FOOTE GEORGE WILLIAM

ARROWS OF FREETHOUGHT

George Foote

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Foote G.

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Содержание

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PREFACE

I republish in this little volume a few of my numerous articles that have appeared in the *Secularist*, the *Liberal*, the *National Reformer*, and the *Freethinker*, during the last five or six years. I have included nothing (I hope) of merely ephemeral interest. Every article in this collection was at least written carefully, and with an eye to more than the exigencies of the moment. In disentombing them from the cemeteries of periodical literature, where so many of their companions lie buried, I trust I have not allowed parental love to outrun discretion.

I have not thought it necessary to indicate, in each case, the journal in which the reprinted articles were first published.

Should anyone object to the freedom of my style, or the asperity of my criticism, I would ask him to remember that Christianity still persecutes to the full extent of its power, and that a Creed which answers argument with prosecution cannot expect tender treatment in return; and I would also ask him, in the words of Ruskin, "to consider how much less harm is done in the world by ungraceful boldness than by untimely fear."

London, November 15th, 1882.

RELIGION AND PROGRESS

(November, 1882.)

The Archbishop of York is peculiarly qualified to speak on religion and progress. His form of thanksgiving to the God of Battles for our "victory" in Egypt marks him as a man of extraordinary intellect and character, such as common people may admire without hoping to emulate; while his position, in Archbishop Tait's necessitated absence from the scene, makes him the active head of the English Church. Let us listen to the great man.

Archbishop Thomson recently addressed "a working-men's meeting" in the Drill Hall, Sheffield. It was densely crowded by six or seven thousand people, and this fact was cited by the Archbishop as a proof that the working classes of England have not yet lost interest in the Christian faith. But we should very much like to know how it was ascertained that all, or even the major portion, of the vast audience were working-men. It is easy enough to give any meeting a name. We often hear of a Conservative Working-men's banquet, with tickets at something like a guinea each, a duke at the top of the table and a row' of lords down each side. And our experience leads us to believe that nearly all religious meetings of "working-men" are attended chiefly by the lower middle classes who go regularly to church or chapel every Sunday of their lives.

Even, however, if the whole six or seven thousand were working-men, the fact would prove little; for Sheffield contains a population of three hundred thousand, and it was not difficult for the clergy who thronged the platform to get up a big "ticket" meeting, at which a popular Archbishop was the principal speaker, and the eloquence was all to be had for nothing.

The Archbishop's lecture, or sermon, or whatever it was, contained nothing new, nor was any old idea presented in a new light. It was simply a summary of the vulgar declamations against the "carnal mind" with which we are all so familiar. Progress, said his Grace, was of two kinds, intellectual and moral. Of the former sort we had plenty, but of the latter not so much. He repudiated the notion that moral progress would naturally keep pace with intellectual progress, and he denied that righteousness could ever prevail without "some sanction from above." This was the sum and substance of his discourse, and we have no doubt that our readers have heard the same thing, in various forms of language, some hundreds of times.

Like the rest of his tribe, Archbishop Thomson went abroad for all his frightful warnings, and especially to France. He severely condemned the French "pride in progress," which led to the Revolution. His Grace has certainly a most original conception of history. Ordinary historians tell us that the Revolution was caused by hunger, bad government, and the rigidity of old institutions that could not accommodate themselves to new ideas. But whatever were the causes, look at the results. Compare the state of France before the Revolution with its condition now. The despotic monarchy is gone; the luxurious and privileged aristocracy has disappeared; and the incredibly wealthy and tyrannous Church is reduced to humbleness and poverty. But the starving masses have become the most prosperous on the face of the earth; the ignorant multitudes are well educated; the platform and the press are free; a career is open to every citizen; science, art, and literature have made immense strides; and although Paris, like every great capital, may still, as Mr. Arnold says, lack morality, there is no such flagrant vileness within her walls as the corruptions of the *ancien régime*; no such impudent affronting of the decencies of life as made the *parc aux cerfs* for ever infamous, and his Christian Majesty, Louis the Fifteenth, a worthy compeer of Tiberius; no such shameless wickedness as made the orgies of the Duke of Orleans and the Abbé Dubois match the worst saturnalia of Nero.

His Grace felt obliged to advert also to the Paris Commune, about which his information seems to be equal to his knowledge of the Revolution. He has the ignorance or audacity to declare that the Commune "destroyed a city and ravaged the land;" when, as a matter of fact, the struggle was

absolutely confined to Paris, and the few buildings injured were in the line of fire. This worthy prelate thinks destruction of buildings a crime on the part of Communalists, but a virtue on the part of a Christian power; and while denouncing the partial wreck of Paris, he blesses the wholesale ruin of Alexandria.

His Grace ventures also to call the leading men of the Commune "drunken dissolute villains." The beaten party is always wicked, and perhaps Dr. Thomson will remember that Jesus Christ himself was accused of consorting with publicans and sinners. Drunken dissolute villains do not risk their lives for an idea. The men of the Commune may have been mistaken, but their motives were lofty; and Millière, falling dead on the Church steps before the Versailles bullets, with the cry of *Vive l'Humanité* on his lips, was as noble a hero as any crucified Galilean who questioned why his God had forsaken him.

