THE ERUDITION OF JOHN CALVIN

I

CALVIN did not owe his position in the world of theology to any superficial brilliance of attainment. A contemporary Roman Catholic scholar pronounced him the most learned man of his generation.[1] The profundity and comprehensiveness of his erudition certainly does not obtrude itself, for he was the last man to make a display of it. So much was it a part of himself that he used it with the same unconscious and natural ease as he wielded his mother-tongue. He never made use of his knowledge more than was necessary for the purpose he had in view or for the proving of his point. To win a scholar's reputation was not his ambition. All his acquisitions were consecrated to the one master-aim of establishing what he believed to be the truth of God. Only the student who has followed to some extent in the highways and byways of his research and study recognises and appreciates the depth and solidity of the learning on which the plain and simple structure of his work was raised.

It may be said with confidence that, if he was excelled in this or that department of learning, he was indisputably the master-mind of his age in respect of the encyclopaedic range of the subjects with which he could deal as an expert. He moved with equal ease and claimed equal authority in exegesis, dogmatics, and polemics, as well as in the more restricted spheres of ecclesiastical organisation and civic legislation. One feels that one is in contact with a mind which insists on thoroughness and accuracy in whatever department of study it invades. Of course, given the capacity, it was easier then to master the whole realm of knowledge with its limited extent, especially in certain directions which now demand specialism. No man is now capable of so mastering the literature of all the provinces of learning covered by Calvin's purview as to constitute himself an authority in all alike. Nevertheless it required an intellect

[1] Calvin's teacher and friend, Bucer, however, regarded Peter Martyr as his equal in dialectic and perhaps his superior in learning, largely because of his unrivalled acquaintance with the scholastic rabbis of the Middle Ages. Calvin himself calls Martyr "le merveille de l'Italie".

of prodigious capacity to compass even what was included in the knowledge of that day, and to have the whole of it at instant command. The Greek and Latin Fathers comprise a library by themselves which afford study for a lifetime to the ordinary student. Comparatively recent as the printing press was, its output of literature, mainly theological, was already of no small dimensions, and Calvin seems to have kept himself abreast of it. In the second edition of the *Institutes* (1539) he quotes one, Themistius, whose work was only published in 1534.[1] Few have lived who have combined such powers as enabled Calvin to do what he did when a Roman Catholic priest with much adroit and plausible display of authorities made a dangerous attack upon the Reformed position ; without preparation he overwhelmed the adversary there and then with a reply in which he poured forth a torrent of quotations from patristic and secular literature. Calvin had not only read widely ; he had thought out the bearings, the significance, and the organic relationship of what he had read.[2] It was all pigeon-holed in his mind ready for use when required, and in all the controversial writings he published, many of them composed in such haste as to allow him no time for complete verification of reference and quotation, he was never once caught tripping.

II

From what he permitted himself to say on various occasions, a false impression might easily be received regarding his attitude to what is labelled as secular or profane knowledge. Calvin neither deprecated its acquisition nor depreciated its value. He had none of the spirit of the Caliph who is said to have destroyed the library of Alexandria, justifying his vandalism on the ground that, if what it taught was in the Koran, then it was not needed ; and if it was not in the Koran, it was likely to be mischievous. Calvin began his career as a humanist and he never ceased to be one. He never repudiated the classical studies of his early years, consigning their acquisitions to an un-

[1] A copy of Sir Thomas More's *Lucubrationes* (Utopiae, etc.), published at Basle in 1563, was recently sold, on the fly-leaf of which was the inscription "LIBER JOHANS CALVIN". Calvin died in 1564.

[2] It was to Calvin that Sleidan applied for information regarding the Vaudois with the view of incorporating it in a history of religion and the State under the Emperor Charles V, which won an unrivalled celebrity, passing through eighty-four editions, besides being translated into German, French, Dutch, Italian, English and Scandinavian (Doumergue, II, 381 ff.).

