

The Legacy of J. B. Bury, 'Progressive' Historian of Ancient Greece

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J. B. Bury was an amazing personality among Greek historians. He held many prestigious positions, and was the Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge when the book *The Ancient Greek Historians* was compiled from his Lane Lectures at Harvard. H. D. F. Kitto referred to him as "a determined rationalist,"¹ and the Lane Lectures on ancient Greek historiography proves this point well. Very few historians have such a grasp on the nuances of Greek, or are so well-read. Very few English writers, historians or otherwise, have such a grasp of the English language as to write as captivately as Bury. Because of this, *The Ancient Greek Historians* proves itself to be a wonderful, insightful, and lucrative read for any person, academic or amateur, interested in the progress of Greek historiography.

The book consists of eight lectures, and because of this original format it seems that much of his information is truncated. On the other hand, the Greek is well-translated; this is an aspect of this book which is very different from Bury's other works as he has a tendency to assume that the reader is already fluent in Greek. However, because the work was originally spoken, the truncation of his points and assertions is completely understandable, and it must be said that the points he makes are nonetheless insightful, and due to the opulent footnotes, perhaps fuller than when originally presented at Harvard.

Bury, at the very beginning of his work, states, "As a Hellenist, I shall be happy if I succeed in illustrating the fact that, as in poetry and letters generally, as in art, as in philosophy, and in mathematics, so too in history, our debt to the Greeks transcends calculation."² The statement, he then goes on to validate from the time of the ancient Greeks, through the Romans, and to our present day. He also does his best to prove that the Greeks "were not the first to chronicle human events, but they were the first to apply criticism. And that means, they originated history."³ Therefore, according to Bury, the study of Greek historiography is not confined in importance to only the realm of Greek historians, but rather defines the purpose and correct philosophy of history in general.

He first turns to the epic poems as historical sources. He cites that the Iliad was a "valid witness" to quarrels over land. The dearth of real history available to the ancient Greeks, Bury point out, is startling when one considers their political maturity, but the Greek identity was adequately defined in the Homeric epics. The epics, he points out, were held to such esteem that Peisistratus, the Athenian

tyrant who held power in the early sixth century before Christ, had an assembly of learned men to edit the poems; Bury asserts that if he had been of any Oriental race, he would have had “his literary friends to celebrate his own career. . . .”⁴ This point may be very true: he validates this by citing Assur-bani-pal’s commissioned records from Assyria in the seventh century before Christ, and that there are many inscriptions of a historical nature in Egypt and Assyria documenting contemporary deeds. However, not only does he point out that the Greeks were not subject to the desire to “secure posthumous fame,”⁵ but also implies that, by virtue of his opening statements, that those inscriptions are not history as they lack criticism. In this, though a questionable assertion, he does not necessarily imply disparagement. A panegyric according to Bury would obviously not qualify as history per se due to a lack of criticism (one is left wondering, then, if Procopius’ panegyric to Justinian *On Buildings* would also not be considered *history* according to Bury. G. Downey, using Bury as his basis for his own work, refers to it as a “treatise” and not a “history”).⁶

He critiques, and often praises, other historians works on ancient Greece, and is very clear in citing what he agrees with and showing which points he believes are not correct. For example, he cites Gilbert Murray’s lectures and agrees with his understanding of the Homeric epics as historical in the ways that they were developed in successive stages and reflected the styles of different periods.⁷ He then breaks with Murray and proves that they were also historical in that the epics left many questions unanswered for later poets. Therefore, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* sparked the desire in the Greek heart for more answers about the outcome of the war and the fates of the heroes.⁸ He believes that Hesiod’s desire to write the genealogic poetry stemmed from this desire, and owes its impetus for creation to Homer.

From here, Bury cites Hecataeus as building the foundations of history by being the first to assess critically the truth in accounts of geographies, genealogies, and past events. Bury points out that Hecataeus, though not writing histories, did try to assess the truth in his topics of geography and genealogy as a Homeric *ιστορ*⁹ did in legal disputes. Here Bury implies not only the beginnings of the historical inquiry, but also shows that the term *ιστορια* may have been coined in this sense before Herodotus fleshed out the procedure for historical inquiry. He then turns to other writers, such as Scylax, Antiochus, and Hellanicus. To these writers, he attributes the true beginnings of history, though points out that the fragments are not enough to judge their contributions to historical literature in any true fairness. Bury does his part to ensure that their contributions are not unnoticed.

To Herodotus, his choice of words is telling: “Today, we come to a work which time has not been *allowed* to destroy [emphasis added].”¹⁰ He implies, though it may not be readily noticeable in that

sentence, that the work was of such quality that it was protected throughout the ages. He believes that the bulk of Herodotus' history was written in Greece, but that the travels that contributed so greatly to the work, to Egypt and Babylonia, occurred later in his life while he lived in Thuri. Bury also contends that the years "between his banishment from his native city and his departure for his new home seem to have been spent in Greece, perhaps chiefly at Athens, and to have been devoted. . . to investigating and composing the story of the invasion of Xerxes."¹¹ He even finds himself convinced that the last three books were composed before the first six in *The Histories*,¹² though also is careful to point out that dividing the work into nine books was a later development and not Herodotus' invention.