That intellectual and moral progress naturally go together, the Archbishop calls "an absurd and insane doctrine," and he couples with these epithets the honored names of Buckle and Spencer. Now it will be well to have a clear understanding on this point. Are intellectual causes dominant or subordinate? Even so intensely religious a man as Lamennais unhesitatingly answers that they are dominant. He affirms, in his *Du Passé et de l'Avenir du, Peuple*, that "intellectual development has produced all other developments," and he adds: —

"It is represented that evil, as it appears in history, springs entirely from the passions. This is quite false. The passions disturb the existing order, whatever it may be, but they do not constitute it. They have not that power. It is the necessary result of the received ideas and beliefs. Thus the passions show themselves the same in all epochs, and yet, in different epochs, the established order changes, and sometimes fundamentally."

The truth is that the great moral conceptions are securely established, and the only possible improvement in them must come from the increased fineness and subtlety of our mental powers.

Civilisation and progress are, according to Archbishop Thomson, nothing but "cobwebs and terms." He besought the working men of Sheffield not to go for information to a big book written in some garret in London. His Grace, who lives in a palace at other people's expense, has a very natural dislike of any man of genius who may live in a garret at his own. What has the place in which a book is written to do with its value? "Don Quixote" and the "Pilgrim's Progress" were written in gaol; and for all Archbishop Thomson knows to the contrary every gospel and epistle of the New Testament may have been written in an attic or a cellar.

The Archbishop seems to hate the very idea of Progress. What has it done, he asks, to abolish drunkenness and gambling? To which we reply by asking what Christianity has done. Those vices are unmistakably here, and on the face of it any objection they may furnish against Progress must equally apply to Christianity. Nay more; for Christianity has had an unlimited opportunity to reform the world, while Progress has been hindered at every turn by the insolent usurpation of its rival.

Dr. Thomson admits that he cannot find a text in the Bible against gambling, and assuredly he cannot find one in favor of teetotalism. On the contrary he will find plenty of texts which recommend the "wine that cheereth the heart of God and man;" and he knows that his master, Jesus Christ, once played the part of an amateur publican at a marriage feast, and turned a large quantity of water into wine in order to keep the spree going when it had once begun.

We repeat that all the Archbishop's objections to Progress, based on the moral defects of men, apply with tenfold force against Religion, which has practically had the whole field to itself. And we assert that he is grievously mistaken if he imagines that supernatural beliefs can ennoble knaves or give wisdom to fools. When he talks about "Christ's blood shed to purchase our souls," and specifies the first message of his creed as "Come and be forgiven," he is appealing to our basest motives, and turning the temple into a huckster's shop. Let him and all his tribe listen to these words of Ruskin's: —

"Your honesty is *not* to be based either on religion or policy. Both your religion and policy must be based on *it*. Your honesty must be based, as the sun is, in vacant heaven; poised, as the lights in

the firmament, which have rule over the day and over the night If you ask why you are to be honest – you are, in the question itself, dishonored 'Because you are a man,' is the only answer; and therefore I said in a former letter that to make your children *capable of honesty* is the beginning of education. Make them men first and religious men afterwards, and all will be sound; but a knave's religion is always the rottenest thing about him. —*Time and Tide*, p. 37."

These are the words of a real spiritual teacher. Archbishop Thomson will never get within a million miles of their meaning; nor will anybody be deceived, by the unctuous "Oh that" with which he concludes his discourse, like a mental rolling of the whites of his eyes.

As we approach the end of his address, we begin to understand his Grace's hatred of Progress. He complains that "intellectual progress never makes a man conceive eternal hopes, never makes a man conceive that he has an eternal friend in heaven, even the Son of God." Quite true. Intellectual progress tends to bound our desires within the scope of their realisation, and to dissipate the fictions of theology. It is therefore inimical to all professional soul-savers, who chatter about another world with no understanding of this; and especially to the lofty teachers of religion who luxuriate in palaces, and fling jibes and sneers at the toiling soldiers of progress who face hunger, thirst and death. These rich disciples of the poor Nazarene are horrified when the scorn is retorted on them and their creed; and Archbishop Thomson expresses his "disgust" at our ridiculing his Bible and endeavoring to bring his "convictions" into "contempt." It is, he says, "an offence against the first principles of mutual sympathy and consideration." Yet this angry complainant describes other people's convictions as "absurd and insane." All the sympathy and consideration is to be on one side! The less said about either the better. There can be no treaty or truce in a war of principles, and the soldiers of Progress will neither take quarter nor give it. Christianity must defend itself. It may try to kill us with the poisoned arrows of persecution; but what defence can it make against the rifleshot of common-sense, or how stand against the shattering artillery of science? Every such battle is decided in its commencement, for every religion begins to succumb the very moment it is attacked.

A DEFENCE OF THOMAS PAINE

(February, 1879.)