visited lumber-room of his brain. Cicero joined with Augustine, Plautus and Terence, alongside the reverend and sainted Fathers, each making his own contribution in the service of Calvin's purposes.[1] If the classics did not edify the soul, they sharpened and polished the wit and enabled it to do its work better. "What is more noble than man's reason," he asks,[2] "in which man excels other animals? How richly deserving of honour are the liberal sciences which polish man so as to give him the dignity of true humanity! Besides this, what distinguished and choice fruits they produce! Who would not extol with the highest commendations civil prudence, that is the science of laws (not to speak of other things) by which governments, principalities and kingdoms are maintained? Paul does not expressly condemn either man's natural perspicacity or wisdom acquired from practice or experience, or cultivation of mind attained from learning; he declares that all this is of no avail for acquiring spiritual wisdom." In these last words Calvin sets us at the point of view from which he regards all non-Christian literature. The knowledge of it by itself is useless for the main end of life. "Man, with all his acuteness, is as stupid for obtaining of himself a knowledge of the mysteries of God, as an ass is unqualified for understanding musical harmonies"; and "a knowledge of all the sciences is mere smoke where the heavenly science of Christ is wanting". Indeed, such knowledge may be used to the degradation and profanation of the soul. "Without Christ", he said, "sciences in every department are vain, and the man who knows not God is vain, though he should be conversant with every branch of learning. Nay more, we may affirm this too, with truth, that these choice gifts of God, expertness of mind, acuteness of judgment, liberal sciences, and acquaintance with languages, are in a manner profaned in every instance in which they fall to the lot of wicked men."

Calvin's first literary venture provides impressive illustration of the extent and thoroughness of his humanist studies. Acting on the counsel of Erasmus given in his edition of Seneca, he edited that Stoic philosopher's treatise *De Clementia*, adding

[1] On Titus i. 12, Calvin infers from Paul's quotation of Epimenides "that those are superstitious who never venture to quote anything from profane authors. Since all truth is from God, if anything has been aptly and truly said even by impious men, it ought not to be rejected, because it proceeded from God."

[2] Comm. 1 Cor. i. 20.

voluminous commentary and notes. It had no theological significance (there are only three citations from the Bible and these of a merely incidental sort) ; it was purely a production of a classical scholar enthusiastically expounding a favourite work. In the course of it, he quotes from fifty-six Latin and twenty-two Greek classical authors, referring to thirty-three works of Cicero (including his letters), all the works of Horace, Virgil and Ovid, five plays of Terence, the epics of Homer, half a dozen of the principal works of Aristotle, and four of Plato and of Plutarch. That he had already roved beyond the classics is proved by his quotations from seven Fathers of the Church. Besides all this he calls in the aid of many humanists of his own age, some of them obscure individuals like Columella and Rutilius Lupus. All this by a young man of twenty-three ! As Doumergue says, " the sureness of the erudition equals its abundance, and its minuteness equals its immensity ".

The tradition that he read through Cicero once a year seems to have no solid foundation, but it at least supplies additional evidence of his well-known fondness for that author. Certainly he did not get rid of his ancient classics when the interests of humanist scholarship gave place to the aims of religious and theological leadership.[1] The frequent allusion to passages in them (and he takes a very evident delight in quoting them) can scarcely be credited to his amazing memory ; in any case, what he treasured in his memory he would not expel from his bookshelves. He found much in these works to illuminate the strangeness and crookedness of human nature, and he did not scruple to draw from them many proofs in support of the views he took of the facts and needs of life. Here were witnesses without theological bias ; and were not the thoughts and perplexities of these thinkers of old confessions that constituted them human documents of high value for the Christian philosopher ? The eyes of a Plato might truly report observations whose real significance his mind might totally misconceive.

III

But of course it was to the study of Christian authors that Calvin primarily gave himself when once launched upon his chosen work. Repudiating the Roman Catholic Church, he

[1] " Calvin like Zwingli was a humanist before he became a Reformer, and what he was at first, he never ceased to be. His mind was the mind of Erasmus, though his faith

did not repudiate the Fathers who contributed to its thought when its stream was still relatively pure. He fully appreciated the worth of their writings upon Scripture and doctrine, moulders, as many of them were, of the theological thought which shaped the creeds accepted by him as the standards for the Christian Church of all time. To them he gave a wide and thorough study, the fruits of which are continually in evidence. There are perhaps few of the patristic classics to which he does not at one time or other make reference. He moves amongst them with the ease of mastery and an enviable readiness of apposite quotation. Comparatively early in his career he publicly evinced such erudition that Melanchthon, himself a scholar of front rank, gave him the title of " The Theologian ". No Roman Catholic champion sought or dared to cross swords with him twice in public debate. He handled their own chosen weapons with a skill with which not even their greatest experts could compete. It was fortunate that Protestantism, in the controversies that had so much to do with shaping public opinion and winning public sympathies, commanded the aid of one who did not have his equal in combined knowledge and the ability to use it. He was always ready to meet his opponents on their own ground. In one paragraph of the Preface to the *Institutes* in which he deals with a question whose settlement is referred to the Fathers, he quotes successively Aetius, Ambrosius, Spiridion, Augustine, Epiphanius, Chrysostom, Pope Calixtus, Pope Gelasius, Cyprian, and Paphnutius.[1] To the average student of Church history, doubtless, not a few of these names are unfamiliar if not unknown. But Calvin did not, for all that, regard them as negligible ; he knew that muskets have their value as well as siege guns, and he did not fail to equip himself to meet every emergency and to drive home every attack.

