought Seeley's fellowship to a close. He was therefore compelled to add to his income by lecturing in London and in the chief provincial towns. His subjects were mainly literary and historical. The lectures were sometimes published in magazines: some of them were collected in a volume of "Lectures and Essays" published in 1870. The most important of these are perhaps the essays on the fall of the Roman Empire and on Milton, and the Inaugural Lecture which he delivered at Cambridge.

In this lecture he laid down the lines which he consistently followed throughout the whole tenure of his professorship. Though he did not coin the phrase "History is past politics, and politics present history," it is perhaps more strictly applicable to his view of history than to that of its author. "The indispensable thing," he said, "for a politician is a knowledge of political economy and of history." And again, "our University must be a great seminary of politicians." History was, for him, not the

history of religion, or art, or society; still less was it a series of biographies; it was the history of the State. The statesman was to be taught his business by studying political history, not with a view to extracting arguments in favour of particular political theories, but in order to understand, by the comparative and historical method, political science, the science of the State.

These views he was never tired of promoting by his pen, and illustrating in his professorial lectures. When the Historical Tripos was established, a few years after he became professor, he gave it a strong political bias. Modern history being specially applicable to existing political problems, he lectured by preference on modern times. For the same reason he devoted his attention generally to international history—the history of the action and reaction of States on each other. He dwelt with especial fondness on the history of Great Britain as a member of the European system, a side of our national life which, he maintained, had been unaccountably neglected by most English historians.

The first product of his professorial life at Cambridge was not, it is true, connected with modern history. It was an edition of the first book of Livy, "with an Introduction, Historical Examination and Notes," published in 1871. But this was a book which he had been requested by the Delegates of the Oxford University Press to undertake, and which he had partially completed while Professor of Latin at University College. The Introduction, while showing familiarity with German research and an admiration for German methods, is thoroughly original and suggestive in its views on the misty origins of the Roman state. But this kind of work was not congenial to him, for he had a certain aversion from what is ordinarily called

research, especially antiquarian research, and he never went farther than this one volume.

In 1878 he produced his most solid contribution to historical knowledge—"The Life and Times of Stein, or Germany and Prussia in the Napoleonic Age." This great work, to the composition of which he devoted much research both in England and Germany, made known to Englishmen a subject hitherto little studied in this country. But it is the period rather than the man that had a dominant interest for the author. It is not so much Stein himself, as Stein in relation to Prussia and Europe, that is the subject of the book. For biographical details Seeley had not much liking, and the personal character of Stein is unattractive. But the nature of the anti-Napoleonic revolution, the share of Prussia in that revolution, and the share of Stein in the revival of Prussia, are subjects on which he dwelt with predilection. They are nowhere treated with greater force or lucidity.

An arrangement with the Cambridge University Press, to which he alludes with gratitude in the preface to the "Life of Stein," had enabled Professor Seeley to devote the whole of his leisure for some time past to the preparation of that work. About the time of its publication, an anonymous benefactor requested permission to add to the endowment of his chair for some years, until the new statutes, then in contemplation, should come in. This welcome generosity freed him from the necessity of adding to his income by extraneous work, and from this time forward he rarely lectured away from Cambridge. On the introduction of the new statutes, in 1882, he was elected a professorial fellow of Caius College, and remained a member of that foundation until his death.

In the year 1883, Professor Seeley's lectures on

the foreign policy of Great Britain in the 18th century were published under the title "The Expansion of England." This book aroused as wide-spread an interest as "Ecce Homo," and its reception was more uniform. The applause which it met with was almost universal. So vigorous and thoughtful an apology for the British Empire, and for the way by which it had been founded, had never before appeared. It brought together in one concise survey and regarded from one point of view a number of occurrences which historians had previously treated in a disconnected manner. Its conclusions were easily grasped: they appealed to a large audience: they were immediately applicable to one of the greatest questions of the day. In its clear-cut, animated style, its deliberate omission of all superfluous detail, its concentration of illustrative facts on the main thesis, and the confidence with which that thesis is maintained, the book is a model of what an historical essay, with a practical end in view, should be.

These qualities are again to be seen, though perhaps not quite to such advantage, in the "Short Life of Napoleon the First," published in 1886. This little book was expanded from an article on Napoleon in the *Encyclopædia Britannica*. It is a concise and rapid sketch—not so much a biography of the man as a survey of his work in relation to his time. Again, as in the case of Stein, it is rather the setting than the portrait which interests the author. Little is said about Napoleon as a commander or as a man. The thesis defended is that Napoleon as a statesman had no originality: his political ideas are all traced either to the Revolution or the *Ancien Régime*.