Fling mud enough and some of it will stick. This noble maxim has been the favorite of traducers in all ages and climes. They know that the object of their malignity cannot always be on the alert to cleanse himself from the filth they fling, especially if cast behind his back; they know that lies, and especially slanderous lies, are hard to overtake, and when caught harder to strangle; and therefore they feel confident as to the ultimate fate of their victim if they can only persevere long enough in their vile policy of defamation. For human nature being more prone to believe evil than good of others, it generally happens that the original traducers are at length joined by a host of kindred spirits almost as eager and venomous as themselves, "the long-neck'd geese of the world, who are ever hissing dispraise because their natures are little;" while a multitude of others, not so much malignant as foolish and given to scandal, lend their cowardly assistance, and help to vilify characters far beyond the reach of their emulation. And should such characters be those of men who champion unpopular causes, there is no lie too black for belief concerning them, no accusation of secret theft or hateful meanness or loathsome lust, that will not readily gain credence. Mr. Tennyson speaks of —

> That fierce light which beats upon a throne,
> And blackens every blot

but what is that to the far fiercer and keener light which beats upon the lives of the great heroes of progress? With all due deference to the Poet Laureate, we conceive that kings and their kind have usually extended to them a charity which covers a multitude of their sins. The late king of Italy, for instance, was said to have had "the language of a guardroom, the manners of a trooper, and the morals of a he-goat," yet at his death how tenderly his faults were dealt with by the loyal press, and how strongly were all his merits brought into relief. Our own royal Sardanapalus, George the Fourth, although Leigh Hunt had the courage to describe him aright and went to the gaol for so doing, was styled by Society "the first gentleman in Europe." Yet Mazzini, Vittor Emmanuel's great contemporary, whose aims were high and noble as his life was pure, got little else than abuse from this same loyal press; and the Society which adored George the Fourth charged Shelley himself with unspeakable vices equalled only by the native turpitude of his soul.

Perhaps no man has suffered more from calumny than Thomas Paine. During his lifetime, indeed, his traducers scarcely ever dared to vent their malice in public, doubtless through fear of receiving a castigation from his vigorous and trenchant pen. But after his death they rioted in safety, and gave free play to the ingenuity of their malevolence. Gradually their libels became current; thousands of people who knew almost nothing of his life and less of his writings were persuaded that Thomas Paine, "the Infidel," was a monster of iniquity, in comparison with whom Judas appeared a saint, and the Devil himself nearly white; and this estimate finally became a tradition, which the editors of illustrated religious papers and the writers of fraudulent "Death-Bed Scenes" did their best to perpetuate. In such hands the labor of posthumous vilification might have remained without greatly troubling those who feel an interest in Thomas Paine's honor through gratitude for his work. The lowest scavengers of literature, who purvey religious offal to the dregs of orthodoxy, were better employed thus than in a reverse way, since their praise is so very much more dishonorable and appalling than their blame. But when other literary workmen of loftier repute descend to the level of these, and help them in their villainous task, it becomes advisable that some one who honors the memory of the man thus aspersed should interpose, and attempt that vindication which he can no longer make for himself.

In reviewing Mr. Edward Smith's "Life of Cobbett," our principal literary paper, the Athenæum, in its number for January 11th, went out of its way to defame Paine's character. This is what it said: —

"A more despicable man than Tom Paine cannot easily be found among the ready writers of the eighteenth century. He sold himself to the highest bidder, and he could be bought at a very low price. He wrote well; sometimes he wrote as pointedly as Junius or Cobbett. Neither excelled him in coining telling and mischievous phrases; neither surpassed him in popularity-hunting. He had the art, which was almost equal to genius, of giving happy titles to his productions. When he denounced the British Government in the name of 'Common Sense' he found willing readers in the rebellious American colonists, and a rich reward from their grateful representatives. When he wrote on behalf of the 'Rights of Man,' and in furtherance of the 'Age of Reason,' he convinced thousands by his title-pages who were incapable of perceiving the inconclusiveness of his arguments. His speculations have long since gone the way of all shams; and his charlatanism as a writer was not redeemed by his character as a man. Nothing could be worse than his private life; he was addicted to the most degrading of vices. He was no hypocrite, however, and he cannot be charged with showing that regard for appearances which constitutes the homage paid by vice to virtue. Such a man was well qualified for earning notoriety by insulting Washington. Only a thorough-paced rascal could have had the assurance to charge Washington with being unprincipled and unpatriotic. Certainly Mr. Smith has either much to learn, or else he has forgotten much, otherwise he could not venture to suggest the erection of a monument 'recording the wisdom and political virtues of Thomas Paine.'"

Now we have in this tirade all the old charges, with a new one which the critic has either furnished himself or derived from an obscure source – namely, that Paine "sold himself to the highest bidder." Let us examine the last charge first. The critic curiously contradicts himself. Paine, he admits, could "sometimes write as pointedly as Junius or Cobbett," whose works sold enormously, and he had the art of devising happy titles for his productions; yet, although he sold himself to the highest bidder, he could be bought at a very low price! The fact is, Paine was never bought at all. His was not a hireling pen. Whatever he wrote he put his name to, and he never parted with the copyright of any of his works, lest the Government or some friend of despotism should procure their suppression. He also published his writings at a ridiculously low price, so low indeed that he lost by them instead of gaining. Of his "Common Sense," that fine pamphlet which stirred the American colonists to battle against their oppressors, not less than a hundred thousand copies were sold; yet he found himself finally indebted to his printer £29 12s. 1d. Fifteen years later the English Government tried through the publisher to get the copyright of the "Rights of Man;" but though a large sum was offered, Paine refused on principle to let it pass out of his own hands. The first part of this work was published at a price which precluded any chance of profit; the publication of the second part caused him to be tried and condemned for treason, the penalty of the law being escaped only by flight. All publication of his works, whether political or religious, was afterwards illegal. Thousands of copies were circulated surreptitiously, or openly by men like Richard Carlile, who spent nine years in prison for his sale of prohibited books. But clearly Paine could derive no profit from this traffic in his works, for he never set foot in England again. Thomas Paine wrote in order to spread his political and religious views, and for no other purpose. He was not a professional author, nor a professional critic, and never needed payment for his literary work. And assuredly he got none. Let the *Athenæum* critic inform the world to whom Paine sold himself, or who ever paid him a penny for his writings. Until he does so we shall believe that the author of "Common Sense," the "Rights of Man," and the "Age of Reason," was honest in saying: "In a great affair, where the good of mankind is at stake, I love to work for nothing; and so fully am I under the influence of this principle, that I should lose the spirit, the pride, and the pleasure of it, were I conscious that I looked for reward."

