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Introduction

JAMES BRYCE'S DEATH at age eighty-three in January 1922 was reported at length across the globe. The First World War and its aftermath had brought him to the height of his fame. It was understandable that he was mourned in the United States, where he had been an unprecedentedly popular ambassador less than a decade earlier; and likewise among the Armenians, for whose cause he had fought for almost half a century, since he climbed Mount Ararat and fell in love with the land and its people. But a host of other peoples claimed a special bond with Bryce: the Swiss, Bulgarians, Austrians, Czechs, Greeks, and Finns, among many others. For a man who was, at heart, a scholar and a thinker, he was astonishingly well-known.

Today it is indisputable that in the hundred years or so since Bryce's death, his name has fallen from a position of worldwide fame to general obscurity. He is not forgotten in the scholarly world. There is a steady stream of new work on aspects of his thought and career.¹ He crops up in a huge range of different contexts, but there is little sense of him in the round. How did the historian of the Holy Roman Empire connect with the architect of the League of Nations? Or the climber of Ararat with the analyst of American democracy? The apologist for segregation—if such he was—with the humanitarian campaigner? There are many other aspects of Bryce's career that have had minimal scholarly attention: the opponent of women's suffrage, the advocate of Christian unity, the public voice for the humanities when they were first perceived to need a public voice. In reconstructing the life and thinking of an extraordinarily many-sided man, the book aims to give a deep insight into the worldview of British liberalism in the period when liberalism moved from a position of national and international hegemony to the brink of terminal decline.

One could think of others—perhaps Asquith—who offer a similar insight from nearer to the summit of politics; or others—the philosopher Henry

Sidgwick and the jurist Albert Venn Dicey—who had a more clearly delineated intellectual legacy. Lord Acton commanded a greater European renown. What was unique about Bryce was his distinguished activity in so many fields: as a cabinet minister *and* a professor; a campaigner and organizer of public opinion *and* an ambassador; a practitioner of the arts of democratic politics *and* one of the foremost academic students of democratic political systems across the world. The geographical as well as historical reach of his mind was astonishing, too, as was his thirst for discovery, so that in re-creating his life we can trace the encounter between a late Victorian Liberal and the wider world, as well as the imaginative encounter between a late Victorian Liberal and the European past over many centuries.

The literature on Bryce mostly deals with just one aspect of a many-sided figure. That may be inevitable, but it comes at a cost. This book draws attention to some of those costs and sets out to show what a more rounded study can offer. It suggests (in chapter 3) that Bryce's Teutonist sympathies, which were authentic, never dominated his thinking and need to be set against, for instance, his fascination with Rome as a universal city, and his academic specialism in Roman law. It shows (in chapter 6) that his support for Irish Home Rule, in defiance of many of his Ulster Protestant family, is less perplexing when set in the context of a lifelong identification with the cause of small nations. It argues (in chapters 9, 10, and 11) that the questionable position he took on the racial problem in his Romanes lecture in 1902, where he seemed to endorse or at least accept segregation, needs to be seen in the context of a trajectory that eventually led him to embrace a markedly more optimistic sense that racial antagonisms between White and Black were historically contingent, and capable of being overcome with time, education, and an increase in social mixing. Of course there are limitations to a biographical approach, too. But the book has as a core purpose to rescue Bryce from being consigned to a pigeonhole.

A Connected Intellectual

Some years ago I published a study of another Victorian intellectual eminence, Mark Pattison.² Pattison and Bryce, though separated in age by twenty-five years, knew each other well and had a high regard for each other. Each had a profoundly historical cast of mind, although both were much else besides historians. They shared a commitment to a number of common causes, from university reform and women's education to the Eastern Question. Each left behind him a number of grand unfinished projects, notably Pattison's

projected study of Scaliger and Bryce's of Justinian. But as intellectual types they were polar opposites. Pattison saw the retreat from the world—in the university or the cathedral chapter—as the necessary setting for scholarly originality and regarded business (busy-ness) as the antithesis of the life of the mind. Bryce, by contrast, thrived on activity. His was a life in which scholarly writing (and he published much more than Pattison) was interwoven with public office, incessant campaigning, frequent and lengthy travel, and voluminous correspondence with a huge network of friends and contacts across the world. Furthermore, although with minor exceptions his published work was all single-authored, it was also in a deep sense the fruit of his friendships and networks. His work testified to enduring dialogue with close friends—Dicey and the historian Edward Freeman were particularly important interlocutors, as were Edwin Godkin and Charles Eliot in the United States—while books such as *The American Commonwealth* and *Modern Democracies* drew on his unique facility for 'fact-gathering' conversations, often with wholly new acquaintances. His was a fundamentally relational intellect.

