

A MAN AND HIS WORK

Tribute to Sir James Hight

(Written for "The Listener" by LEICESTER WEBB)

I SUPPOSE that most of us who have been associated with James Hight as students or teachers or university administrators would like to pay a small part of our debt to him, and perhaps pass on our memory of him to later generations, by writing something which would delineate sharply and memorably the nature of the man and his work. None of us is likely to make the attempt, because it is not a matter of sketching the outlines of a personality which impressed itself immediately and strongly on those whom he taught and worked with. From the hundreds of his lectures which I must have attended, no vivid phrase or novel exposition has remained in my mind. From the history of the University and of Canterbury College during his life as teacher and administrator it is not easy to pick out decisions and developments and attribute them to him. One thinks of James Hight not as a man who said or wrote or did particular things, but rather as a pervasive and beneficent influence in the lives of certain institutions and several generations of students. If you knew him long enough, you became aware gradually that something massive and substantial, as it were a new centre of reference, had come into your scheme of things. As doubts and difficulties arose you found yourself going to him to seek counsel and in the hope of being able to borrow a little of his wisdom and a little of his mild serenity of outlook.

One reason for the attractive force of Hight's personality within the University is obvious. He is a wise and learned man—and there have not been many New Zealanders, even inside the University, to whom this latter adjective can justly be applied. Out of the University of New Zealand have come some spectacularly good scientists, linguists and economists; but with few exceptions they have been specialists, and the present tendency is more and more towards expertise in a narrow field. Hight, it is true, arrived ultimately at history as his narrower field, but he arrived there by a long road which led him through the classics and through the literatures of two or three modern languages besides English. He would have been as much at home in the society of the Oxford or Cambridge senior common room as he is at Canterbury College (for that matter his name is not unknown in such precincts); nor would he have been an alien in the Sorbonne or in the Heidelberg that was. He belonged, in short, to the world-wide fellowship of those who have been to the springs of Western culture.

This last point is worth meditating upon. Laments over New Zealand's "cultural isolation" have become almost a theme song for those few literary periodicals whose mission it is to water the

SIR JAMES HIGHT, Professor of History at Canterbury University College, and formerly Rector of the College and Pro-Chancellor of the University of New Zealand, retired last month. We publish this tribute by one of his old students.

ragged shoots of a national culture. James Hight was brought up on a North Canterbury mixed farm; his educational opportunities were those of any New Zealander of his generation without wealth or influence to help him; and until he was past middle age he did not leave the shores of his native country. For a brief period he taught in



SIR JAMES HIGHT
A portrait by the late A. Elizabeth Kelly

Auckland, for a still briefer as an exchange professor in the University of Leeds; during almost the whole of the rest of his life his physical horizon has been bounded by the North Canterbury foothills and the sea. Mentally, his horizon is the horizon of Western civilisation.

The example of James Hight suggests that, as a nation, we are less than honest when we blame the seas between for a certain sickliness in our literature and art, and a certain aridity in our university life. There are, no doubt, cultural disadvantages in being a long way from the historic centres of the Western world; they are not such disadvantages as need set limits to our expansion in the world of the spirit.

It is significant that the University of New Zealand, when James Hight entered it as a student, was a very different institution from what it is now. It was a

narrower institution in the sense that, being governed and staffed by men in the English academic tradition, it regarded the humanities as the foundation of university education. This was particularly so at Canterbury College, where Hight enrolled as a student in the heroic days when Macmillan Brown took to himself almost the whole field of human knowledge. Domination by the humanities may have been carried too far; there is a story still current at Canterbury College that Macmillan Brown was only prevented from ploughing Ruth-erford by the intercession of his colleagues. But although by escaping the domination of the humanities the University of New Zealand has developed many specialisations which have contributed notably to the country's welfare, the eclipse of the humanities has in the last decade gone so far that it has begun to impoverish our cultural life by weakening our hold on the true values of our civilisation. James Hight made his contribution as a teacher and as a writer in the field of the social sciences, and to this extent was one of those who helped to widen out the University's curriculum. Under him the history school became the core of Canterbury College; and out of the history school grew, nurtured by him, economics as a separate subject. (One sometimes forgets, indeed, that he walks more surely in the shaky terrain of economics and sociology than some who call these subjects their own.)

In my time as a student at Canterbury College we argued endlessly about the supposedly competing claims of classics and modern languages on the one hand and the social sciences on the other; and the abolition of compulsory languages in the B.A. course was a sort of Bastille Day for the social scientists. When I reflect on James Hight's work in developing the social sciences in New Zealand I begin to see that our arguments missed the point, which is that a training in a social science is not in itself an education or any substitute for an education. I don't regret, or even wish to qualify, my youthful belief that it is desperately important for us to make



A cartoon by J. T. Allen drawn in 1936

progress in the social sciences. But it is clearer to me now that the specialist in the social sciences is always in danger of losing balance and direction unless his intellectual background is wider than his specialisation. The mind of the specialist is too often like the ordinary prismatic compass which veers uncertainly under the influence of its immediate environment; James Hight's mind has the steadiness of an oil-bath compass, and the oil-bath in his case is the heritage of Western literature and thought.

Because Hight's life as student and teacher at Canterbury College spans the transition from the Macmillan Brown period of domination by the humanities to a period in which the social sciences are in the ascendancy, and also because he was mainly instrumental in bringing about that transition, his retirement marks off an epoch in the College history, and perhaps in the history of the University as a whole. But it is important to understand that he did more than bring about a transition; in his own intellectual life and in his teaching he reconciled two ideals in university education which have been unnecessarily and unprofitably at war with one another. Education in New Zealand needs that reconciliation.

Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge;

Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?

Information can be taught, a task our Universities do well. And knowledge can be fitfully communicated. But wisdom? How are men taught to be wise? Only by example. The example of a wise man, even if it does not make others wise, at least shows them how to be scrupulous, generous and perhaps humble. It offers a steady beacon to lighten the darkness of ordinary human behaviour. James Hight, as all his students will agree, is a wise man.