Popularity-hunting, to use the critic's graceless phrase, was Paine's next fault; but as, according to the same authority, he was guilty in this respect only in the same sense as Junius was, the burden of his iniquity cannot be very great.

Addiction to the most degrading of vices, is a charge difficult to confute until we know specifically what vice is meant. Paine has been accused of drunkenness; but by whom? Not by his intimate acquaintances, who would have detected his guilt, but by his enemies who were never in his society, and therefore could know nothing of his habits. Cheetham, who first disseminated this accusation, was a notorious libeller, and was more than once compelled to make a public apology for his lies; but he was a shameless creature, and actually in his "Life" of Paine resuscitated and amplified falsehoods for which he had tendered abject apologies while his victim was alive. Even, however, if Paine had yielded to the seductions of strong drink, he should be judged by the custom of his own age, and not that of ours.

Mr. Leslie Stephen does not rail against Boswell for his drinking powers; Burns is not outlawed for his devotion to John Barlycorn; Byron and Sheridan are not beyond pardon because they often went drunk to bed; and some of the greatest statesmen of last century and this, including Pitt and Fox, are not considered the basest of men because they exercised that right which Major O'Gorman claims for all Irishmen – "to drink as much as they can carry." But no such plea is necessary, for Paine was not addicted to drink, but remarkably abstemious. Mr. Fellows, with whom he lived for more than six months, said that he never saw him the worse for drink. Dr. Manley said, "while I attended him he never was inebriated." Colonel Burr said, "he was decidedly temperate." And even Mr. Jarvis, whom Cheetham cited as his authority for charging Paine with drunkenness, authorised Mr. Vale, of New York, editor of the *Beacon*, to say that *Cheetham lied*. Amongst the public men who knew Paine personally were Burke, Home Tooke, Priestley, Lord Edward Fitzgerald, Dr. Moore, Jefferson, Washington, Volney and Condorcet: but none of these ever hinted at his love of drink. The charge of drunkeness is a posthumous libel, circulated by a man who had publicly quarrelled with Paine, who had been obliged to apologise for former aspersions, and who after Paine's death was prosecuted and *condemned* for libelling a lady whom he had accused of undue familiarity with the principal object of his malice.

Finding the charge of drunkenness unequivocally rebutted, Paine's traducers advance that of licentiousness. But this is equally unsuccessful. The authority relied on is still Cheetham, who in turn borrowed from a no less disreputable source. A man named Carver had quarrelled with Paine over money matters; in fact, he had been obliged with a loan which he forgot to pay, and like all base natures he showed his gratitude to his benefactor, when no more favors could be expected, by hating and maligning him. A scurrilous letter written by this fellow fell into the hands of Cheetham, who elaborated it in his "Life." It broadly hinted that Madame Bonneville, the by no means youthful wife of a Paris bookseller who had sheltered Paine when he was threatened with danger in that city, was his paramour; for no other reason than that he had in turn sheltered her when she repaired with her children to America, after her home had been broken up by Buonaparte's persecution of her husband. This lady prosecuted Cheetham for libel, and a jury of American citizens gave her a verdict and damages.

Here the matter might rest, but we are inclined to urge another consideration. No one of his many enemies ever accused Paine of licentiousness in his virile manhood; and can we believe that he began a career of licentiousness in his old age, when, besides the infirmities natural to his time of life, he suffered dreadful tortures from an internal abscess brought on by his confinement in the reeking dungeons of the Luxembourg, which made life a terror and death a boon? Only lunatics or worse would credit such a preposterous story.

The *Athenoum* critic alleges that Paine insulted Washington, and was therefore a "thorough-paced rascal." But he did nothing of the kind. He very properly remonstrated with Washington for coolly allowing him to rot in a French dungeon for no crime except that he was a foreigner, when

a word from the President of the United States, of which he was a citizen, would have effected his release. Washington was aware of Paine's miserable plight, yet he forgot the obligations of friendship; and notwithstanding frequent letters from Munro, the American ambassador at Paris, he supinely suffered the man he had once delighted to honor to languish in wretchedness, filth, and disease. George Washington did much for American Independence, but Thomas Paine did perhaps more, for his writings animated the oppressed Colonists with an enthusiasm for liberty without which the respectable generalship of Washington might have been exerted in vain. The first President of the United States was, as Carlyle grimly says, "no immeasurable man," and we conceive that Paine had earned the right to criticise even him and his policy.

