ADAMS CHARLES FRANCIS

"IMPERIALISM" AND "THE TRACKS OF OUR FOREFATHERS"

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Содержание

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"Imperialism" AND "The Tracks of Our Forefathers"

A PAPER READ BY

CHARLES FRANCIS ADAMS

Before the Lexington, Massachusetts, Historical Society

Tuesday, December 20, 1898

"In a word, many wise men thought it a time wherein those two miserable adjuncts, which Nerva was deified for uniting, *imperium et libertas*, were as well reconciled as is possible."—*Clarendon's History of the Rebellion, B. 1. § 163*

"I put my foot in the tracks of our forefathers, where I can neither wander nor stumble."—*Burke's Speech on Conciliation with America*

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What the feast of the Passover was to the children of Israel, that the days between the nineteenth of December and the fourth of January—the Yuletide—are and will remain to the people of New England. The Passover began "in the first month on the fourteenth day of the month at even," and it lasted one week, "until the one and twentieth day of the month at even." It was the period of the

sacrifice of the Paschal lamb, and the feast of unleavened bread; and of it as a commemoration it is written, "When your children shall say unto you, What mean ye by this service? that ye shall say, It is the sacrifice of the Lord's passover, who passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt, when he smote the Egyptians. Now the sojourning of the children of Israel, who dwelt in Egypt, was four hundred and thirty years." And thus, by their yearly Passover, were the Jewish congregations of old put in mind what farewell they took of the land of Egypt.

So our own earliest records tell us that it was on the morning of Saturday, of what is now the nineteenth of December, that the little exploring party from the *Mayflower*, then lying at her anchor in Provincetown Harbor, after a day and night of much trouble and danger, sorely buffeted by wind and wave in rough New England's December seas, found themselves on an island in Plymouth Bay. It was a mild, "faire sunshining day. And this being the last day of the weeke, they prepared ther to keepe the Sabath. On Munday they sounded the harbor, and marched into the land, and found a place fitt for situation. So they returned to their shipp againe [at Provincetown] with this news. On the twenty-fifth of December they weyed anchor to goe to the place they had discovered, and came within two leagues of it, but were faine to bear up againe; but the twenty-sixth day, the winde came faire, and they arrived safe in this harbor. And after wards tooke better view of the place, and resolved wher to pitch their dwelling; and the fourth day [of January] begane to erecte the first house for commone use to receive them and their goods." Such, in the quaint language of Bradford, is the calendar of New England's Passover; and, beginning on the nineteenth of December, it ends on the fourth of January, covering as nearly as may be the Christmas holyday period.

Is there any better use to which the Passover anniversary can be put than to retrospection? "And when your children shall say unto you, What mean you by this service? ye shall say, It is the sacrifice of the Lord's passover, when he smote the Egyptians, and delivered our houses." So the old story is told again, being thus kept ever green in memory; and, in telling it, the experiences of the past are brought insensibly to bear on the conditions of the present. Thus, once a year, like the Israelites of old, we, as a people, may take our bearings and verify our course, as we plunge on out of the infinite past into the unknowable future. It is a useful practice; and we are here this first evening of our Passover period to observe it.

This, too, is an Historical Society,—that of Lexington, "a name," as, when arraigned before the tribunal of the French Terror, Danton said of his own, "tolerably known in the Revolution;" and I am invited to address you because I am President of the Massachusetts Historical Society, the most venerable organization of the sort in America, perhaps in the world. Thus, to-night, though we shall necessarily have to touch on topics of the day, and topics exciting the liveliest interest and most active discussion, we will in so doing look at them,—not as politicians or as partisans, nor from the commercial or religious side, but solely from the historical point of view. We shall judge of the present in its relations to the past. And, unquestionably, there is great satisfaction to be derived from so doing; the mere effort seems at once to take us into another atmosphere,—an atmosphere as foreign to unctuous cant as it is to what is vulgarly known as "electioneering taffy." This evening we pass away from the noisy and heated turmoil of partisan politics, with its appeals to prejudice, passion, and material interest, into the cool of a quiet academic discussion. It is like going out of some turbulent caucus, or exciting ward-room debate, and finding oneself suddenly confronted by the cold, clear light of the December moon, shining amid the silence of innumerable stars.

