

*Charles Norris
Cochrane*

1889-1945

Harold A. Innis

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Charles Norris Cochrane, 1889-1945

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Charles Norris Cochrane was born at Omemee, Ontario, in 1889 and died in 1945 at Toronto. He belonged to the third generation of graduates of the University of Toronto, his father being a physician. He was a graduate in classics in University College in 1911 and after securing his degree at Oxford was appointed to the staff of that college in 1913 under the late W. S. Milner in the Department of Ancient History. He was an officer in the 1st Tank Battalion in the First World War. After returning to the University, he was appointed in 1924 Dean in residence in University College. He served as director of classes for the Toronto Bankers Education Association from 1922 to 1939, and was secretary of the Canadian Historical Association in 1926. During the Second World War he was a member of a commission appointed by the Department of Justice to consider the claims of interned aliens.

His first work included *David Thompson the Explorer* (Toronto, 1924) and Parts II-V of *This Canada of Ours* (Toronto, 1926) written with Mr. W. S. Wallace. His work in ancient history began with a study of Roman political thought but this was interrupted to work out a new approach to Thucydides. The publication of *Thucydides and the Science of History* (London, 1929) marked the beginning of his contributions to the philosophy of history. Possibly influenced by the medical tradition of his family, he traced the influence of Hippocrates on Thucydides and outlined the importance of the latter in discovering the “dynamic or principle of motion in human history . . . in history itself, i.e., in the relationship between the aspirations and ideals of men, on the one hand, and, on the other, the material circumstances upon which their satisfaction depends” (see his review of John H. Finley, Jr., *Thucydides*, Cambridge, 1942, in *Classical Philology*, January, 1944, p. 58). He returned to the study of Roman political thought and published *Christianity and Classical Culture: A Study of Thought and Action from Augustus to Augustine* (Oxford, 1940). In the preface he wrote “it is none of my business as an historian to pronounce upon the ultimate validity of

Christian claims as opposed to those of classicism” (p. vi). His position was elaborated in “The Mind of Edward Gibbon.”, *University of Toronto Quarterly*, vol. XII, nos. 1 and 2; in an unpublished lecture delivered in University College on Carl Lotus Becker; in the unpublished lectures delivered at Yale University in 1945 which included “The Augustinian Prognostic,” “National Necessity and Human Freedom,” “The Imperfection of Politics,” and “Personality and History”; and in “Diabolism in Græco Roman Thought,” a paper presented to the Hellenic Society in London and mimeographed in summary.

He chose Becker as an historian on whom to lecture because his work was “impregnated throughout with philosophy.” He rejected the conclusions of Gibbon as to the causes of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire and regarded his work “as an insight of priceless value into the mentality of the eighteenth century, by revealing so lucidly and vividly how that century saw its past.” He “ventured to defy the accepted convention [of dissociating classical and Christian studies] and to attempt a transition from the world of Augustus and Vergil to that of Theodocius and Augustine. . . . I have been impelled to undertake it both because of its intense interest and because of the light it throws on subsequent developments of European culture.” The Christian fathers are brought into line with the Greek and Roman classics (see “The Latin Spirit in Literature,” *University of Toronto Quarterly*, vol. II, No. 3, 315-35). In his study of the interrelations of thought and action he stoutly affirmed the significance of thought in the problems, past and present, of Graeco-Roman civilization. Thucydides reflected a fundamental belief in the existence of natural law and the possibility of science. Augustine avoided the classical dilemma which attributed human imperfection either to opinion or to nature by emphasizing personality and will. Rome and Greece had suffered from the vice of false doctrine, namely perfection through political action. Christian realism meant an emancipation from the moral and intellectual difficulties of classical antiquity. To Augustine man was “the efficient cause of his own activity.” History became the history of wills or personalities. Secular pride, i.e., the original sin, became the key to the weakness of classical civilization and the doctrine of original sin became a fatal weapon against the pretensions of emperors. Gibbon neglected the role of personality and its unpredictability.

In a sense his contribution represents the flowering of a long tradition of classical scholarship in University College and in Oxford. His roots were in Ontario soil. His robust independence of word and phrase reflected his background. His concern not only with the role of thought in Graeco-Roman civilization but also with its reflection in the work of the great historians of

that civilization enabled him to make the first major Canadian contribution to the intellectual history of the West. It is significant that his publishers suggested that the name University College should be omitted from the title page of *Christianity and Classical Culture* as having possible depressing effects on prestige and sales. Perhaps Canadians will eventually realize that they have scholars in their midst and will insist on encouraging them and recognizing them before they are compelled to secure recognition outside Canada. Cochrane's work will go far to show the possibilities of a university tradition in Canada and to suggest its importance. Goldwin Smith reported Dean Gassford as saying "Cultivate classical literature, which not only enables you to look down with contempt on those who are less learned than yourself but often leads to places of considerable emolument in this world." This view will no longer be possible.

The significance of the volume for social scientists is in its philosophical approach. In classical civilization reason asserted its supremacy and in doing so betrayed its insecure position with disastrous results. "Such perversions of intellectual activity," Augustine called "*fantastica fornicatio*, the prostitution of the mind to its own fancies." Classicism was indicted "in the fact that it acknowledged the claim of science to be architectonic and therefore, entitled to legislate with sovereign authority for the guidance of human life" (see his review of *Augustus* by John Buchan, *University of Toronto Quarterly*, vol. VII, no. 2, Jan., 1938, pp. 261-7). History written from the philosophical background of classicism differs sharply from history written from the Augustinian point of view with its emphasis on will, personality, and unpredictability. Paradoxically classicism assumed the unpredictable in the incalculable, in fortune or in chance, whereas Augustine admitted the possibility of understanding the unpredictable by emphasizing personality or individuality. A society dominated by Augustine will produce a fundamentally different type of historian, who approaches his problem from the standpoint of change and progress, from classicism with its emphasis on cyclical change and the tendency to equilibrium. The doctrine of original sin became the basis of a philosophy of progress in contrast with the philosophy of order of classicism.

The sweep of the Platonic state in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the spread of science has been followed by the horrors of the Platonic state. The social scientist is asked to check his course and to indicate his role in western civilization. His answer must stand the test of the philosophic approach of Cochrane. It was inevitable that his work like Gibbon's should be "an insight of priceless value into the mentality" of the twentieth century and that he should "emphasize the truth of the precept, *let the dead past bury*

the dead” (see his comment on Moses Hadas’ “Federalism in Antiquity” *Approaches to World Peace, Fourth Symposium*, New York, 1944, p. 51). To the social scientist, he might have said, your cycles, your theories of civilization, and your “creative” politics are the new *fantastica fornicatio*. He has traced the problem of weaving the major strands of Graeco-Roman civilization, namely order and progress. In some comments on communism, Cochrane compared the role of original sin with that of the dictatorship of the proletariat and atheism as weapons against Caesarism in the ancient world and in Russia. His contribution to the philosophy of history is shown in the development of general concepts at the basis of progress and the adjustment of order to meet the demands of change, in the study of toxins and antitoxins of the body politic. Men will fail “unless they prove themselves capable of energy and initiative, of intellectual and moral daring, comparable with that displayed by the great names of the past. In this, rather than in any futile attempt to keep alive the lessons of ancient wisdom, lies their true affiliation with the spirit of antiquity.”

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *Charles Norris Cochrane, 1889-1945* by Harold A. Innis]