

Edward Bagnall Poulton



*Science and
the Great War*

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WHEN I was honoured by the invitation to deliver the Romanes Lecture I made up my mind to speak on the relationship between newer and older conceptions of evolution. But this and every other subject which might be chosen by a naturalist in ordinary years seemed to shrink away under the great and overshadowing menace of the war. In this struggle science has played, and will continue to play, a tremendous part. It seemed appropriate, therefore, that a scientific man should take as his subject the bearing of science upon the great war, all the more so when he is convinced that we must employ science a great deal more than we have done in order to achieve success.

I do not propose to say anything of the causes which led up to the war, or to dwell upon the state of preparation in which we found ourselves at its outbreak. I cannot share the strong views of a friend who feels 'that any civic spirit which we have expended during the past twenty years has been devoted to the maintenance in authority of one or other of two sets of scoundrels who have been content to let the people of this country live in a fool's paradise'.

Our diplomacy and the state of our preparations equally show that we intended no aggressive war, while, as for defence, we were ready to do everything that had been put down as our reasonable share. No one of the allied nations had realized or could realize the deadly meaning of the organized effort and preparation carried on by Germany for a generation. No one supposed that we should be required to hold the seas and also to raise an army on the continental scale. What we set out to do was done with extraordinary speed and success. We held the seas and dispatched an expeditionary force of moderate size, which forthwith proved itself to be of the very highest efficiency.

My object is to consider some of the steps we took or failed to take when the real nature of the German menace became evident. And I shall attempt to show that the failures which have occurred are nearly all due to the national neglect of science and the excessive predominance in Parliament, and especially in the Government, of the spirit that is most antagonistic to science—the spirit of the advocate.

It would not be right to speak on the national neglect of science without acknowledging with gratitude the patriotic