Every person is of course free to hold what opinion he pleases of Paine's writings. The *Athenoum* critic thinks they have "gone the way of all shams." He is wrong in fact, for they circulate very extensively still. And he may also be wrong in his literary judgment. William Hazlitt, whose opinion on any subject connected with literature is at least as valuable as an *Athenoum* critic's, ranked Paine very high as a political writer, and affirmed of his "Rights of Man" that it was "a powerful and explicit reply to Burke." But Hazlitt had read Paine, which we suspect many glib critics of to-day have not; for we well remember how puzzled some of them were to explain whence Shelley took the motto "We pity the Plumage, but Forget the Dying Bird" prefixed to his Address to the People on the death of the Princess Charlotte. It was taken, as they should have known, from one of the finest passages of the "Rights of Man." Critics, it is well known, sometimes write as Artemus Ward proposed to lecture on science, "with an imagination untrammeled by the least knowledge of the subject."

Let us close this vindication of Paine by citing the estimate of him formed by Walt Whitman, an authority not to be sneered at now even by *Athenoum* critics. In 1877 the Liberal League of Philadelphia celebrated the 140th birthday of Thomas Paine, and a large audience was gathered by the announcement that Whitman would speak. The great poet, according to the *Index* report, after telling how he had become intimate with some of Paine's friends thirty-five years before, went on to say: —

"I dare not say how much of what our Union is owning and enjoying to-day, its independence, its ardent belief in, and substantial practice of, Radical human rights, and the severance of its Government from all ecclesiastical and superstitious dominion – I dare not say how much of all this is owing to Thomas Paine; but I am inclined to think a good portion of it decidedly is. Of the foul and foolish fictions yet told about the circumstances of his decease, the absolute fact is that, as he lived a good life after its kind, he died calmly, philosophically, as became him. He served the embryo Union with the most precious service, a service that every man, woman, and child in the thirty-eight States is to some extent receiving the benefit of to-day, and I for one here cheerfully and reverently throw one pebble on the cairn of his memory."

We are content to let the reader decide between Whitman and the *Athenoum* critic in their respective estimates of him who wrote, and as we think acted up to it – "All the world is my country, and to do good my religion."

THE GOSPEL OF FREETHOUGHT

(August, 1882.)

Christians are perpetually crying that we destroy and never build up. Nothing could be more false, for all negation has a positive side, and we cannot deny error without affirming truth. But even if it were true, it would not lessen the value of our work. You must clear the ground before you can build, and plough before you sow. Splendor gives no strength to an edifice whose foundations are treacherous, nor can a harvest be reaped from fields unprepared for the seed.

Freethought is, in this respect, like a skilful physician, whose function it is to expel disease and leave the patient sound and well. No sick man claims that the doctor shall supply him with something in place of his malady. It is enough that the enemy of his health is driven out. He is then in a position to act for himself. He has legs to walk with, a brain to devise, and hands to execute his will. What more does he need? What more can he ask without declaring himself a weakling or a fool? So it is with superstition, the deadliest disease of the mind. Free-thought casts it out, with its blindness and its terrors, and leaves the mind clear and free. All nature is then before us to study and enjoy. Truth shines on us with celestial light, Goodness smiles on our best endeavors, and Beauty thrills our senses and kindles our imagination with the subtle magic of her charms.

What a boon it is to think freely, to let the intellect dart out in quest of truth at every point of the compass, to feel the delight of the chase and the gladness of capture! What a noble privilege to pour treasures of knowledge into the crucible of the brain, and separate gold from the dross!

The Freethinker takes nothing on trust, if he can help it; he dissects, analyses, and proves everything. Does this make him a barren sceptic? Not so. What he discards he knows to be worthless, and he also knows the value of what he prizes. If one sweet vision turns out a mirage, how does it lessen our enjoyment at the true oasis, or shake our certitude of water and shade under the palm trees by the well?

The masses of men do not think freely. They scarcely think at all out of their round of business. They are trained not to think. From the cradle to the grave orthodoxy has them in its clutches. Their religion is settled by priests, and their political and social institutions by custom. They look askance at the man who dares to question what is established; not reflecting that all orthodoxies were once heterodox, that without innovation there could never have been any progress, and that if inquisitive fellows had not gone prying about in forbidden quarters ages ago, the world would still be peopled by savages dressed in nakedness, war-paint, and feathers. The mental stultification which begins in youth reaches ossification as men grow older. Lack of thought ends in incapacity to think.

Real Freethought is impossible without education. The mind cannot operate without means or construct without materials. Theology opposes education: Freethought supports it. The poor as well as the rich should share in its blessings. Education is a social capital which should be supplied to all. It enriches and expands. It not only furnishes the mind, but strengthens its faculties. Knowledge is power. A race of giants could not level the Alps; but ordinary men, equipped with science, bore through their base, and made easy channels for the intercourse of divided nations.

Growth comes with use, and power with exercise. Education makes both possible. It puts the means of salvation at the service of all, and, prevents the faculties from moving about *in vacuo*, and finally standing still from sheer hopelessness. The educated man has a whole magazine of appliances at his command, and his intellect is trained in using them, while the uneducated man has nothing but his strength, and his training is limited to its use.

Freethought demands education for all. It claims a mental inheritance for every child born into the world. Superstition demands ignorance, stupidity, and degradation. Wherever the schoolmaster is

busy, Freethought prospers; where he is not found, superstition reigns supreme and levels the people in the dust.

Free speech and Freethought go together. If one is hampered the other languishes. What is the use of thinking if I may not express my thought? We claim equal liberty for all. The priest shall say what he believes and so shall the sceptic. No law shall protect the one and disfranchise the other. If any man disapproves what I say, he need not hear me a second time. What more does he require? Let him listen to what he likes, and leave others to do the same. Let us have justice and fair play all round.