In the case of the ever-disputed digressions in *The Histories*, Bury is quick to point out that Herodotus' first obligation was to the reader or listener. He is ready to point out that the geographical deviations from the historical story were Hecataean in flavor and point to Herodotus' being influenced by that predecessor. The speeches and ethnographic diversions harken back to Homer, and are proof that Herodotus was trying to write an epic in prose, much in the same way that Homer had done in poetry. They keep the attention of the reader or listener, and do not fatigue the audience by over-expounding his storyline. Rather, Bury attests, they break up the story and "achieve epic variety."¹³

He turns to the speeches to show another epic quality to Herodotus' writing. As Bury is quick to point out, these speeches show the Ionian epic's influence, and not that of the Athenian drama. However, because of this, Bury suggests that Herodotus was the first to see the possibility of a Homeric history rather than that of a Hesiodic styled history. He also contends that Herodotus may be shown to have more of Hecataeus' influence in these speeches, for though unfortunately he does not give us the example, he does say that "I may note that in one case at least he [Hecataeus] put words into the mouth of an actor."¹⁴

He does make a very interesting case for Herodotus' being the first historian to encompass the history of civilization and to write a universal history. His work, Bury points out, is not encompassing in space or time, as his writing consists of a relatively short period in a relatively localized area. However, he does present a wide view of the Greeks (though not all) and the surrounding cultures who have directly or indirectly affected Greek civilization.¹⁵ His work is universal in scope as it does have a certain quality of *Weltgeschichte*,¹⁶ which Bury points out is evident by the fitting the narrative to the histories of the many civilizations in relation to one another, showing a "common history of man."¹⁷ As Bury says, "Herodotus is irreproachably comprehensive;

and his book, though he never formulates the idea, is a lesson in the unity of history.”¹⁸ He nevertheless does not spare Herodotus from the obvious criticisms of relying on theology or his incompetence in understanding military tactics. Still, Bury, so influenced by Leopold von Ranke, praises Herodotus’ ability to be critical in historical endeavors, and states that Herodotus’ techniques still “lie at the basis of the modern developments of what is called historical methodology.”¹⁹

In his dealings with Thucydides, Bury writes more of a panegyric than a critique. He speaks glowingly of his ability to rely on logic as his guide in historical judgment. He defends Thucydides from all contemporary and modern criticism, and uses his language abilities in Greek even more so than with Herodotus. He is so smitten with Thucydides that he dedicates two lectures to the historian, though Herodotus’ work was in many ways just as important as Thucydides.

To speak of Thucydides’ competence as an historian, Bury finds that he has to discern between *αιτια* and *προφασις* in defending the alleged causes of the Peloponnesian War. *Προφασις*, or “pretext,” Bury argues is used as “cause.” *Αιτια*, however, is used as “blame” or “charge.” While the concept of causality is more fluid in Greek than in English, just as the verb “to know” is more differentiated in Slovak than in English,²⁰ this Bury uses in defense of Thucydides adroitly, showing that “reason” in English²⁰ is just as elastic a word as Thucydides’ use of *προφασις* as “cause.”²¹ Also, Bury cautions, Thucydides had two distinct understandings of why: why the war started at all, and why it started *when* it did.²² With this, Bury finds Thucydides’ understanding of the war quite sufficient and “adequate.”²³

In dealing with a topic that was obviously close to Bury’s heart, he documents an often-neglected aspect of Thucydides’ work, his dealing of non-contemporary history. Here Bury continues his panegyric, and shows the methods of Thucydides to be “modern.”²⁴ Thucydides accepted much of Homer and the legends of Minos, Pelops, and Agamemnon, as well as fact that the Trojan War actually took place. Bury defends this by stating that “. . .we have come to know within the last thirty years more than Thucydides could discover.”²⁵ He goes on to show that Thucydides was able to create a masterfully ordered history from the legends and traditions, and took the time to create “a reasoned march of development, furnishing the proofs of his conclusions.”²⁶

As far as the disparities of styles in Thucydides are concerned, Bury reminds us that this is not fickleness; he asserts that the sometimes odd variations in the Greek are deliberate. “Such caprice would not be artistic, and it would not be Greek.”²⁷ He asserts that the points of convoluted Greek are points where Thucydides is “making points of his own.”²⁸ This possibility has been given credence by other scholars, namely H. Rackham at Christ’s College in Cambridge, UK.²⁹ One can only wish, though, that Bury were more critical of Thucydides’ shortcomings; then there may be some semblance of fair-

ness in relation to Herodotus' work. He states, "The work of Thucydides has limitations which we must beware of underrating; but it marks the longest and most decisive step that has ever been taken by a single man towards making history what it is today."³⁰ While it is true that critical history "*wie es eigentlich gewesen*"³¹ began with Thucydides, one may also argue that Herodotus' looking at the past as a reason why the present is the way it is, and to search for causality for events beyond the realms of Tyche and the Gods, was a much larger step.