Addressing ourselves, therefore, to the subject in hand, the question at once suggests itself,—What year in recent times has been in a large way more noteworthy and impressive, when looked at from the purely historical point of view, than this year of which we are now observing the close? The first Passover of the Israelites ended a drama of more than four centuries' duration, for "the sojourning of the children of Israel, who dwelt in Egypt, was four hundred and thirty years; and at the end of the four hundred and thirty years all the hosts of the Lord went out from the land of Egypt." So the Passover we now celebrate commemorates the closing of another world drama of almost precisely

the same length, and one of deepest significance, as well as unsurpassed historic interest. These world dramas are lengthy affairs; for, while we men are always in a hurry, the Almighty never is: on the contrary, as the Psalmist observed, so now, "a thousand years in his sight are but as yesterday when it is past, and as a watch in the night." The drama I have referred to as this week brought to its close, is that known in history as Spanish Domination in America. It began, as we all know, on the twenty-first of October, 1492; it has been continuous through six years over four centuries. It now passes into history; the verdict may be made up.

So far as I personally am concerned,—a matter needless to say of very trifling consequence,—this verdict was rendered a year ago. It was somewhat Rhadamanthine; but a twelve-month of further reflection has shown no cause in any respect to revise it. In referring to what was then plainly impending, in December, 1897, before the blowing up of the battleship *Maine*, before a conflict had become inevitable, I used this language in a paper read to the Massachusetts Historical Society: "When looking at the vicissitudes of human development, we are apt to assume a certain air of optimism, and take advancement as the law of being, as a thing of course, indisputable. We are charitable, too; and to deny to any given race or people some degree of use in the economy of Nature, or the plan of Creation, is usually regarded as indicative of narrowness of view. The fatal, final word "pessimist" is apt to be whispered in connection with the name of one who ventures to suggest a doubt of this phase of the doctrine known as Universalism. And yet, at this time when, before our eyes, it is breathing its last, I want some one to point out a single good thing in law, or science, or art, or literature,—material, moral or intellectual,—which has resulted to the race of man upon earth from Spanish domination in America. I have tried to think of one in vain. It certainly has not yielded an immortality, an idea, or a discovery; it has, in fact, been one long record of reaction and retrogression, than which few pages in the record of mankind have been more discouraging or less fruitful of good. What is now taking place in Cuba is historical. It is the dying out of a dominion, the influence of which will be seen and felt for centuries in the life of two continents; just as what is taking place in Turkey is the last fierce flickering up of Asiatic rule in Europe, on the very spot where twenty-four centuries ago Asiatic rule in Europe was thought to have been averted forever. The two, Ottoman rule in Europe, and Spanish rule in America, now stand at the bar of history; and, scanning the long four-century record of each, I have been unable to see what either has contributed to the accumulated possessions of the human race, or why both should not be classed among the many instances of the arrested civilization of a race, developing by degrees an irresistible tendency to retrogression."

This, one year ago; and while the embers of the last Greco-Turkish struggle, still white, were scarcely cold on the plain of Marathon. The time since passed has yielded fresh proof in support of this harsh judgment; for, if there is one historical law better and more irreversibly established than another, it is that, in the case of nations even more than in the case of individuals, their sins will find them out,—the day of reckoning may not be escaped. Noticeably, has this proved so in the case of Spain. The year 1500 may be said to have found that country at the apex of her greatness. America had then been newly discovered; the Moor was just subdued. Nearly half a century before (1453) the Roman Empire had fallen, and, with the storming of Constantinople by the Saracens, disappeared from the earth. That event, it may be mentioned in passing, closed another world drama continuous through twenty-two centuries,—upon the whole the most wonderful of the series. And so, when Roman empire vanished, that of Spain began. It was ushered in by the landfall of Columbus; and when, just three hundred years later, in 1792, the subject was discussed in connection with its third centennial, the general verdict of European thinkers was that the discovery of America had, upon the whole, been to mankind the reverse of beneficent. This conclusion has since been commented upon with derision; yet, when made, it was right. The United States had in 1792 just struggled into existence, and its influence on the course of human events had not begun to make itself felt. Those who considered the subject had before them, therefore, only Spanish domination in America, and upon that their verdict cannot be gainsaid; for, from the year 1492 down, the history of Spain and

Spanish domination has undeniably been one long series of crimes and violations of natural law, the penalty for which has not apparently even yet been exacted in full.