The intellectual relationship between Bryce and Dicey exemplifies the importance of conversation—face-to-face and by letter—in the intellectual development of both men. They first met as undergraduates, fellow members of the Old Mortality Society at Oxford; Dicey was three years older and was elected fellow of Trinity College while Bryce was still an undergraduate at that college, where Dicey taught him for a time. They were travelling companions on the visit to the United States in 1870, a journey that more than any other formed Bryce's public life and intellectual career, and Dicey recalled more than four decades later that 'we accomplished a good deal of thinking in our 8 weeks'. In the same letter Dicey reflected that 'I am certain that conversation has very much improved my own thinking'.³ Bryce was an important influence on Dicey's magnum opus, the *Lectures Introductory to the Study of Law of the Constitution*, just as Dicey was on Bryce's *American Commonwealth*; and both books could be said to have been germinated during that tour of America in 1870. This was perhaps Bryce's closest relationship outside his family and marriage, but it epitomizes the way in which he developed as a person and as a thinker.⁴ There were dozens, even hundreds, of such intellectual relationships—with the Irish American editor Edwin Godkin and the heterodox divine and poet Stopford Brooke, with the Italian historian Ugo Balzani and the feminist mountaineer and philanthropist Emma Winkworth. Bryce's intellectual life cannot be captured without a deep investigation of the networks of acquaintance and friendship in which he operated.⁵

In a Commemoration address at Johns Hopkins University in 1911, on the subject of specialization in university education, he gave a clue as to the way in which he deployed his insatiable curiosity and his ability to extract knowledge and insight from anyone he met: ‘The scientific specialist makes interesting company—when I have a chance I always try to get beside him at dinner—because he is able to tell us what we seek to know of the progress of discovery in the growing sciences, and we have only to interrogate him to get at once, without the labour of consulting books, the latest results in the clearest form.’⁶ He was a natural synthesizer, but also one who had an extraordinary gift for deriving maximum practical benefit from casual and social encounters, as well as from business meetings. The most vivid account of this aspect of Bryce’s personality comes from Henry Morgenthau, the American lawyer and businessman who had recently taken up the role of ambassador to the Ottoman Empire when Bryce met him in Palestine in 1914. They would later become close, as Morgenthau was important in documenting Turkish atrocities against the Armenians in 1915–1916. He recalled:

On this trip I first had occasion to observe his method of obtaining information, which doubtless accounts for a part of his remarkable equipment as an historian. He was quite the greatest living questioner that I have ever met. He had developed cross examination to a fine art of picking men’s brains. Most other men gather their information from books. It was a joy to be permitted to attend his séances with people who possessed information. He first put them completely at ease by ascertaining what subjects they were thoroughly posted on, and then, with a beneficent suavity, he made them willing contributors to his own unlimited store of knowledge. His thirst for facts was unquenchable. Question followed question almost like the report of shots fired from a machine gun. By this process, I have seen him rifle every recess of the minds of men like Schmavonian, who was a storehouse of Turkish history, custom, and tradition, and of Dr Franklin E. Hoskins, who is a profound scholar in Bible history. His method was physically exhausting to his victims, and in the hands of a less delightful personality would have been intolerable. But Lord Bryce was as charming as he was inquisitive, and more than that, he gave out of his vast erudition as freely as he received.⁷

The connected quality of Bryce’s intellectual activity has implications for the way in which this book is conceived. Like any intellectual biography, it of course tries to reconstruct the intellectual contexts in which Bryce wrote; but

his case cries out for a deeper exploration of the intellectual networks that shaped his thinking. Each chapter aims to home in on one or more important interlocutors, so that we can see Bryce's thinking evolving not in the privacy of the study or the library but amid a life of constant public business, travel, and sociability. The working notes that Bryce left—these are substantial, though not exhaustive by any means—illustrate the way in which his ideas were hammered out in society and amid an active life, with ideas for his next book scribbled on the backs of menus or on parliamentary order papers.