In regard to his knowledge of Greek and Latin, suffice it to say that in spite of depreciative assertions, an impartial student of his commentaries cannot but admit that he was more than adequately equipped to deal authoritatively with the originals of both Old Testament and New Testament. One who could fearlessly join issue with such a scholar as Erasmus would need

and conscience were those of Luther. He had the clear reason and the open vision of the one, but the religious fire and passion of the other. In Calvin the historical sense of the humanist and the spiritual passion of the Reformer were united " (Fairbairn in the *Cambridge Modern History*).

[1] Cf. also *Instit.* IV, esp. Chapter 7.

to have had ample philological knowledge to support his views. It takes intimacy with a language, that inside knowledge of it which is gained only through penetrating deeply into its structure and organism, to be able to discuss the essential significance of doubtful words as Calvin so frequently does and to found on them doctrinal conclusions.[1] He made it his business, also, to consult the codices within his reach in cases of doubtful texts.[2] All this abundantly proves the ample scholarly equipment and exact scholarly habits which he brought to his responsible work.

IV

To these items of his equipment must be added his legal knowledge, an element which played no small or unimportant part in the varied work he did. After the repudiation of his curacy, he was destined by his father for a legal career, in which doubtless he would have shone brilliantly only to disappear from the firmament of fame. He gives abundant evidence of having used to excellent purpose the time spent in the necessary qualifying studies at the University of Paris. Nor did he abandon his interest in them or cease to improve himself therein after exchanging the wig for the gown. Some providential prophetic impulse led him to take other courses of lectures in the University of Orleans. The result was that, like the great builders and writers of the Western Church,[3] he became as accomplished a lawyer as he was a divine, and brought the penetrating acumen and judicial balance of a mind trained to the law's subtleties both to the review of the Mosaic Code, the organisation of the infant Church, and the reconstruction of the economy of the Genevan State. The tasks and responsibilities assigned to him by the Genevan Councils evidence the confidence reposed in his legal capacity and the acknowledgment of his possession of qualifications owned in the same

[1] Cf. his discussion of Eph. iii. 4 in Comm., where he joins issue with Erasmus over the syntax of the Greek.

[2] Cf. Comm. Phil. iii. 15, 16.

[3] "The great men who built up the Western Church were almost all trained Roman lawyers. Tertullian, Cyprian, Augustine, Gregory the Great were all men whose early training had been that of a Roman lawyer,—a training which moulded and shaped all their thinking, whether theological or ecclesiastical. . . . They had the lawyer's craving for exact definitions. They had the lawyer's idea that the primary duty laid upon them was to enforce obedience to authority, whether that authority expressed itself in external institutions or in the precise definitions of the correct ways of thinking about spiritual truths. No branch of Western Christendom has been able to free itself from the spell cast upon it by these Roman lawyers of the early centuries of the Christian Church" (Lindsay, *History of the Reformation*, i, p. 168).

degree by no one of the regular legal fraternity. What a committee of jurisconsults failed to do (the compilation of a new legal Code for the city), Calvin was entrusted with and successfully accomplished single-handed within a fortnight. He added to his legal fitness the originative faculty which exalts the lawyer into the statesman. It was to him, too, that the Councils appealed when delicate political negotiations were in progress, as in those with Berne in connection with the interference of that city's Bailiff with the decisions of Genevan courts.[1] The letters challenging their legal rights and vindicating those of Geneva are in the handwriting of the Reformer. Matters of such moment would not have been entrusted to one towards whom no little jealousy was manifested, unless the Government had been fully convinced that the negotiations were in safe hands.

V

It may be said with truth of Calvin as it has been said of Augustine, that he wrote more than another can well read. His output indeed well deserves Dominie Sampson's favourite epithet, "Prodigious!" What survives in print does not by any means comprise the whole of his literary production. In addition to what has survived there is evidence that whole works from his restless pen were lost during their transmission to friends for review. Add to these the sheaves of letters destroyed or lost by their recipients, which must have amounted to at least as many as those which have been preserved. From the time he took up his pen to write the *Institutes* till he laid it down eight hours before he breathed his last, it was seldom idle. He produced with that unfailing, uniform rapidity which reminds one of the uncanny swiftness with which Sir Walter Scott covered sheet after sheet. Sometimes his speed of composition amounted to the superhuman ; witness the elaborate answer to Cardinal Sadolet (extending to forty-four quarto pages in the English translation) thrown off in one day, and the pamphlet against Westphal in three. To his unfailing flow of thought and easy command of appropriate language, he added a memory which seemed to forget nothing and had the power of instantly summoning up all its resources. Minute details came at his call as promptly as important facts. He could marshal dates, pertinent

