LORD BALFOUR AND THE PROGRESS OF MEDICINE.

BY

SIR WALTER FLETCHER, K.B.E., C.B., F.R.S.,

SECRETARY OF THE MEDICAL RESEARCH COUNCIL.

THE public tributes lately paid to Lord Balfour as a political leader and as a great servant of the State have inevitably left in relative shadow the services he gave throughout his long life to the promotion of education within the country and to the advancement of knowledge by research. These are not forgotten, and that they should now be passing relatively unacclaimed is in itself but a measure of the great range over which his private interests and public work extended. It is only the passage of time that can bring into sight the true proportions and relative values of all he did. It is not very daring even now to prophesy that as contemporary views of party history are adjusted and fade, as records now confidential become known, the future generations will find cause to believe that of all the services Lord Balfour gave to England none have a higher claim on their gratitude or contributed more to their welfare than his unswerving faith in the value of education and of knowledge, and the practical expression he found means of giving to it.

No English statesman of modern times, with the possible exception of Lord Haldane, has ever had the same grasp as Lord Balfour of the methods by which natural knowledge is enlarged and more detailed information of the growing points in its chief branches. He had quite exceptional opportunities given to him by birth, by his political career, by his almost unique position in society, and by his high skill in argument, whether public or private, of aiding any great cause he had at heart. His political life, party warfare, the irregular claims and opportunities for constructive legislation, and, nearer the end, the great tasks laid upon him during and after the war, all these kept him from giving with any continuity and completeness the service he was always eager to give to the progress of knowledge and to its more effective use for the general good. Nevertheless, in uncountable ways he used his powers at every opportunity to serve education and research, to deal a stroke for them at this point, to remove an impediment at that. Only as time passes can it be seen how great in sum has been his achievement within those fields.

The debt that medicine in particular owes to Lord Balfour is certainly hardly measurable now, but it may assuredly be said that no great statesman can be named in modern history as having done it greater service. The benefits we owe to him are both general and particular. In general, medicine has drawn increasing strength, like every other field of learning, from the services Lord Balfour gave to education in the country as a whole. This is not the place in which to speak of those. We may well remember, however, that our still youthful system of modern universities, including, of course, their medical schools, in England, Wales, and Ireland, almost all of it framed within the present generation, rests largely upon the efforts of Lord Haldane, with indispensable aid from Lord Balfour, and that no chapter in recent political history is more creditable than that in which those two men carried forward this great work in spite of party antagonism and behind its set scenery. The national system of public secondary education, the soundness of which is the condition of health for any national university system, this, of course, was the work again, more conspicuously and directly, of Balfour, aided by that great public servant Sir Robert Morant.

Lord Balfour's specific services to the progress of medicine as such, and outside this general sphere of education, have been thrown into shadow, even more than his services to physical science, by the glamour of his personal and political gifts. His kinship with Lord Rayleigh kept him in easy touch with the growth of physical science that he

followed with such personal interest, and he played a leading part in the foundation of the National Physical Laboratory during the Premiership of his uncle, Lord Salisbury. Many of his public utterances and writings, of which the brilliant address he gave as President of the British Association at Cambridge in 1904 is a good example, made the educated public well aware of his informed sympathy with the progress of physical science, and the fascination it had for him in its relation to philosophic thought. But he had an even closer family tie with the biological world. His brother Francis, for whom the chair of animal morphology was especially created at Cambridge, where the beauty of his short life and great work are still a living tradition, may be called the founder of comparative embryology. It was in tribute to Lord Balfour and his family, many years after his brother's untimely death in the Alps, that the Balfour chair of genetics at Cambridge, first held by Bateson, was endowed. He followed the progress of biology at all its chief points of active growth with at least the same eagerness and enjoyment as he drew from the developments of physical science. There was certainly no aspect of biology which had a stronger appeal for him than that of its bearing upon the hopes of human progress and upon the immediate merciful work of the medical profession. At every period of his life he showed his friendship for the progress of medicine and the medical sciences; and the friendship, active and sustained, of a man with his gifts and opportunities could not have failed, and did not fail, in spite of his manifold preoccupations of other kinds, to bring aid of far-extending value to the causes that "medicine" represents.

