

ANDREW DICKSON WHITE

THE MOST BITTER FOE OF
NATIONS, AND THE WAY
TO ITS PERMANENT
OVERTHROW

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the Way to Its Permanent Overthrow**

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Andrew Dickson White
The Most Bitter Foe of Nations, and
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New Haven, July 26, 1866.

Dear Sir,

The undersigned have been appointed by the Phi Beta Kappa Society a Committee to render you the cordial thanks of the Society for your admirable Address, delivered last evening, and to request a copy for the Press.

Respectfully and truly yours,

A. C. TWINING,
G. P. FISHER.

Professor White.

State of New York,

Senate Chamber,
Albany, Aug. 30th, 1866.

Gentlemen,

Accept my thanks for the very kind expressions regarding the Address which, in accordance with the request conveyed by you, I forward herewith.

With great respect,

Very truly yours,
A. D. WHITE.

Professors A. C. Twining and
G. P. Fisher.

ADDRESS

In this sacred struggle and battle of so many hundred years,—this weary struggle of truths to be recognized,—this desperate battle of rights to be allowed;—in this long, broad current toward more truth and more right, in which are seen the hands of so many good and bad and indifferent men,—and in the midst of all, and surrounding all, the hand of very God,—what political institution has been most vigorous against this current,—what political system has been most noxious to political truth and right?—in short, what foe, in every land, have right and liberty found it hardest to fight or outwit?

Is it Ecclesiasticism?—is it Despotism?—is it Aristocracy?—is it Democracy?

The time allotted me this evening I shall devote to maintaining the following Thesis:

Of all systems and institutions, the most vigorous in battling Liberty,—the most noxious in adulterating Right,—the most corrosive in eating out Nationality, has been an Aristocracy based upon habits or traditions of oppression.

I shall also attempt to deduce from the proofs of this a corollary, showing *the only way in which such an Aristocracy ever has been or ever can be fought successfully and put down permanently*.

Let me first give this Thesis precision.

I do not say that Aristocracy, based upon habits and traditions of oppression, is the foe which takes deepest hold;—Despotism and Ecclesiasticism are dragons which get their claws far deeper into the body politic;—for Despotism clutches more temporal, and Ecclesiasticism more eternal interests.

Nor do I say that Aristocracy is the enemy most difficult to find and come at. Demoralization in Democracy is harder to find and come at; for demoralization in Democracy is a disease, and lurks,—Aristocracy is a foe, and stands forth—bold; Demoralization is latent, and political doctors disagree about it,—Aristocracy is patent, and men of average sense soon agree about it.

But the statement is that Aristocracy, based upon oppression, is, of all foes to liberty the most vigorous, of all foes to rights the most noxious, and of all foes to nationality the most corrosive.

Other battles may be longer;—but the battle with Aristocracy is the sharpest which a nation can be called upon to wage,—and as a nation uses its strength during the contest—and *as it uses its wits after the contest*—so shall you find its whole national life a success or a failure.

For my proofs I shall not start with *a priori* reasoning;—that shall come in as it is needed in the examination of historical facts. You shall have the simple, accurate presentation of facts from history—and plain reasoning upon these facts—and from Ancient History, rich as it is in proofs, I will draw nothing!—all shall be drawn from the history of modern States—the history of men living under the influence of great religious and political ideas which are active to-day—and among ourselves.

Foremost among the examples of the normal working of an Aristocracy based upon the subjection of a class, I name Spain. I name her first—not as the most striking example, but as one of those in which the evil grew most naturally, and went through its various noxious phases most regularly.

The fabric of Spanish nationality had much strength and much beauty. The mixture of the Barbarian element with the Roman, after the Roman downfall, was probably happier there than in any other part of Europe. The Visigoths gave Spain the best of all the barbaric codes. Guizot has shown how,¹ as by inspiration, some of the most advanced ideas of modern enlightened codes were incorporated into it.

The succeeding history of the Spanish nation was also, in its main sweep, fortunate. There were ages of endurance which toughened the growing nation,—battles for right which ennobled it;—disasters which compacted manliness and squeezed out effeminacy.

¹ History of Civilization in Europe. Third Lecture.

This character took shape in goodly institutions. The city growth helped the growth of liberty, not less in Spain than in her sister nations. Cities and towns became not merely centres of prosperity, but guardians of freedom.²

Then came, perhaps, the finest growth of free institutions in Mediæval Europe.

The Cortes of Castile was a representative body nearly a hundred years before Simon de Montfort laid the foundations of English parliamentary representation at Leicester.³ The Commons of Arragon had gained yet greater privileges earlier.