Bury then concentrates on those historians that were after Thucydides, and gives each perfunctory coverage; yet, he is always careful to prove that they were influenced by the earlier historians. Polybius, as expected, gets the most attention as he is most obviously influenced by Thucydides. He admires the fact that Polybius "was not taken in by 'authority. . .'"³² His take on Polybius' understanding of the difference between "*αἰτία και ἀρχή*"³³ hearkens back to his defense on Thucydides, and his comment on Polybius' belief in Fortune (or, in Greek, Τυχή or Tyche) is incongruent in his defense of Thucydides' use of Tyche as "chance."³⁴

In conclusion, however, Bury does modern history well in achieving his desire to show that the Greeks helped give history its places in academia and literature. Bury can be forgiven his need to identify history as a "science"³⁵ in the strictest sense as was in vogue at the time. He shows that it was the ancient Greek historians that gave us the concept of progress in modern history, and his book, though sometimes flawed in its favoritisms, would do every historian well to have in his library.

Notes

¹ H. D. F. Kitto, *The Greeks* (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 91.

² J. B. Bury, *The Ancient Greek Historians* (New York: Dover Publications, 1958), 1.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 3.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ G. Downey, "The Composition of Procopius, *De Aedificiis*," *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 78 (1947): 171-183.

⁷ Ibid., 4.

⁸ Ibid., 4-5.

⁹ Pronounced "histor," this is a person who discerns the truth from arguments and facts in mediating arguments in Homer's works.

¹⁰ Ibid., 36.

¹¹ Ibid., 37.

¹² Ibid., 39.

¹³ Ibid., 42.

¹⁴ Ibid., 43. However, rather than expounding on his assertion, he uses the footnote to dispel earlier assertions by Marcellinus.

¹⁵ Ibid., 45.

¹⁶ Ibid. This is German for "World History," a term that was not at all in much use in English during Bury's life, especially apparent due to the fact that he gives the term in German. It is interesting that Bury foreshadows the academic movement towards "World History" by citing the *first* historian.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., 71.

²⁰ "Poznat" means "to know, to be familiar with," and "vediet" means "to know intellectually." I state this to show that concepts can be often more fluid or differentiated in other languages than in English.

²¹ Ibid., 93.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 102.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 103.

²⁷ Ibid., 112.

²⁸ Ibid., 112-113.

²⁹ H. Rackham, review of *The Ancient Greek Historians*, by J. B. Bury, *The Classical Review* 23, no. 7 (November 1909): 226-227.

³⁰ Bury, 147.

³¹ Often attributed to Leopold von Ranke, this term was shown to be, ironically, a paraphrase of Thucydides. See Konrad Repgen, "Über Rankes Diktum von 1824," *Historisches Jahrbuch* 102 (1982): 439-49.

³² Ibid., 197.

³³ Causes and beginnings.

³⁴ Ibid., 125.

³⁵ Ibid., 259.

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Benjamin Sorensen has a good history of teaching; he once held the position of Area Coordinator at the Akademia Vzdelavania (Academy of Education) in Poprad, Slovakia. He was also an ESL instructor there with a very good record of preparing students to pass the British Council's First Certificate Exam and Advanced Certificate Exam in English. He also taught English to business owners and professionals all over the country. Upon his moving back to the United States, he entered corporate America in the cell phone industry; however, his heart was always in teaching.

He entered the MA in History program at American Public University to honor his favorite professor Dr. Walter Hanak, leaving the cell phone industry right before he began his thesis. Graduating with honors, Benjamin began teaching in North Carolina's community college system. Teaching ESL and Western Civilization at two local community colleges, Benjamin also gives lecture series through Brunswick Community College on various aspects of local history. He is also employed as an online adjunct faculty at Ashford University. Currently enrolled in the American Revolution Studies graduate certificate program at APU, Benjamin plans to further his studies by earning a PhD. His real strength in history, is in the Byzantine Empire, with strong focuses on the reign of Justinian and the missions of the Saints Constantine Cyril and Methodius. Benjamin currently serves as an editor for the Saber and Scroll Journal.

Outside of his academic career, Benjamin is very active. President of the Cape Fear Revolutionary War Round Table, he is also an active Freemason, belonging to the oldest lodge in North Carolina, St. John's No. 1. An officer in the lodge and the lodge historian, as well as the historian for the Scottish Rite Valley of Wilmington, he is fluent in English, Slovak, and Czech, and proficient at reading several others. Musically talented, Ben sings and plays several instruments including the largest gothic Slovak flute, the fujara. Ben has a lovely wife and two children, all of whom are Slovak nationals, with his children being dual citizens.