During most of his life he had no time to give public service in this direction except by occasional speeches on behalf of institutions or societies. His speeches, however, had an educative value of exceptional kind. His were not the deliverances of the prominent public man giving patronage to science in a speech framed for him upon the occasion. They were speeches made *ex tempore* from the briefest possible notes, that showed personal knowledge of the essential problems in view and of the methods being used to solve them. A good example may be found in his speeches, beginning more than a quarter of a century ago, that were made on behalf of the Imperial Cancer Research Fund. His knowledge and clear vision allowed him not only to understand the point of view of the scientific workers but to explain it to the public at large and to the laymen whose support was necessary. His aid then must be counted as contributing greatly to the enlightened spirit in which so much valuable work for that Fund has been done for many years in the face of a good deal of pessimism from the profession and much clamour for quick results from an impatient public. Looking back now with our present knowledge, we can see that Lord Balfour was then taking the true vision and giving wise counsel, and not a word that he said in those early years appears now to be out of place or unjustified. So it was in his speeches on behalf of many other interests, whether upon tuberculosis during the early years of the century, when public attention was focused upon it and sanatorium treatment was being actively developed, or upon eugenics, or upon bacteriology, that he had seen born as a science, or upon the importance of the study of tropical medicine for the Empire. Above all, and at every point, he threw his influence steadily into the movements, whether public or private, that made towards the better encouragement of scientific research in this country. He did much behind the scenes, and he spoke upon this matter publicly and often. Nowadays it is becoming not uncommon for public men to understand the value of research and to work for its aid. But thirty years ago or more there was no Minister of the Crown who would or could have said, as he did in 1898:

"I have all my life been an ardent believer in a cause which is often laughed at—the cause of the endowment of research. In that cause I most firmly believe, and I think there is no branch of knowledge in which it may find a more useful field of application than in that of advancing medical knowledge. It is wonderful to think how the public are prepared to pay, and in my opinion rightly prepared to pay, for the services of those whose clinical genius, whose power of absorbing all that is practically useful

in the knowledge of their day, whose bedside genius—if I may so describe it—demands, and ought to have the fullest recognition—it is wonderful, I say, how the public are prepared to pay for that kind of genius, but apparently put aside with indifference the not less essential kind of genius which deals with the progress of knowledge and the furtherance of invention. This is not selfishness; I think it is latent imagination. The work of the medical practitioner is seen at once; its value can be immediately appreciated; but he who spends his life in the pursuit of the secrets of Nature, working in his laboratory, may very often receive no public recognition at all during his life, except from that restricted circle of experts who alone, after all, are capable of forming any valuable estimate as to its merits."

and it was just before he became Prime Minister four years later that he said:

"I do not believe any man who looks round the equipment of our universities, of our medical schools, and other places of education, can honestly say in his heart that we have done enough to equip research with all the costly armoury which research must have in these modern days. We lag behind—we, the richest country in the world, lag behind Germany, France, Switzerland, Italy. Is it not disgraceful? Are we too poor, or are we too stupid? Do we lack the imagination required to show what these apparently remote and abstract studies do for the happiness of mankind?"

and he went on to say:

"It is the result of my unfortunate profession that I am constantly engaged in discussions and in conflicts which at the worst have a party significance, and at the best have but a national significance. The cause I plead now is not the cause of a party nor the cause of a nation—it is the cause of mankind at large. Every discovery which is made in the laboratory in Germany, France, or Italy is the possession, not of those countries, but of the whole world. Let us not be backward in this great international competition, which surely may be said, in some way, to balance that more costly and destructive competition in armaments and, it may be, in commerce."

Inasmuch as his "unfortunate profession" prevented him through most of his long life from giving more than his powerful words and great influence to promote medical advance, we must count it a very happy stroke of fate that brought him at the age of 71, after his long political life and his later services in making war and making peace, to be Lord President of the Privy Council, and in that office to be responsible to Parliament and in the Cabinet for the greater part of the State aid now given for the support of scientific research. It would not be hard to guess, and indeed I have heard him declare himself, that no part of all his public work, immense as its range had been, had brought him so much matter for personal interest or had seemed to him to be of more importance. In each of the two research Departments falling directly under him—the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research and the Medical Research Council—his active personal interest from that beginning, now ten years ago, is passing into legend. On the very day after he assumed office, a tall gentleman called unexpectedly at the not very obvious offices of the Medical Research Council in Buckingham Street and announced himself as Mr. Balfour. He had called, he said, to see "whether there was anything he could do to help." The Council had worked previously under some six or seven Ministers, variously eminent, but none, I think, had ever made himself aware of the geographical position of the office. In like manner he paid, as Minister, repeated personal visits to the sister Department. Need explanation be offered for the affectionate devotion his courtesy and simplicity won from all his subordinates?