Freethought is not only useful but laudable. It involves labor and trouble. Ours is not a gospel for those who love the soft pillow of faith. The Freethinker does not let his ship rot away in harbor; he spreads his canvas and sails the seas of thought. What though tempests beat and billows roar? He is undaunted, and leaves the avoidance of danger to the sluggard and the slave. He will not pay their price for ease and safety. Away he sails with Vigilance at the prow and Wisdom at the helm. He not only traverses the ocean highways, but skirts unmapped coasts and ventures on uncharted seas. He gathers spoils in every zone, and returns with a rich freight that compensates for all hazards. Some day or other, you say, he will be shipwrecked and lost. Perhaps. All things end somehow. But if he goes down he will die like a man and not like a coward, and have for his requiem the psalm of the tempest and the anthem of the waves.

Doubt is the beginning of wisdom. It means caution, independence, honesty and veracity. Faith means negligence, serfdom, insincerity and deception. The man who never doubts never thinks. He is like a straw in the wind or a waif on the sea. He is one of the helpless, docile, unquestioning millions, who keep the world in a state of stagnation, and serve as a fulcrum for the lever of despotism. The stupidity of the people, says Whitman, is always inviting the insolence of power.

Buckle has well said that scepticism is "the necessary antecedent of all progress." Without it we should still be groping in the night of the Dark Ages. The very foundations of modern science and philosophy were laid on ground which was wrested from the Church, and every stone was cemented with the blood of martyrs. As the edifice arose the sharpshooters of faith attacked the builders at every point, and they still continue their old practice, although their missiles can hardly reach the towering heights where their enemies are now at work.

Astronomy was opposed by the Church because it unsettled old notions of the earth being the centre of the universe, and the sun, moon, and stars mere lights stuck in the solid firmament, and worked to and fro like sliding panels. Did not the Bible say that General Joshua commanded the sun to stand still, and how could this have happened unless it moved round the earth? And was not the earth certainly flat, as millions of flats believed it to be? The Catholic Inquisition forced Galileo to recant, and Protestant Luther called Copernicus "an old fool."

Chemistry was opposed as an impious prying into the secrets of God. It was put in the same class with sorcery and witchcraft, and punished in the same way. The early chemists were considered as agents of the Devil, and their successors are still regarded as "uncanny" in the more ignorant parts of Christendom. Roger Bacon was persecuted by his brother monks; his testing fire was thought to have come from the pit, and the explosion of his gunpowder was the Devil vanishing in smoke and smell. Even at the end of last century, the clergy-led mob of Birmingham who wrecked Priestley's house and destroyed his apparatus, no doubt felt that there was a close connexion between chemistry and infidelity.

Physiology and Medicine were opposed on similar grounds. We were all fearfully and wonderfully made, and the less the mystery was looked into the better. Disease was sent by God for his own wise ends, and to resist it was as bad as blasphemy. Every discovery and every reform was decried as impious. Men now living can remember how the champions of faith denounced the use of anaesthetics in painful labor as an interference with God's curse on the daughters of Eve.

Geology was opposed because it discredited Moses, as though that famous old Jew had watched the deposit of every stratum of the earth's crust. It was even said that fossils had been put underground

by God to puzzle the wiseacres, and that the Devil had carried shells to the hilltops for the purpose of deluding men to infidelity and perdition. Geologists were anathematised from the pulpits and railed at by tub-thumpers. They were obliged to feel their way and go slowly. Sir Charles Lyell had to keep back his strongest conclusions for at least a quarter of a century, and could not say all he thought until his head was whitened by old age and he looked into the face of Death.

Biology was opposed tooth and nail as the worst of all infidelity. It exposed Genesis and put Moses out of court. It destroyed all special creation, showed man's kinship with other forms of life, reduced Adam and Eve to myths, and exploded the doctrine of the Fall. Darwin was for years treated as Antichrist, and Huxley as the great beast. All that is being changed, thanks to the sceptical spirit. Darwin's corpse is buried in Westminster Abbey, but his ideas are undermining all the churches and crumbling them into dust.

The gospel of Freethought brands persecution as the worst crime against humanity. It stifles the spirit of progress and strangles its pioneers. It eliminates the brave, the adventurous and the aspiring, and leaves only the timid, the sluggish and the grovelling. It removes the lofty and spares the low. It levels all the hills of thought and makes an intellectual flatness. It drenches all the paths of freedom with blood and tears, and makes earth the vestibule of hell.

Persecution is the right arm of priestcraft. The black militia of theology are the sworn foes of Freethought. They represent it as the sin against the Holy Ghost, for which there is no forgiveness in this world or the next. When they speak of the Holy Ghost they mean themselves. Freethought is a crime against *them*. It strips off the mystery that invests their craft, and shows them as they really are, a horde of bandits who levy black mail on honest industry, and preach a despot in heaven in order to main-tain their own tyranny on earth.

The gospel of Freethought would destroy all priesthoods. Every man should be his own priest. If a professional soul-doctor gives you wrong advice and leads you to ruin, he will not be damned for you He will see you so first. We must take all responsibility, and we should also take the power. Instead of putting our thinking out, as we put our washing, let us do it at home. No man can do another's thinking for him. What is thought in the originator is only acquiescence in the man who takes it at secondhand.