Soon after bringing out his "Napoleon," Professor Seeley began to work at the book which is here laid

before the public. His original intention was to write a history of British foreign policy from the Revolution of 1688. But it soon became evident to him that post-revolutionary policy could not be adequately presented without an examination of what went before. To place England in her proper setting among the states of Europe, and to display the effect of the Revolution on her relations with the European powers, it was necessary to mark the contrast between the years that preceded and those that followed 1688. He therefore determined on giving an introductory view, before entering on his main theme. But it was difficult to fix upon a starting-point. At first it seemed sufficient to go back to Cromwell. But Cromwell's policy was itself a revival. More and more impressed by the importance of religious differences on the one hand and commercial considerations on the other, as motors in international politics, he at length fixed on the accession of Elizabeth as the date when the main lines of British foreign policy were definitely laid down. It was the principles then adopted which, developed by Elizabeth herself, by Cromwell and William III, were eventually to lead up to the triumphs of the 18th century. The connexion between this book and a previous work is obvious. Had it been completed, it would have given a fuller presentation of the subject, one side of which was so brilliantly lit up in the "Expansion of England."

It was a heavy task which he had undertaken. The material was vast, and the bounds within which it was to be compressed were narrow. It was difficult to avoid letting it overflow the limits of an introduction. To present the subject in the only form which Seeley thought satisfactory—the form of an essay, bringing into high relief the main lines of development only—involved con-

tinuous thought and application. The exceeding complexity of the subject made the attempt to systematise and generalise it very difficult. It may safely be said to have been the hardest historical problem which Seeley ever set himself to solve. The labour which it involved was too much for his powers, weakened by long years of deficient health. He gave himself no holiday in the summer of 1891. In the October of that year a sudden seizure of an alarming kind showed that rest was imperatively required.

Nearly half his book was then in type; a great part of the remainder was written. But the work had perforce to be laid aside, and he was never able to take it up again except for short intervals. From this time forward his health gradually grew worse. Late in 1892 the disease which eventually proved fatal reappeared, after a long interval, and necessitated frequent operations. In the latter part of 1893 he was laid up for some months with a severe attack of phlebitis.

During these years of growing weakness, his courage and patience never faltered. He was never heard to complain; his temper remained as equable as before; he never even seemed to lose hope. Whenever not absolutely incapacitated by illness, he insisted on discharging his professorial duties. He continued to give his lectures and to attend the meetings of the University Boards with which he was connected.

In the intervals of comparative ease and vigour which he still enjoyed, he struggled on with his book, and gradually got all that is here printed into type. But he was never able to revise it as he wished, and death came upon him before he could bring it to a full end.

While laid up in the autumn of 1893 he employed himself in revising and amplifying some papers on Goethe,

originally published in the *Contemporary Review* for 1884. These were now reproduced in a little volume, entitled "Goethe Reviewed after Sixty Years." As in his essays on Milton, so with Goethe, his attention is rather fixed on the content than the form of the poet's works. It is Goethe the philosopher and teacher, the practical exponent of a noble theory of life, rather than Goethe the poet, who is under consideration. The author maps out his life, traces the broad outlines of his development and analyses the influences brought to bear upon his genius, but with Goethe the supreme artist he has little to do. It is thus, as it was with Napoleon, a somewhat one-sided view that is presented, but so far as it goes it is eminently keen-sighted, luminous and suggestive.

In the early part of 1894 Seeley had the satisfaction of receiving public acknowledgement of the services which by his writings and addresses he had rendered to the empire. When Lord Rosebery came into office as Premier on Mr Gladstone's resignation, one of his first acts was to suggest to Her Majesty that she should confer some honour on the Cambridge Professor. He was accordingly made Knight Commander of the Order of St Michael and St George. This recognition gave Seeley no little pleasure, not on his own account, but because he regarded it as a sign that the principles which he so warmly advocated were at length making way in influential quarters.

His last publication was an article in the *Contemporary Review* for July 1894, designed to prepare the way for his forthcoming work on *British Policy*. His health during the year 1894 was not sensibly worse than it had been for some time, but it was known that the end could not be very long delayed. It came at last, somewhat suddenly, and almost painlessly, on January 13, 1895.