[1] When the Bernese seized upon several villages of the Genevese and neither side would accept the decision of Basle, which was called in as arbitrator, Calvin was invited by both sides to arbitrate.

examples, illustrative passages in Church history, corroborative quotations from the Fathers, useful contributions from the classics, after an effortless fashion which provokes wonder and excites envy. The contemplation of his work and the manner of it suggests comparison with the miracle of the baby whom the poet admiringly asks, How did you come to be you? to be answered, God thought of me and so I grew! Almost it was as if someone else thought out Calvin's effusions and used him for their setting down.

But swiftly as he must have written, to judge from the difficulty of reading his MSS., he could not have indited the total products of his indefatigable brain, had he not had the aid of secretaries or amanuenses. That post was no sinecure in relation to such a man as he. With such impetuosity and rush did he often dictate that they could scarcely keep up with him. One of them, Charles de Joinvilliers, to whom Calvin latterly dictated his letters, tells us that in taking them down he was often overcome with admiration at the singular eloquence that he poured forth.

With all allowances for his enormous and constant readiness, no man could have produced such a literary output without an industry which allowed few moments for recreation, much less idleness. Like Talleyrand, Napoleon, and other great men, he had the advantage of being able to do with little sleep, often not more than four hours. Working late at night, he was up at dawn and at his desk with no more delay than was occasioned by the devotions which ever prefaced the day's work. Doubtless he might have often said what he once did in a letter to Farel, "Farewell, I have often already fallen asleep, but cannot leave off writing".[1] If we may believe Du Raimond, the Roman Catholic biographer, when he was composing the *Institutes* he frequently passed whole nights without sleeping, as he did whole days without eating. If Musculus may justly compare him to a bow always strung, it was not that he chose to be in that condition. As his position grew more commanding and his influence farther reaching, burdens and tasks were thrust upon him which he could not evade or refuse. Whatever ambition he may have had, it was equalled by his peculiarly strong and lively sense of responsibility. Ever he lived as in his great Taskmaster's eye. The sudden coming of the Lord was no mere figure of speech

[1] Letter, Feb. 26, 1540.

to him. When his infirmities were latterly sore upon him and he suffered headaches so severe that he often lost consciousness, he was urged to give up at least dictating and writing. " Would you that the Lord should find me idle when He comes ? " was the answer of a man, more relentless to himself than to any other. During his last illness he translated his commentary on the last four books of Moses, revised the translation of that on the first book, composed his exposition of the book of Joshua, and revised the greater part of his translations of the New Testament and annotations thereon. He ceased his work, Beza tells us, only when his voice failed him, eight hours before his death. There was no rust on Calvin's mind or soul when he passed hence, nor were they worn out ; rather they were bright and efficient as when first he plunged into the press of things from which he never emerged. He left no work half-done, nothing incomplete; death did not surprise him with loose ends in his fingers. He gave his last comprehensive instructions and counsels as though he were a prince going on a journey who would leave all his affairs in perfect order that they might run smoothly until his return.

So driven was he by the demands made upon him that he seldom had leisure to revise his writings before they went to the press. That witnessed not only to the resources of his fully furnished mind, but also to the clearness with which he held his regulative principles and normative doctrines, and the nimbleness and immediacy with which he could relate or apply them to every fresh subject of thought or study. Beza speaks of " his marvellous dexterity of mind to seize upon the knotty point in the argument and ability to develop it ". He was greatly aided in the saving of time, which was so precious to him, by a quality of mind which is highly uncommon and might be dangerous if it were not possessed in great perfection. The work of composition was subject to constant interruption—Calvin reserved no sacrosanct forenoons to himself—but he could take up an interrupted writing and continue it just as though there had been no break, without going back on what he had written or dictated. He could do the same on resuming in the morning at the point at which he had left off the night before. He never began a work which he failed to carry through and complete because of getting bogged by the way—except once. It is on record that his treatise on *Offences* is the only one which

he had to begin several times and found himself frequently unable to proceed with for lack of the appropriate mood. Only four years after its inception did he gain the right disposition for its composition, a consoling proof that even he was not altogether exempt from the exasperating conditions under which more ordinary mortals carry on their literary labours.

A. MITCHELL HUNTER.

New College,
Edinburgh.