

WILLIAM GRAHAM SUMNER

A. G. KELLER
Yale University

As one contemplates the close of a long, full, and many-sided life of usefulness, like that of William Graham Sumner, he feels powerless to reduce his crowding impressions to order. To attain the perspective of such a life demands much reflection and study; for no living man has accompanied Sumner through the several phases of his intellectual evolution, so as to be able to afford an intimate survey of the paths he traveled and the labors he wrought. Hence in any brief preliminary notice of his passing one can scarcely do more than to take some phase of his career and seek to give an idea of its beginning and its salient features. In a sense this task seems easier from the point of view of the sociologist than from that of the economist or political scientist, for it would seem at first sight that the sociologist needs consider only the last period of Professor Sumner's life and work. But, looked at more understandingly, the career of the man we mourn was that of a sociologist throughout. His was not the type of mind that could remain contented within the bonds of any special subdivision of the social sciences. He felt too keenly the complexity of societal life, and the multiplicity of factors entering into its evolution to stop in his studies short of the effort to develop a "science of society." And so, in a sense, the endeavor to treat of Sumner the sociologist is the attempt to deal with the general case.

This cannot be done in this time and place, but it is possible in a few words to indicate in outline some of the aspects of Sumner's career most interesting to sociologists. As a young man he was captivated by Herbert Spencer and felt that here at last was an intellectual emancipation and a satisfaction not before experienced. Filled with the zeal of the truth-disseminator, he prevailed at length against conservative opposition and

began to teach social science or sociology of the Spencerian type, becoming the pioneer in America of sociological instruction. But the demands upon him of his large and enthusiastic classes in political economy, and the exigencies of tariff-controversy, kept Professor Sumner from the studies he was coming to prefer, and it was only after a severe breakdown in the early nineties that he definitely retired from the teaching of political economy and gave himself over entirely to the science of society. There ensued those years of quiet, incessant study, part of the results of which are to be seen in the *Folkways*; it was this period of retirement from the eye of the public and even of scholars which caused some to think that Sumner's career closed in the middle nineties and others to regret his withdrawal from political economy. The publication of the *Folkways* somewhat startled the adherents of these views. I do not need to speak of this volume to sociologists, but it is clear that it disposed of both theories concerning Sumner's latter years; the awe-inspiring bibliography revealed to the scholar long hours of herculean toil, and the freshness and strength and originality of the theoretic part showed the old-time vigorous mind in characteristic action. And it must be understood that during these latter years since the breakdown before referred to, Sumner had never been a thoroughly well man; many is the time he has moaned to me about having to "go to bed with the chickens," and the like.

In the preface to the *Folkways* a certain amount of biographical matter occurs—this I may, perhaps, somewhat amplify. Sumner wrote along on his projected *Science of Society* for several years till he came to the topic of the "Mores." Here he grounded for some time, finally working out what he called "a chapter of two hundred thousand words." But by this time he had convinced himself that the idea of the folkways was entirely fundamental to his conception of any science of society; after telling me from time to time of his perplexities, he said one day: "That chapter is too long for a chapter; guess I'll make a book of it." Such was the genesis of the *Folkways*.

Professor Sumner felt that this would be his last book; the labors of composition expended upon it tired him excessively.

Parts of it were written over seven times, or even more. Respecting the general treatise he used to say somewhat despondingly that its completion meant less to him because it was only one of five or six books which he was ready to write if he had the strength. But the sense of emancipation which he felt when the *Folkways* was finally completed was so great, and the reaction from the toil spent upon it was so strong that he scarcely touched the partially written general treatise again. Several topics originally designed to go into the *Folkways* were treated in the *Forum*, in the *Yale Review*, and in the presidential address recently printed in this *Journal*; but the man was tired out with his lifetime of incredible mental toil, and could not arouse himself to do any more. So he "settled down to loaf." His last months before his collapse in New York were spent in a very restful and happy way; he was deeply touched by the truly magnificent ovation attending his induction as a Yale doctor of laws at the Commencement of June, 1909, and by the stream of grateful and affectionate letters that flowed to him all the following summer. He joked on that Commencement occasion, to the delight of all concerned, about his "walking the plank" and "joining Carnegie's kindergarten," and after his retirement used to speak in most enthusiastic terms about the joys of the *emeritus*, instancing late breakfasts as one of the chief of these.

I have wandered from the subject of Sumner as a sociologist; but most of us know of his views along that line, and a full treatment of his place in the science cannot now be written. Briefly, he was of the school of Spencer; his great initial inspiration came from the *Study of Sociology*. With Spencer he reckoned Lippert as an influence of the highest significance in his sociological thinking; and at one time he added Ratzenhofer to these two, but later, I think, was inclined to rate him less highly, and to believe that Spencer and Lippert were the dominant influences upon his own work. Sumner hated metaphysics and everything connected with it, and took little stock in psychology; he always stated, rather truculently at times, that his work rested upon ethnography and history. He never took to

“practical sociology” at all, and in the effort to distinguish his conception of sociology from the several divagations which the term has come to cover in the years since Spencer’s beginnings he was accustomed for some time to use the term “societology.” It was his idea that more investigation and less theorizing should be done in sociology; this view comes out in his answer to the questionnaire propounded several months ago by this *Journal*. In that same connection he remarked, in his usual effort to avoid what he called “tampering with other people’s business,” that he did not know how sociology at Yale would be taught after his retirement. He really knew as well as I do that we shall continue to teach here what the boys call “Sumnerology.” For to us who have worked side by side with him, there is mingled with the sorrow for the warm-hearted and considerate mentor and friend the conviction that we have in Sumner’s system of the science of society the work of a master-mind of the first order.