If we do our own thinking in religion we shall do it in everything else. We reject authority and act for ourselves. Spiritual and temporal power are brought under the same rule. They must justify themselves or go. The Freethinker is thus a politician and a social reformer. What a Christian *may* be he *must* be. Freethinkers are naturally Radicals. They are almost to a man on the side of justice freedom and progress. The Tories know this, and hence they seek to suppress us by the violence of unjust law. They see that we are a growing danger to every kind of privilege, a menace to all the idle classes who live in luxury on the sweat and labor of others – the devouring drones who live on the working bees.

The gospel of Freethought teaches us to distinguish between the knowable and the unknowable. We cannot fathom the infinite "mystery of the universe" with our finite plummet, nor see aught behind the veil of death. Here is our appointed province:

> "This world which is the world
> Of all of us, and where in the end
> We find our happiness or not at all."

Let us make the best of this world and take our chance of any other. If there is a heaven, we dare say it will hold all honest men. If it will not, those who go elsewhere will at least be in good company.

Our salvation is here and now. It is certain and not contingent. We need not die before we realise it. Ours is a gospel, and the only gospel, for this side of the grave. The promises of theology cannot be made good till after death; ours are all redeemable in this life.

We ask men to acknowledge realities and dismiss fictions. When you have sifted all the learned sermons ever preached, you will find very little good grain. Theology deals with dreams and phantasies, and gives no guidance to practical men. The whole truth of life may be summed up in a few words. Happiness is the only good, suffering the only evil, and selfishness the only sin. And the whole duty of man may be expressed in one sentence, slightly altered from Voltaire – Learn what is true in order to do what is right. If a man can tell you anything about these matters, listen to him; if not, turn a deaf ear, and let him preach to the wind.

The only noble things in this world are great hearts and great brains, There is no virtue in a starveling piety which turns all beauty into ugliness and shrivels up every natural affection. Let the heart beat high with courage and enterprise, and throb with warm passion. Let the brain be an active engine of thought, imagination and will. The gospel of sorrow has had its day, and the time has come for the gospel of gladness. Let us live out our lives to the full, radiating joy on all in our own circle, and diffusing happiness through the grander circle of humanity, until at last we retire from the banquet of life, as others have done before us, and sink in eternal repose.

FREETHOUGHT IN CURRENT LITERATURE

[A Paper read at the Annual Conference of the National Secular Society, in the Co-operative Hall, Bury, June 5th, 1881.]

When I was invited to read a paper at this Conference, I thought that, as editor of the Freethinker, I ought to say something about Freethonght. And as the deliberations of this Conference are mostly on practical matters, it occurred to me that I had better select a subject of less immediate though not of insignificant interest. So I resolved to address you on Freethonght in Current Literature.

I have said that this subject, if not practical and urgent, is assuredly not unimportant. The power of literature over men's minds cannot be estimated too highly. Science is a tremendous force, but its greatest influence is exercised over the human mind when it quits the merely practical task of ministering to our material desires, and seeks to mould our moral and spiritual conceptions of our position and destiny in the universe. To do this it must address us through the medium of literature. Art also is a great force, more especially in countries which have not been subjected, like ours, to the bondage of Puritanism. But art has hitherto appealed to a restricted circle, although that circle is rapidly widening in our own age. The greatest, most permanent, and most universal force is literature. Raphael and Michael Angelo have not influenced the world so profoundly as Shakespeare and Dante; while so many artistic achievements of antiquity are lost or half decayed, its literary masterpieces still survive with undiminished freshness and charm; and while the most eminent works even of contemporary artists are seen only occasionally by a few, the most eminent writings of the world's master minds may and do become a household possession to thousands who move in the humblest spheres of life.

In these cosmopolitan days the Freethinker and Humanitarian naturally looks beyond his own country into the great world, which is at present divided by national and other barriers, but which will in time become the home of one all-embracing family. And I confess that I was strongly tempted to trace the workings of the spirit of Freethought as far as I could in the general literature of Europe. But I soon recognised the necessity of limiting myself to the manifestations of that subtle and pervasive spirit in the current literature of our English tongue.

When the present century commenced Europe was stirred to the utter depths by that great French Revolution which marked a new epoch in the world's history. The revolutionary wave surged across the western world, and passed over England as well as other countries. Some thought the huge eclipse of social order which accompanied it the herald of approaching night, and others thought it the dawn of a new day; but none were indifferent. There was an intense excitement of radical passions and desires, a quickening of all the springs of life. This produced a blossoming of our literature such as had not been witnessed since the great Elizabethan age, and then, as before, Free-thought mixed with the vital sap. Of the long array of post-revolutionary names I select three – Thomas Paine, who represented the keen and restless common-sense of Freethought; William Godwin, who represented its calmer philosophy; and Shelley, who represented its lofty hopes and soaring aspirations. Godwin has almost faded into a name; Paine's great work is nearly done, for a deeper and more scientific scepticism has possessed itself of the field in which he labored; but Shelley has a message for generations yet unborn. He emerges as the supreme figure destined to immortality of fame. All great and noble and beautiful qualities cohere in him, the "poet of poets and purest of men." And he is ours. Byron, with all his splendid energy and terrible scorn, quailed before the supreme problems of life; but Shelley faced them with a courage all the greater because it was unconscious, and casting aside all superstitious dreams and illusory hopes, yearned prophetically towards the Future, when freedom, truth and love shall supersede all other trinities, and realise here on earth that Paradise which theologians have only promised in a world to come.