Historiography

Bryce has received a more than respectable amount of scholarly attention, starting with the standard two-volume life produced, at Lady Bryce's invitation, by the historian and cabinet minister H.A.L. Fisher. Fisher was a distinguished man who knew Bryce well, being married to his goddaughter, but the volume is generally regarded as something of a disappointment. Bryce's niece later speculated (having seen the vast mass of papers Bryce left) that Fisher had been given access to only a fragment of the whole.⁸ There are two good monographs by the Americanists Edmund Ions and Hugh Tulloch, both of which naturally focus on Bryce's relationship with the United States; a neglected but scholarly study in German by Thomas Kleinknecht; and an agreeable and well-balanced short general life by John T. Seaman.⁹ Bryce is, perhaps, a neglected figure in studies of the post-Gladstonian Liberal Party.¹⁰ But he continues to attract attention in the substantially new fields of the history of international thought, the history of humanitarianism, and even the history of walking and mountaineering, as well as in older but resurgent fields such as the history of constitutional thought.¹¹ He is a central figure in Christopher Harvie's now somewhat forgotten early work, *The Lights of Liberalism*, and also—though less than perhaps he merits—in the classic study of *That Noble Science of Politics* by Stefan Collini, Donald Winch, and John Burrow.¹² There has also been sustained interest from Italian scholars (untranslated and hence largely undigested in the English-language literature), in particular on his constitutional writings and his contributions to the emergent discipline of political science.¹³ What we lack, however, is anything like a comprehensive study of Bryce's thought, one that characterizes him in the round.

A word should be said for the rationale for an intellectual *biography*, as distinct from a study of Bryce on constitutionalism, or Bryce on America, or Bryce on democracy, or Bryce on race. All those subjects are well worth

studying and are studied here, but they risk losing a sense both of the diversity of Bryce's interests and of their interconnectedness. They thus push out of sight what is surely an insistent set of questions about him: what kind of an intellectual was he? What kind of a public figure? How was the figure of the intellectual harmonized (if indeed it was) with that of the public man? A focus on the man enables us to wrestle with these questions, and to convey a sense of how, in practice, a late Victorian Liberal intellectual thought about questions of constitutionalism, democracy, and public opinion; of gender and the public sphere; of race, empire, and humanitarianism; of war and peace. It enables us to engage not just with well-developed theory but also with *opinion*. What made the vigorous activist for the extension of girls' and women's education at the same time an opponent of women's suffrage—and not just a casual opponent, but one who to the end was among Britain's most tenacious parliamentary critics of women's suffrage? Why was a man who unhesitatingly backed the cause of the North and the Union in the American Civil War—and who had a lifelong revulsion for slavery—also a critic of the extension of the suffrage to former slaves in the wake of that war?

The term *intellectual biography* is in need of some unpacking. In the case of Pattison, this was not a big question: he himself said that he had no history but a mental history, and while that was certainly an overstatement (how could it not be?), it was true that what mattered most about Pattison was the life of his mind. Bryce, by contrast, was a man of many parts who spent most of his adult life in public life of one kind or another: an MP for twenty-seven years, a peer for eight; a cabinet member for about four years under three prime ministers; ambassador for six years; a chair of Royal Commissions and similar inquiries; president of the British Academy; and so on. It would certainly be possible to frame a study of him as a political biography, or a life of the public man. That said, he was a politician of the second rank, who prior to his ambassadorship achieved much less in that domain than his talents suggested he should have; whereas his intellectual eminence was undisputed. It is as an intellectual figure that he really matters.