This is not the place for an estimate of Professor Seeley's position as an historian, or a detailed criticism of his views on politics, education and other subjects. But a few general remarks may be added. What was most remarkable in his teaching of history was its suggestive and stimulative character, and the constancy of its scientific aim. The facts which Seeley mentioned in his lectures were, as a rule, well known; it was the use he made of them that was new. Historical details were worth nothing to him but as a basis for generalisation; the idea to which they pointed was everything. In dealing with history he always kept a definite end in view—the solution of some problem, the establishment of some principle, which would arrest the attention of the student, and might be of use to the statesman. History pure and simple, that is narrative without generalisation, had no interest for him: it appeared trivial, unworthy of serious attention. With this habit of mind, it was inevitable that his conclusions should sometimes appear disputable, but in any case they were thoughtful, bold and original. Except perhaps in his *Life of Stein*, he added little to the sum of historical knowledge, if by that is meant the knowledge of historical events. But he pointed out a further aim, to which the mere acquisition of knowledge is subsidiary. Taking facts as established, he insisted on thinking about them, and on deducing from them the main lines of historical and political evolution. Such a method of study is not without its risks, but it is fertile and attractive; it has a vitalising tendency.

The same positive, creative impulse is visible in his treatment of Political Science, which he regarded as the outcome of historical generalisation. In his "Conversation Classes"—informal meetings of advanced students, held

at his own house—he discussed the origin and nature of the State, analysed its composition, and deduced its necessary functions and its behaviour under various circumstances. For him the State was an ever-present reality, an object of study and devotion, as for an ancient Greek. He was a good citizen, with a high sense of political responsibility. A Liberal so far as domestic progress was concerned, anxious for the wider spread of education, for the open career, he was ardently conservative of what he conceived to be the foundations of the state.

A little England, an England shorn of Empire, was to him synonymous not only with national degradation but national ruin. Thus he became a warm supporter of Federation—not of any specific form of federal union, but of the federal idea. To foster an enthusiasm for the British State, to convince the people that it is worth preserving, to eradicate the Turgot view of colonies, and to set men thinking how the existing union may be preserved—such were the aims of many lectures and addresses delivered during his later years. Out of a similar conviction he became a vigorous opponent of Irish Home Rule, regarding it as a first step towards a dissolution of the Empire.

On the subject of education he held strong views. He disliked the great public schools, and while regarding them as “wonderful institutions,” maintained that they failed in the weightier portion of their task. He would have substituted for them day-schools, abundantly supplemented by home-education. He conceived that too much attention was still paid to the classics, and far too little to modern languages and to the master-pieces of English literature. It was a maxim of his that one subject, or two at most, should be studied at one time. The great

variety of subjects simultaneously taught at ordinary schools seemed to him one of the chief reasons why four out of five pupils leave without mastering any.

He did not avoid society, but he was no great lover of it. Not a voluble talker, he yet conversed readily with intimate friends or on topics in which he took interest. On such occasions his conversation was infallibly brilliant and epigrammatic, and abounding in apt and humorous illustration. When deeply interested, whether in conversation or on the platform, there shone forth a fire of enthusiasm, generally kept under close restraint or concealed in later years by a somewhat lethargic exterior. In University affairs of the ordinary kind he took little part; the routine of academic business, of syndicates, examinations and college meetings, was distasteful to him. As a young man he used to play racquets and cricket, and in his vacations he sometimes went on walking tours, in the Welsh mountains and Switzerland. But he had no natural fondness for athletic exercises: in later life his only form of physical recreation was a walk, and a solitary walk, he complained, afforded but little rest, for his mind was working all the time. It was his misfortune that he never acquired the art of lying fallow.

It remains only to state the share that I have taken in bringing out this book. At the request of Lady Seeley I undertook to see it through the press. All that is here printed was already in type; most of it had been more or less carefully revised. Professor Seeley had submitted the first volume, or portions of it, to Mr S. R. Gardiner, Dr Henry Sidgwick, and Mr J. Bass Mullinger, and had had the benefit of their advice. I had also read through the whole during the autumn before his death, and we

had talked over a good many doubtful points. He would undoubtedly have made several minor alterations had his life and health been spared, and would probably have rewritten certain portions altogether.

I did not, however, conceive myself justified in making any changes beyond such as appeared absolutely necessary. I have excised some repetitions which appeared superfluous or unintentional, and which, when pointed out, the author expressed his intention to excise. Others I have left, for emphatic repetition is by no means alien from Professor Seeley's style. Such few errors of date or mis-statements of fact as attracted my notice, I have corrected; here and there I have amended a word or transposed a sentence; I have added nothing. The author had written a portion, some three pages, of a concluding chapter, apparently intended to sum up the whole work. The printed portion broke off in the middle of a sentence, and there was no manuscript beyond. This fragment added nothing new, and an attempt to complete it could hardly have been successful. I have therefore decided to suppress it. With these exceptions the book is exactly as it was left by Professor Seeley.

I have to thank Lady Seeley and her daughter for prompt and active assistance in verifying references and in other ways. The index is the work of Miss Mary Bateson and Miss Seeley.

G. W. PROTHERO.

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