A Shelley cultus has grown up during recent years, and many of our most gifted writers reverently bow themselves before him. I have only to mention such names as Browning, Swinburne, and Rossetti to show the intellectual rank of his worshippers. Their number increases every year, and it is touching to witness the avidity with which they seize on all new facts relating to him, whether the record of some episode in his life, a reported conversation, or a scrap of writing from his hand.

From the Shelley and Byron period to the fresh revolutionary outburst of 1848 there was a lull in England as well as elsewhere. Several great political reforms were achieved in the interval. A Reform Bill was carried. Catholics and Jews were emancipated, and freedom and cheapness of the press were won by the untameable courage of men like Carlile, Hetherington, Lovett, and Watson. But quietude reigned in the higher spheres of literature. The age was eminently respectable, and it acclaimed the highly respectable Wordsworth as, the prophet divinely inspired to teach men how to rest and be thankful.

But during that interval of apathy and respectability, Science was slowly gathering strength and making conquests, in preparation for the time when she might plant her feet firmly on the solid ground she had won, and challenge Theology to mortal combat. Geology and Biology, in especial, were getting themselves ready to overthrow the fables of Genesis and destroy its doctrines of special creation. And one is glad to admit that they have completely succeeded at last. Professor Huxley declares that he is not acquainted with any man of science or properly instructed person who believes that Adam and Eve were the first parents of mankind, or that we have all descended from the eight persons who superintended that wonderful floating menagerie which survived a universal deluge less than five thousand years ago. And all the clergy can say in reply is that Professor Huxley is not endowed with that theological faculty which enables them to perceive in the language of Scripture a meaning which is quite undiscernible to the eyes of common sense.

Another influence was at work during that interval. Mainly through Carlyle, the treasures of German literature were opened up to English readers. The greatest German writers, from Leasing, Göethe, and Schiller to Fichte, Richter, and Heine, were outrageous Freethinkers compared with our own respectable and orthodox writers, and their influence soon made itself evident in the tolerance and courage with which English authors began to treat the great problems of morality and religion. German scholarship, too, slowly crept among us. Its Biblical criticism showed us the utter inadequacy of evidential works like Paley's, and made us see that the Christian Scriptures would have to be viewed in a very different light and studied in a very different spirit. To estimate the extent of this change, we have only to place Paley's "Evidences of Christianity" beside such a work as "Supernatural Religion." The gulf between these works is enormous; and it is notable that the more scientific and rigorous is the criticism of the New Testament books, the more heterodox are the conclusions reached. Even Scotland has been invaded by this German influence, and it now affords us the laughable spectacle of a number of grave ministers pursuing as a damnable heretic a man like Dr. Robertson Smith, whose only crime is having stated about the Bible nothing new, but what every scholar in Europe knows to be admitted and indisputable. These solemn ministers of the old creed are determined to keep the deluge of what they call "German infidelity" from flooding the valleys and mounting the hillsides of Scotland; but their heresy-hunts are just as efficacious against what they so piously dread as Mrs. Partington's mop against the mighty onrush of Atlantic rollers.

With the revolutionary movement of '48 came a fresh impulse from France. The great evangel of '89 had not perished; it was only in abeyance; and again it burst upon Europe with its words of fire. We all know how the Republic which was then established was soon suppressed in blood by the gang of adventurers presided over by Napoleon the Little. But the day of retribution came, and the empire went the way of all tyrannies. On its ruins the Republic has been established anew, and now it reckons in its service and among its champions the best intellects and the noblest characters in France; while the masses of the people, taught by the bitter lessons of adversity, are also content to enjoy the benefits of ordered liberty and peaceful progress under its benign sway.

Now French progress has always been a question of ideas no less than of material advantage. The great democratic leaders in France have nearly all been avowed Freethinkers. They have separated themselves alike from "the blood on the hands of the king and the lie at the lips of the priest," being perfectly assured that outward freedom in politics is in the long run impossible without inward freedom of thought. The chief statesman in France, M. Gambetta, has publicly declared himself a disciple of Voltaire, and neither at the marriages nor at the funerals of his friends does he ever enter the doors of a church. He stays outside and quietly allows those who desire it to go in and listen to the mumbling of the priest.

My purpose, however, being literary and not political, I must recur to my remark that a fresh impulse came to us from France after the revolution of '48. Lamartine at first exercised considerable influence here, but gradually Victor Hugo's star ascended, and from the moment it reached the zenith until now, he has been accounted the supreme poet of France, and the greatest contemporary evangelist of the ideas of '89. He is a Freethinker as well as a Republican; and it was inevitable that the younger school of writers in England, who acknowledge him as a lofty master, should drink from his inexhaustible spring the living waters of Democracy and Freethought.

French influence on our very recent literature is evident in such works as Mr. John Morley's Studies on Voltaire, Rousseau, Diderot, and Condorcet; Mr. Christie's monumental Life of Etienne Dolet, the Freethought martyr; and Mr. Parton's new Life of Voltaire; all of which demand and will amply requite our attention.

Such are the influences which have conspired to shape the literary activities of the generation in which we live. Now Freethought, like a subtle essence, penetrates everywhere. Every book betrays its presence, and even the periodical literature of our age is affected by it. The Archbishop of Canterbury laments that Christian men cannot introduce the most respectable magazines into their homes without the risk of poisoning the minds of their families with heretical ideas.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.