Statesmen sat in these—statesmen who devised curbs for monarchs, and forced monarchs to wear them. The dispensing power was claimed at an early day by Spanish Kings as by Kings of England;—but Hallam acknowledges⁴ that the Spaniards made a better fight against this despotic claim than did the English. The Spanish established the Constitutional principle that the King cannot dispense with statutes centuries before the English established it by the final overthrow of the Stuarts.

Many sturdy maxims, generally accounted fruit of that early English boldness for liberty, are of that earlier Spanish period. "No taxation without representation" was a principle asserted in Castile early, often and to good purpose. In Arragon no war could be declared,—no peace made,—no money coined without consent of the Cortes.⁵

The "Great Privilege of Saragossa" gave quite as many, and quite as important liberties to Arragon as were wrested from King John for England in the same century.

Such is a meagre sketch of the development of society at large. As regards the other development which goes to produce civilization—the development of individual character, the Spanish peninsula was not less distinguished. In its line of monarchs were Ferdinand III., Alfonso X., James II., and Isabella;—in its line of statesmen were Ximenes and Cisneros—worthy predecessors of that most daring of all modern statesmen, Alberoni. The nation rejoiced too in a noble line of poets and men of letters.⁶

Still more important than these brilliant exceptions was the tone of the people at large. They were tough and manly.⁷

No doubt there were grave national faults. Pride—national and individual—constantly endangered quiet. Blind submission to Ecclesiastical authority was also a fearful source of evil! Yet, despite these, it is impossible not to be convinced, on a careful reading of Spanish history, that the influence which tore apart States,—which undermined good institutions,—which defeated justice,—which disheartened effort,—which prevented resistance to encroachments of Ecclesiasticism and Despotism—nay, which made such encroachments a *necessity*—came from the *nobility*.

The Spanish nobility had risen and become strong in those long wars against the intruding Moors,—they had gained additional strength in the wars between provinces. They soon manifested necessary characteristics. They kept Castile in confusion by their dissensions,—they kept Arragon in confusion by their anti-governmental unions.

Accustomed to lord it over inferiors, they could brook no opposition,—hence all their influence was Anarchic; accustomed to no profitable labor of any sort, their influence was for laziness and wastefulness;—accustomed to look on public matters as their monopoly, they devoted themselves to conjuring up phantoms of injuries and insults, and plotting to avenge them.

Every Aristocracy passes through one, and most Aristocracies through both of two historic phases.

² Sempere, *Histoire des Cortes d'Espagne*, Chap. 6.

³ Prescott's *Ferdinand and Isabella*. Introduction, p. 48.

⁴ Hallam's *Hist. of Middle Ages*, Vol. 2, p. 30.

⁵ Robertson's *Introduction to Life of Charles V.*, Section 3d; also Prescott.

⁶ What an effect this early liberty had in stimulating thought can be seen in a few moments by glancing over the pages of Ticknor's *History of Spanish Literature*.

⁷ For some statements as to hardy characteristics of Spanish peasantry, see Doblado's *Letters from Spain*. Letter 2.

The first may be called the *Vitriolic*,—the period of intense, biting, corrosive activity,—the period in which it gnaws fiercely into all institutions with which it comes into contact,—the period in which it decomposes all elements of nationality.

In Spain this first period was early developed and long continued. Grandees and nobles bit and cut their way into the Legislative system,—by brute force, too, they crushed their way through the Judicial system,—by judicious mixtures of cheating and bullying they often controlled the Executive system.

Chapter after chapter of Mariana's history begins with the story of their turbulence, and ends with the story of its sad results;—how the nobles seized King James of Arragon;—how the Lara family usurped the Government of Castile;—how the houses of Lara, Haro, Castro and their peers are constantly concocting some plot, or doing some act to overthrow all governmental stability.

But their warfare was not merely upon Government and upon each other;—it was upon the people at large. Out from their midst comes a constant voice of indignant petitions. These are not merely petitions from serfs. No! history written in stately style has given small place to their cries;—but the great flood of petitions and remonstrances comes from the substantial middle class, who saw this domineering upper class trampling out every germ of commercial and manufacturing prosperity.

Such was the current of Spanish history. I now single out certain aristocratic characteristics bedded in it which made its flow so turbulent.

Foremost of these was that first and most fatal characteristic of all aristocracies based on oppression—*the erection of a substitute for patriotism*.

Devotion to caste, in such circumstances, always eats out love of country. A nobility often fight for their country—often die for it;—but in any supreme national emergency,—at any moment of moments in national history the rule is that you are sure to find them asking—not "What is my duty to my country?" but "*What is my duty to my order?*"

Every crisis in Spanish history shows this characteristic,—take one example to show the strength of it.

Charles the Fifth was the most terrible of all monarchic foes to the old Spanish institutions. The nobles disliked him for this. They also disliked him still more as a foreigner. Most of all they disliked him because the tools he used in overturning Spain were foreigners.

