

JOHN VENN—1834—1923.

JOHN VENN, M.A., Sc.D., F.R.S., F.S.A., logician and antiquary was born August 4, 1834, and died April 4, 1923.

No one could have had a more uncompromisingly clerical ancestry and upbringing than had Venn. His five or six immediate ancestors, whose lives he gave in his notable book "The Annals of a Clerical Family," were vicars or rectors occupying positions of importance in the Church.

His own upbringing was in the narrowest atmosphere of Low Church Evangelicalism, and, owing to this, he came to the University with so slight an acquaintance with books of any kind that he may be said to have begun there his knowledge of literature.

Venn entered Gonville and Caius College from Islington Proprietary School in 1853, and was sixth wrangler in the Mathematical Tripos of 1857—a time when a man's position in the list depended greatly upon the coach with whom he had read. He was elected Fellow of his college in the same year, took Priest's Orders in 1859, and was for a year curate at Mortlake.

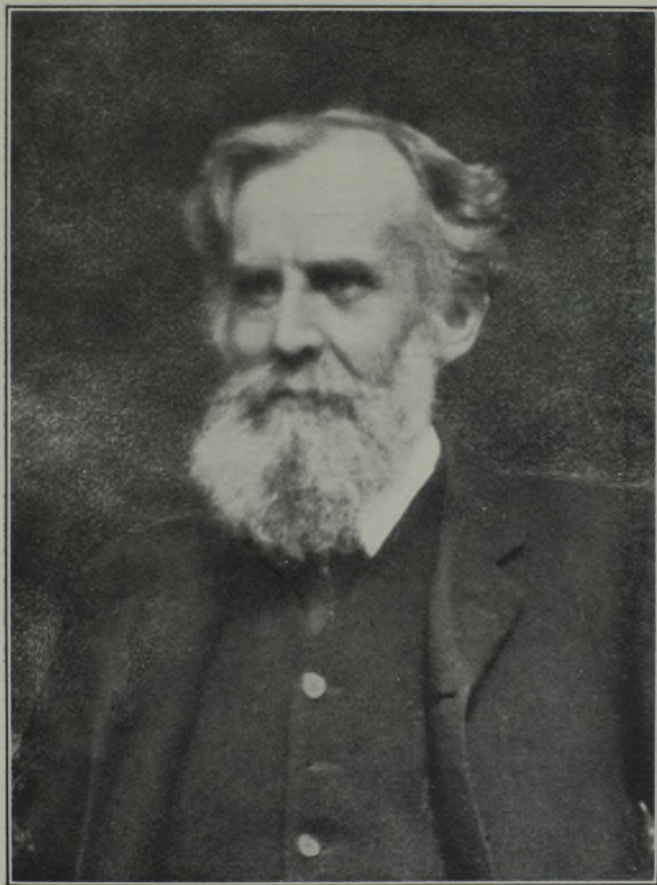
He was drawn to the study of logic by reading Mills, and in 1862, when he returned to Cambridge as Lecturer in Moral Science to his college, he became, with Sidgwick and Marshall, one of the principal lecturers on the subjects of the Moral Sciences Tripos. At this period Venn took a few private pupils, amongst them being Lord Balfour, Sir Charles Dilke, Professor Maitland, and Doughty, the traveller in Arabia.

In 1869 Venn delivered the Hulsean Lectures, his subject being the "Characteristics of Belief." In 1870 he relinquished Holy Orders. In 1903 he was elected President of his college and held that office until his death.

Venn's intellectual life falls into two distinct periods; in the first he was a student of logic, in the second an antiquary. He achieved distinction in both. The close of the first period is marked roughly by his election into our Society in 1883. The second period ended only with his death, for he was actively engaged on his great biographical history of the University of Cambridge to within a few days of that event.

His "Logic of Chance" was published in 1866, and later editions appeared in 1876 and 1888. It was, according to Dr. Keynes, "strikingly original and considerably influenced the development of the theory of statistics." "Probably his most enduring work on logic"—I quote again from Dr. Keynes—was the "Symbolic Logic," which appeared in 1881, with a second edition in 1894. "A great part of his treatment must always remain of value."

"The Principles of Empirical or Inductive Logic" appeared in 1889, in a second edition in 1907. "This followed on the general lines of Mills 'Logic,'



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and although it contained independent departures in many directions, it was less original than his other books."

That Venn should have become an antiquary was natural, since he was born in an antiquarian family and reared in traditional memories. His first important study in this direction was in the history of his own college [Caius College (College Histories), 1901], and his second in the history of his own family ("Annals of a Clerical Family," 1904).

In 1886 he published the "Admissions to Gonville and Caius College, 1558-1679," and in 1897 "The Biographical History of Gonville and Caius College, 1349-1897." This great work, possibly the most detailed study of a social organisation ever made, would, if it stood alone, place Venn in the front rank of antiquaries, but it led to an even greater work, namely, a similar study of the University. This is the "Alumni Cantabrigienses from earliest times to 1900," (1922-). In this immense work he was assisted by his son, and of it a brother antiquary writes:—"It is difficult for anyone who has not seen the work in its making to realise the immense amount of research involved in this great undertaking. Take, for instance, one section of the inquiries—a large one—that of the Clergy. In most dioceses Dr. Venn ransacked the Bishop's Registers and Act Books, the volumes of 'Subscriptions for Orders,' the Episcopal Visitations, the Book of Institutions and of First Fruits at the Record Office. From such details let the reader judge his methods of inquiry and research!"

All this research bore fruit other than the detailed records set out in the "Alumna," for Venn was keenly alive to the human and not infrequently humorous sides of his study. The result was not a few asides, always most interesting, on manners and people, which were published for the most part in the Caius College Magazine.

Venn had mechanical gifts out of the common, and was something of a craftsman. Later in his long life he turned this ability to curious use by devising and constructing a machine for bowling, the efficiency of which was demonstrated at Fenner's on the occasion of the visit of the Australian Team to Cambridge in 1909, when the redoubtable Victor Trumper was clean bowled by it four times!

A good field botanist, a bit of a mountaineer, a craftsman, and with a gift of dry humour, Venn lived his long life to the full. Age treated him kindly—an active, spare man, he retained his sprightly walk and his interest in work and play until the end.

A personal note, to which the present writer is greatly indebted, was contributed by the late H. T. Francis to the Caius College Magazine.

W. B. H.