As an intellectual figure he was a great polymath, a man who was in his element in writing a preface to the 'handy volume' issue of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* in 1915, and other syntheses of the state of knowledge. But his expertise was concentrated in the study of politics, law, and constitutions, both past and present. His central concerns were of three main kinds. He wrestled with the nature of democratic politics: this was a subject he first wrote about in his contribution to *Essays on Reform* (1867); it was the main theme of his

American Commonwealth (1888); and it was also his central concern in his old age, when he finally published his *Modern Democracies* (1921). Democratic institutions certainly interested him, but Collini, Winch, and Burrow do him an injustice by depicting him as a pioneer of the ‘how-many-chambers-had-Lady-Macbeth’ school of comparative government.¹⁴ The recurrent theme in his writing on democracy was the importance of what we now call political culture, and in particular the role of public opinion: he was one of the first academic writers on politics to give due weight to political parties, the press, and other organs of public opinion. Second, he was concerned with the problem of peace. He is recognized as a leading ‘pro-Boer’, that is, a critic of the second South African War; and as the presiding grandee in the wartime Bryce Group, which nurtured the vision of a new world order organized by a ‘league of nations’. But the peaceful organization of the world was an enduring concern of his, starting with *The Holy Roman Empire* (1864), the book that established his intellectual reputation. That book’s focus was on the theory and practice of the medieval empire as a world order, and in a sense that set the agenda for a lifetime’s preoccupation with the problem of international governance in a world of nation-states and colonial empires—an interest that paralleled his lifelong preoccupation with nationalism and national identity.¹⁵ His third principal concern straddled the first two: a fascination with the causes of the cohesion or decomposition of states—what he termed ‘centripetal’ and ‘centrifugal’ forces—and how they could be managed constitutionally. The nationality question was fundamental here, and we find in Bryce some intriguing tension between his visceral sympathy for small nations struggling to be free (a sympathy that grew stronger with time) and the liberal conviction that the proliferation of small states would prove inimical to both economic progress and cultural vitality. Importantly, the problem of the cohesion and decomposition of states also drew him into the emerging field of race relations. He hoped and believed that the encounter and intermarriage of different racial groups would soften their difference and facilitate peaceful relations. But he agonized about what would happen if, as seemed to be the case in the United States and southern Africa, the antipathy between Whites and Blacks was such as to block any hope of progress through intermarriage.

This brief account of Bryce’s distinctive intellectual interests suggests a way in which an intellectual biography can at the same time engage with the public man. He understood democratic politics not just as an academic student of the subject and as an avid traveller, but also as an active politician, one who, though he barely (in Max Weber’s terms) ‘lived off’ politics, was nevertheless

a professional.¹⁶ At the same time as he was working on *The American Commonwealth* in the mid-1880s, he was sitting in the Commons and writing commentaries on British politics for the New York weekly, *The Nation*. He analysed the workings of public opinion in the United States and other democratic polities, but he was also fully engaged in trying to shape public opinion through the numerous pressure groups in which he took a leading role, on causes ranging from the defence of the subject nationalities of the Ottoman Empire, above all the Armenians, to the campaign for preservation of common spaces open to the public. He wrote extensively on the politics of federal and unitary states, of multinational empires and settler colonies, but he was also active in wrestling with the Irish Question as a Gladstonian Home Ruler, and also in trying to shape the international order, as a diplomat, a peace campaigner, and an advocate for the incipient League of Nations. So in this book Bryce's thinking about the grand challenges of democratic politics, international organization for peace, and nationality and race will be traced not only through his writings but also through his career as an activist and statesman. His career in high politics will be very much part of the picture, but high politics is viewed primarily as an arena for his intellectual engagement with these grand challenges.