Against this detested policy the cities of the kingdom planned a policy thoughtful and effectual. Cardinal Cisneros favored it,—the only thing needed was the conjunction of the nobles. They seemed favorable—but at the supreme moment they wavered. The interest of the country was clear;—but *how as to the interests of their order?* They began by fearing encroachments of the people;—they ended by becoming traitors, allowed the battle of Villalar to be lost—and with it the last chance of curbing their most terrible enemy.⁸

Another characteristic was *the development of a substitute for political morality*.

These nobles were brave. The chronicles gave them plentiful supply of chivalric maxims, and they carried these out into chivalric practices. Their quickness in throwing about them the robes of chivalry was only excelled by their quickness in throwing off the garb of ordinary political morality. They could die for an idea, yet we constantly see among them acts of bad faith—petty and large—only befitting savages.

John Alonzo de la Cerda, by the will of the late King, had been deprived of a certain office; he therefore betrays the stronghold of Myorga to the new King's enemies.⁹ Don Alonzo de Lara had caused great distress by his turbulence. Queen Berengaria writes an account of it to the King. Don Alonzo does not scruple to waylay the messenger, murder him, and substitute for the true message a

⁸ Sempere, p. 205.

⁹ Mariana Hist. of Spain.

forgery, containing an order in the Queen's hand for the King's murder.¹⁰ Of such warp and woof is the history of the Spanish aristocracy—the history of nobles whose boast was their chivalry.

How is this to be accounted for? Mainly by the fact, I think, that the pride engendered by lording it over a subject class lifts men above ordinary morality. If commonplace truth and vulgar good faith fetter that morbid will-power which serf-owning gives, truth and good faith must be rent asunder.

The next characteristic was *the erection of a theory of easy treason and perpetual anarchy*.

Prescott calls this whimsical; he might more justly have called it frightful.

For this theory, which they asserted, maintained, and finally brought into the national notion and custom was, that in case they were aggrieved—*themselves being judges*—they could renounce their allegiance, join the bitterest foes of king and nation,—plot and fight against their country,—deluge the land in blood,—deplete the treasury; and yet that the King should take care of the families they left behind, and in other ways make treason pastime.

Spanish history is black with the consequences of this theory. Mariana drops a casual expression in his history which shows the natural result, when he says: "The Castro family were *much in the habit* of revolting and going over to the Moors."¹¹

The absurdity of this theory was only equaled by its iniquity.

For it involved three ideas absolutely fatal to any State—*the right of peaceable secession—the right of judging in their own cause, and the right of committing treason with impunity*. Now, any nation which does not, when stung by such a theory, throttle it, and stamp the life out of it, is doomed.

Spain did not grapple with it. She tampered with it, truckled to it, compromised with it.

This nursed another characteristic in her nobility, which is sure to be developed always under like circumstances. This characteristic was *an aristocratic inability to appreciate concessions*.

The ordinary sort of poor statesmanship which afflicts this world generally meets the assumptions and treasons of a man-mastering caste by concessions. The commercial and manufacturing classes love peace and applaud concessions. But concessions only make matters worse. Concessions to a caste, based upon traditions of oppression, are but fuel to fire. The more privileges are given, the higher blazes its pride, and pride is one of the greatest causes of its noxious activity. Concessions to such a caste are sure to be received as tributes to its superiority. Such concessions are regarded by it not as favors but as rights, and no man ever owed gratitude for a right.

There remained then but one way of dealing with it,—that was by overwhelming force; and at the end of the Fifteenth Century that force appeared. The encroachments upon regular central government produced the same results in Spain as in the rest of Europe at about the same time.

To one not acquainted with previous history, but looking thoughtfully at the fifteenth century, it must seem strange that just at that time—as by a simultaneous and spontaneous movement—almost every nation in Europe consolidated power in the hands of a monarch. In France, in England, in Italy, as well as in Spain, you see institutions, liberties, franchises, boundaries sacrificed freely to establish despotism. You see Henry VII. in England, Louis XI. in France, Charles V., a little later, in Germany and Italy, Ferdinand and Isabella in Spain—almost all utterly unlovely and unloved—allowed to build up despotisms in all cases severe, and in most cases cruel. Why? Because the serf-owning caste had become utterly unbearable; because one tyrant is better than a thousand.

Then the Spanish nobility went into the next phase. Ferdinand, Charles the Fifth, Philip the Second—three of the harshest tyrants known to history,—having crushed out the boldness and enterprise of the aristocracy it passed from what I have called the *Vitriolic* into what might be called the *Narcotic period*

¹⁰ Mariana, History of Spain.

¹¹ Mariana, History of Spain, XIII., 11.

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