

CHARLES EARLE RAVEN

D.D., HON. D.SC., F.B.A.

(1885-1964)

Regius Professor of Divinity in the University of Cambridge, 1932-1950;
Master of Christ's College, 1939-1950; Vice-Chancellor of the
University of Cambridge, 1947-1949

CANON CHARLES RAVEN was a Foundation Member of the Society. He came into prominence in the History of Science as the author of *John Ray, Naturalist: His Life and Works* and *English Naturalists from Neckam to Ray*, published by the Cambridge University Press in 1942 and 1947. Both these works were outstanding contributions to our subject and could only have been produced by a scholar, a humanist and a naturalist; Raven was all of these.

Charles Earle Raven was born on 4 July 1885, son of John E. Raven, barrister-at-law. At Uppingham he was well grounded in the classics and was able to follow his bent for natural history, interesting himself in bird watching, identifying plants and collecting moths and butterflies. He gained an open classical scholarship at Caius College, Cambridge, took a first class in Part I of the Classical Tripos in 1907, followed by a first class in Part II of the Theological Tripos in 1908. After a brief interlude as assistant secretary for higher education under the Liverpool City Council, he became Dean and Lecturer in Theology at Emmanuel College, Cambridge, an office which involved taking Holy Orders and was the beginning of a distinguished academic career. In 1914, at the outbreak of war, he went to Tonbridge as an assistant master, and in 1917 volunteered for war service as a Chaplain. At the end of the war he returned to Emmanuel, in 1920 became Rector of Bletchingley, and in 1924 was made a Canon of Liverpool. He returned to Cambridge in 1932 to take up the Regius Professorship of Divinity.

It was my privilege to come to know Canon Raven personally and very closely during the Second World War, when working officially as a civilian my headquarters were in Cambridge. Having been invited to become Hon. Secretary of the Cambridge University History of Science Lectures Committee I often had occasion to visit Canon Raven at Christ's College, where he was Master. I met him first when he was on the sick list with cerebral thrombosis, but fortunately four months' rest mostly in bed brought about complete recovery. He was just finishing his book on John Ray, and what impressed me was his tremendous enthusiasm for his subject, which I am convinced was an important factor in the cure. When he was quite well I invited him on behalf of the Committee to become a member and to take part in a course of lectures on the History of Science to which he made a distinguished contribution.

As a speaker he was spellbinding, but this was not achieved without intense effort. He told me that in early days, for some twenty-four hours before speaking in public—in the pulpit, in the lecture theatre or on the platform—he was terribly nervous, almost to the point of nausea, and only by the severest self-discipline had he been able to overcome this ‘weakness’ as he called it. Naturally he was in great demand as a speaker and his list of notable public lectures is unusually long and impressive. But it is as a thinker that Raven concerns the student of the history and the philosophy of science. His integrity of mind and intellectual modesty are best revealed by his own words. My quotation is taken from the preface to *English Naturalists from Neckam to Ray*, mentioned above.

‘That a history of man’s attitude to nature and especially to the flora and fauna of his environment would be important for the student of social development and of religious and speculative thought, has been frequently emphasized—and not least by one of the most eminent of recent philosophical theologians, Dr. John Oman. But it has been something of a surprise to discover how very obviously this attitude reflected and by its alteration influenced the momentous changes taking place in the period under review. Such surprise is no doubt due partly to my own ignorance; if I had known these centuries better I might have realized the significance of their naturalists. But, indeed, the subject has never (to my knowledge) been fully treated either by the historians of science, who almost without exception pay little heed to botany and zoology, or by the students of literature and philosophy. That it richly repays investigation will I hope be evident even from so limited a survey as I have here undertaken.’

Raven’s contributions to the history of science are by no means confined to the two books mentioned, although in these he obviously enjoyed the work of observing, analysing, identifying, recording and interpreting—using the methods his subjects used, following their footsteps in the field, often himself testing their original observations, handling many, if not most, of the books they read and wrote, and bringing to bear on the whole undertaking the critical apparatus of the professional historian coupled with the sympathetic understanding of the humane scholar. His comments on the views and reasoning of other authors are interesting, often arresting, sometimes astringent, always punctilious. A man of shining moral courage he loathed shoddiness of any sort and could be withering when he found it, but was always a fair-minded and generous critic of sound work, incapable of bearing malice or harbouring a grievance. His book entitled *Science, Religion and the Future* (Cambridge University Press, 1943) contains much reasoned material and could well be a critical model for the would-be historian and philosopher of science.

Raven greeted the foundation of the Council for the Promotion of Field Studies (now the Field Studies Council) in 1943 with enthusiastic delight. To receive from a professional scholar and an amateur naturalist of his intellectual calibre such a measure of thrilling encouragement

braced one to meet effectively the shoals of administrative difficulties lying in the wake of World War II. He was President of the Field Studies Council from 1953 to 1957 and of the Botanical Society of the British Isles from 1951 to 1955.

F. H. C. BUTLER