But an 'intellectual biography' of Bryce must also do justice to the relational character of his intellect. What that means is that it must capture the extent and importance of the networks to which he belonged and that helped frame his thinking. It must be thickly contextualized. My contention is that none of the existing studies do justice to this fundamental characteristic of Bryce. To take one important example: none of the existing biographical studies devote more than cursory attention to the importance of women in Bryce's life. They pass fleetingly over his relations with his mother and his sisters Mary and Katharine. Yet Mary lived with him, ran his household, and acted as a kind of political and personal secretary and political hostess for more than a decade before his marriage. We also have no significant analysis of the strikingly close partnership he formed with his wife, Marion, who assumed the roles that Mary Bryce had previously performed, accompanied him on almost all his travels and was undoubtedly a powerful influence on his career, as well as steward of his posthumous reputation.¹⁷ The book also draws attention to a number of close friendships with women—always women of intellectual interests and standing—that clearly meant a lot to Bryce throughout his adult life. They included Alice Stopford Green (1847–1929), historian, Irish nationalist, and widow of Bryce's friend the historian John Richard Green; Emma Winkworth,

née Thomasson, Bolton Unitarian, London hostess, mountaineer, and campaigner for the causes of women's education and women's suffrage; and Anne Thackeray Ritchie (1837–1919), novelist and novelist's daughter. Bryce was an early, staunch, and consistent supporter of the cause of girls' and women's education, but he was also a strong and consistent opponent of women's suffrage, to the end of his life. These are positions that had an intellectual logic that can be unfolded, but they were also embedded in this network of personal relationships, some of which were damaged by his opposition to the suffrage, though others were reinforced by it. So this is precisely the kind of issue that can best be analysed by means of an intellectual biography that places its subject's thinking into a thick context of personal relationships and intellectual networks. Equally, while Bryce's family background has certainly been covered in existing studies, the importance of the family in shaping his thinking has never been written about in any depth. But this was crucial in several important respects. First, while his religious beliefs evolved toward a nondogmatic but morally serious liberal Protestantism, he remained staunchly attached to the family's religious heritage that was steeped in the Presbyterianism of the seventeenth-century Covenanters and the eighteenth-century Seceders. He remained a firm opponent of ecclesiastical establishments and a consistent advocate of nondenominational education. Second, the absence of any kind of break with his parents and their religious heritage tells us something important about Bryce's psychology: in his intellectual evolution he added new layers—new friendships, allegiances, enthusiasms, interests—but he rarely shed the old ones, so there are no obvious narrative discontinuities in his life. There is a suggestion that a less harmonious private life might have nurtured a greater originality, as it certainly did with Pattison.¹⁸ Third, while relations with his parents were remarkably harmonious, there were tensions with the wider family, not least with his Uncle John (Dr Reuben John Bryce) on university tests and especially on Home Rule, so that private lives and public service interacted in fascinating ways.

The temporal continuity of Bryce's life and career has implications for the way in which the book is organized. Of course there were some important turning points around which a narrative can be structured. His entry into Parliament in 1880 was an obvious one; so too was 1888–1889, when within a period of eight months or so he published *The American Commonwealth* and got married at the age of fifty-one. The appointment as ambassador to the United States in 1907 was a third. But while entry into Parliament gave him a new sphere of activity, he did not abandon academia: he retained his Oxford chair

for the first half of his twenty-seven-year stint in Parliament. Even when he resigned his chair, he continued to be active in helping to build the structures of academic life: as a founding fellow of the British Academy, and one of its early presidents, and as a participant in the international academic congresses that started to become an entrenched presence in academic life at the beginning of the twentieth century, including the famous St Louis Congress of 1904. *The American Commonwealth* built on the foundations of his first visit to the United States way back in 1870, and that was itself the fruit of the enthusiasm for American institutions (and the cause of the Union) among the Oxford academic liberals of the 1860s. As ambassador between 1907 and 1913, he played a distinctive and innovative role as a practitioner of what we might now call public or cultural diplomacy, seeking (with a striking degree of success) to make an impact on American public opinion; but this role was possible because of the reputation that *The American Commonwealth* had made for him both as a friend of America and as a sympathetic authority on its institutions.

Moreover, at least three of Bryce's major works had long lives that make them hard to pigeonhole temporally. What I mean by that is not simply that they continued to be read for many years, although that is true. Both *The Holy Roman Empire* and *The American Commonwealth* went through many new editions in Bryce's lifetime, often with substantive revisions, stretching to new chapters as well as revisions of points of interpretation. That means that they belong to several phases of Bryce's career. That is why *The American Commonwealth* is considered briefly in chapter 5 and in detail in chapters 7, 9, and 10. *Modern Democracies*, by contrast, went through only one edition in his lifetime, since it was published in his final year. But it had been conceived as long ago as 1904, and he worked on it, when time allowed, not only up to his entry into the cabinet in December 1905, but also throughout his ambassadorship and throughout his very busy First World War. So while it is analysed in depth in chapter 12, it is anticipated in chapter 10, which shows how some of his thinking on democracy was shaped by his renewed encounter with the American public during his time in Washington.