Of those national crimes four stand out in special prominence, constituting counts in a national indictment than which history shows few more formidable. These four were: (1) The expulsion, first, of the Jews, and then of the Moors, or Moriscoes, from Spain, late in the fifteenth and early in the sixteenth centuries; (2) the annals of "the Council of Blood" in the Netherlands, and the eighty years of internecine warfare through which Holland fought its way out from under Spanish rule; (3) the Inquisition, the most ingenious human machinery ever invented to root out and destroy whatever a people had that was intellectually most alert, inquisitive, and progressive; and, finally (4), the policy of extermination, and, where not of extermination, of cruel oppression, systematically pursued towards the aborigines of America. Into the grounds on which the different counts of this indictment rest it would be impossible now to enter. Were it desirable so to do, time would not permit. Suffice it to say, the penalty had to be paid to the uttermost farthing; and one large instalment fell due, and was mercilessly exacted, during the year now drawing to its close. Spanish domination in America ceased,—the drama ended as it was entering on its fifth century,—and it can best be dismissed with the solemn words of Abraham Lincoln, uttered more than thirty years ago, when contemplating a similar expiation we were ourselves paying in blood and grief for a not dissimilar violation of an everlasting law,—"Yet, if God wills that this mighty scourge continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsmen's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn by the lash shall be paid by another drawn by the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said, 'The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether!'"

But not only is this year memorable as witnessing the downfall and complete extirpation of that Spanish rule in America which began with Columbus, but the result, when it at last came about, was marked by incidents more curiously fitting and dramatic than it would have been possible for a Shakspeare to have conceived. Columbus, as we all know, stumbled, as it were, on America as he sailed west in search of Asia,—Cipango he was looking for, and he found Cuba. It is equally well known that he never discovered his mistake. When fourteen years later he died, it was in the faith that, through him, Europe had by a westward movement established itself in the archipelagoes of Asia. And now, at last, four centuries afterward, the blow which did most to end the American domination he established was struck in Asiatic waters; and, through it and the descendants of another race, America seems on the threshold of realizing the mistaken belief of Columbus, and by a westward movement establishing the European in that very archipelago Columbus failed to reach. The ways of Providence are certainly not less singular than slow in movement.

But the year just ending was veritably one of surprises,—for the historical student it would, indeed, seem as if 1898 was destined to pass into the long record as almost the Year of Surprises. We now come to the consideration of some of these wholly unanticipated results from the American point of view. And in entering on this aspect of the question, it is necessary once more to remind you that we are doing it in the historical spirit, and from the historical point of view. We are stating facts not supposed to admit of denial. The argument and inferences to be drawn from those facts do not belong to this occasion. Some will reach one conclusion as to the future, and the bearing those facts have upon its probable development, and some will reach another conclusion; with these conclusions we have nothing to do. Our business is exclusively with the facts.

Speaking largely, but still with all necessary historical accuracy, America has been peopled, and its development, up to the present time, worked out through two great stocks of the European family,—the Spanish-speaking stock, and the English-speaking stock. In their development these two have pursued lines, clearly marked, but curiously divergent. Leaving the Spanish-speaking branch out of the discussion, as unnecessary to it, it may without exaggeration be said of the English-speaking branch that, from the beginning down to this year now ending, its development has been one long protest against, and divergence from, Old World methods and ideals. In the case of those descended

from the Forefathers,—as we always designate the Plymouth colony,—this has been most distinctly marked, ethnically, politically, industrially.