In 1922 he resigned with the Coalition Government and assumed private life. In 1924 Mr. Edward Wood, now Lord Irwin, resigned the chairmanship of the Medical Research Council on his appointment to be Viceroy of India. The appointment to the vacancy on the Council fell to Lord Curzon. He desired a representative of the Council to seek the opinion of Lord Balfour, who indicated that he himself would be willing to join the Council and become chairman, if Lord Curzon could not see his way to a better appointment. Never, we may suppose, was an appointment more confidently made, and never, certainly, was any so welcome to the Council he joined. From that

time, and for nearly five years, until his health failed, he regularly attended meetings of the Council and gave the most ready sympathy and eager help to their work at all times and in every way open to him. Upon Lord Curzon's death in 1924 Lord Balfour joined Mr. Baldwin's Ministry and again became Lord President of the Council. As is now well known, he made the Medical Research Council aware that he so much enjoyed seeing their work at first hand that, unless the point were raised by others, he was prepared himself to connive at a situation in which he remained chairman of a body that was advisory to himself as Minister to the Crown. He continued to serve the work of medical research in both capacities until the Ministry fell last summer, and he resigned his chairmanship of the Council on the ground of ill health shortly afterwards.

Lord Balfour's knowledge of the research work done on behalf of the two research organizations under him had made him increasingly aware before 1924 that some better machinery was needed for bringing the results of investigation, when attained, into more effective application in human affairs, and that this machinery must include more effective modes of consultation between separate administrative Departments or Services on the one hand and the men with first-hand scientific knowledge on the other. When Mr. Baldwin announced in Parliament after Lord Curzon's death that Lord Balfour was to succeed as Lord President, he said that he was to be entrusted with the special task of improving the machinery for bringing the results of scientific work into their proper relation to statecraft. Almost immediately after his appointment in 1924 Lord Balfour, who, as Prime Minister a quarter of a century before, had established the Committee of Imperial Defence, proceeded to set up a closely analogous machinery for civilian affairs as the Committee of Civil Research. Under this committee, as under its military counterpart, there sprang up progressively a number of subcommittees, each constituted with a single eye to the promotion of some special object, for the gaining of which scientific knowledge and administrative art must go hand in hand. All these subcommittees reported confidentially to the Cabinet, and not a tithe of the work which has been done is familiar at present to the public. It is now increasingly apparent as the facts have become known that no single agency did more to save the country in the war than the timely work of the Committee of Imperial Defence. It is not a rash speculation to guess that the next generation will realize that no single agency may have done more to save and develop the Empire than Lord Balfour's Committee of Civil Research—if we may assume that its realities, unlike its name, are to be retained in what has been re-christened by his present successors the Economic Advisory Council. If the records could lie open it would now be seen what effective work Lord Balfour had done at the extreme end of his long life for the advancement of science and for the enrichment of its powers to help the country. In no branch of science has this been more evident than in the biological sciences, and especially in those medical sciences serving the well-being of human life and industry in tropical parts of the Empire.

To Lord Balfour himself we can hardly apply more fitting words now than those which he used himself of Lord Salisbury when paying his obituary tribute in the House of Commons: "It is impossible to form a full and fair judgement of the policy of any statesman until his career be run and until the secret documents, by which alone he can be judged, become common property. . . . It is not until the controversies in which we have been engaged have lost all living interest and have become the property of the student in history that our children will be able to judge how great and how beneficent was the part he played in the history of this country." It will be in large part due to his own efforts for education if our children come to see, and more clearly than our own generation has seen, that place which natural knowledge should take in the right guidance of the State, and in proportion as they learn that lesson they will pay tribute to Lord Balfour's life and work.