The question of *temporality* is for that reason a methodologically tricky one to handle in writing about Bryce. He did not abandon causes or friendships, though he acquired new ones, and an important thing to understand about his way of operating as a politician and public intellectual was that he deployed networks formed for one purpose in helping to advance other causes. Thus the American academic and political contacts he built up when writing *The*

American Commonwealth were also deployed to act on American public opinion on behalf of the Armenian people, and later in support of American entry into the First World War. He did not compartmentalize his life, so that at the height of the Home Rule crisis we find him in dialogue with Gladstone about the interpretation of Dante, and as ambassador he used to entertain President Roosevelt with his recitations from Icelandic sagas. His enthusiasm for Dante and for primitive Iceland were motifs or tropes that recurred in unexpected contexts throughout Bryce's career. Something similar could be said about the concept of public opinion. This was central to his analysis of democratic political systems both in *The American Commonwealth* and in *Modern Democracies*. But he had been thinking seriously about the workings of public opinion ever since he worked for the Schools Inquiry Commission back in the 1860s, and as we shall see, public opinion was a recurrent motif in his political activity as well as in his political science. So while the book is organized both chronologically and thematically, there is necessarily frequent use of retrospectives and indeed prospectives; and if Irish Home Rule and *The American Commonwealth* are dealt with in separate chapters, we also have to take the opportunity to peer across these artificial walls to acknowledge that Bryce was working on the two simultaneously. Indeed, less than six weeks separated the completion of *The American Commonwealth* from *Two Centuries of Irish History*, the volume he edited at Gladstone's instigation as part of a concerted effort to make the intellectual case for Home Rule.

A Democratic Intellect?

The book's subtitle recalls George Davie's famous work in which he characterized the idea of the democratic intellect as the distinguishing feature of the Scottish educational tradition.¹⁹ As chapter 1 shows, Bryce was shaped by that tradition, both because he spent three formative years at Glasgow University before he proceeded to Oxford, but also because his family was steeped in the Scottish university tradition as practised at Glasgow in particular. Bryce's famed polymathy bore the recognizable marks of his formation in the Scottish university tradition before its anglicization.

To call Bryce's intellect a 'democratic' one is not to imply that he was a democrat in an absolute sense. He belonged to the democratic wing of the Liberal Party in the 1860s and 1870s, but by the end of his life he looked back nostalgically on the time when he could view the coming of democracy optimistically. The book shows in chapter 7 and elsewhere that he was attached to

both the archetypal nineteenth-century Liberal doctrine of *capacity* and the republican belief that any viable free political order must depend on the nurturing of civic virtue. He was consistently opposed to the idea of an abstract *right* to vote. But the theory and practice of democracy stood at the heart of his intellectual concerns, from his contribution to *Essays on Reform* in 1867 to his *Modern Democracies* in 1921, and that is a second reason for the title.

The third and most important reason is that what most distinguished Bryce as a type of public moralist was his sustained preoccupation with public opinion. This was the pivotal concept in his analysis of American democracy in *The American Commonwealth*, and later the pivotal concept in his comparative analysis of democratic systems in *Modern Democracies*. Just as important, what was most distinctive about his political career was his engagement with public opinion: as a single-issue campaigner for access to open spaces at home or for the rights of oppressed peoples overseas; as a democratic ambassador who forged a new kind of relationship with the American people; and finally as one of those who, in the First World War and after, identified the formation of an international public opinion as the only sure route to peace. But for Bryce public opinion was never just a datum with which politicians had to reckon. It had to be led, and the leadership of public opinion was central to the vocation of the intellectual-in-politics. Above all else he was in public life to educate and to shape public opinion, in Britain and abroad.

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