America was the sphere where the European, as a colonist, a settler, first came on a large scale in contact with another race. Heretofore, in the Old World, when one stock had overrun another, —and history presented many examples of it,—the invading stock, after subduing, and to a great extent driving out, the stock which had preceded in the occupancy of a region, settled gradually down into a common possession, and, in the slow process of years, an amalgamation of stocks, more or less complete, took place. In America, with the Anglo-Saxon, and especially those of the New England type, this was not the case. Unlike the Frenchman at the north, or the Spaniard at the south, the Anglo-Saxon showed no disposition to ally himself with the aborigines,—he evinced no faculty of dealing with inferior races, as they are called, except through a process of extermination. Here in Massachusetts this was so from the outset. Nearly every one here has read Longfellow's poem, "The Courtship of Miles Standish," and calls to mind the short, sharp conflict between the Plymouth captain and the Indian chief, Pecksuot, and how those God-fearing Pilgrims ruthlessly put to death by stabbing and hanging a sufficient number of the already plague-stricken and dying aborigines. That episode occurred in April, 1623, only a little more than two years after the landing we to-night celebrate, and was, so far as New England is concerned, the beginning of a series of wars which did not end until the Indian ceased to be an element in our civilization. When John Robinson, the revered pastor of the Plymouth church, received tidings at Leyden of that killing near Plymouth,— for Robinson never got across the Atlantic,—he wrote: "Oh, how happy a thing had it been, if you had converted some before you had killed any! There is cause to fear that, by occasion, especially of provocation, there may be wanting that tenderness of the life of man (made after God's image) which is meet. It is also a thing more glorious in men's eyes, than pleasing in God's or convenient for Christians, to be a terror to poor, barbarous people." This all has a very familiar sound. It is the refrain of nearly three centuries; but, as an historical fact, it is undeniable that, from 1623 down to the year now ending, the American Anglo-Saxon has in his dealings with what are known as the "inferior races" lacked "that tenderness of the life of man which is meet," and he has made himself "a terror to poor, barbarous people." How we of Massachusetts carried ourselves towards the aborigines here, the fearful record of the Pequot war remains everlastingly to tell. How the country at large has carried itself in turn towards Indian, African, and Asiatic is matter of history. And yet it is equally matter of history that this carriage, term it what you will,—unchristian, brutal, exterminating,—has been the salvation of the race. It has saved the Anglo-Saxon stock from being a nation of half-breeds, —miscegenates, to coin a word expressive of an idea. The Canadian half-breed, the Mexican, the mulatto, say what men may, are not virile or enduring races; and that the Anglo-Saxon is none of these, and is essentially virile and enduring, is due to the fact that the less developed races perished before him. Nature is undeniably often brutal in its methods.

Again, and on the other hand, the Anglo-Saxon when he came to America left behind him, so far as he himself was concerned, feudalism and all things pertaining to caste, including what was then known in England, and is still known in Germany, as Divine Right. When he at last enunciated his political faith he put in the forefront of his declaration as "self-evident truths," the principles "that all men are created equal;" that they are endowed with "certain inalienable rights," among them "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness;" and that governments derived "their just powers from the consent of the governed." Now what was meant here by the phrase "all men are created equal?" We know they are not. They are not created equal in physical or mental endowment; nor are they created with equal opportunity. The world bristles with inequalities, natural and artificial. This is so; and yet the declaration is none the less true;—true when made; true now; true for all future time. The reference was to the inequalities which always had marked, then did, and still do, mark, the political

life of the Old World,—to Caste, Divine Right, Privilege. It declared that all men were created equal before the law, as before the Lord;[1]

[1] "Obviously, men are not born equal in physical strength or in mental capacity, in beauty of form or health of body. Diversity or inequality in these respects is the law of creation. But this inequality is in no particular inconsistent with complete civil or political equality."The equality declared by our fathers in 1776 and made the fundamental law of Massachusetts in 1780, was *Equality before the Law*. Its object was to efface all political or civil distinctions, and to abolish all institutions founded upon *birth*. 'All men are *created* equal,' says the Declaration of Independence. 'All men are *born* free and equal,' says the Massachusetts Bill of Rights. These are not vain words. Within the sphere of their influence, no person can be *created*, no person can be *born*, with civil or political privileges not enjoyed equally by all his fellow-citizens; nor can any institutions be established, recognizing distinctions of birth. Here is the Great Charter of every human being drawing vital breath upon this soil, whatever may be his conditions, and whoever may be his parents. He may be poor, weak, humble, or black,—he may be of Caucasian, Jewish, Indian, or Ethiopian race,—he may be born of French, German, English, or Irish extraction; but before the Constitution of Massachusetts all these distinctions disappear. He is not poor, weak, humble, or black; nor is he Caucasian, Jew, Indian, or Ethiopian; nor is he French, German, English, or Irish; he is a MAN, the equal of all his fellow-men. He is one of the children of the State, which, like an impartial parent, regards all its offspring with an equal care. To some it may justly allot higher duties, according to higher capacities; but it welcomes all to its equal hospitable board. The State, imitating the divine Justice, is no respecter of persons."—*Works of Charles Sumner, Vol. II., pp. 341-2*.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.