Literature

"Democracy and Liberty"

By William Edward Hartpole Lecky. 2 vols. Longmans, Green & Co.

THE KNOWLEDGE that the American War of Independence was in no real sense of the word a democratic revolution is very slowly penetrating into the mind of the lay world, imbued with the misleading phrases of the Jeffersonian Declaration of Independence. It was the revolt of a nation that had grown to maturity silently, and, in the main, untrammeled by its mother, and which resented any unwonted maternal interference in its affairs. It was the result of a nearly wholly unconscious striving for national independence, not a revolt against a largely imaginary tyranny on the part of England. With the exception of Samuel Adams and of Thomas Jefferson, none of the statesmen of the day were democrats; none but these two had any confidence in the commonsense of the masses. The creed of the revolutionary statesmen in general was, that little should be done directly by the masses, but that all should be done for them by the nation's wisest and most honest men. The people were not even to elect the President. The social revolution followed the political; it was only after 1783 that the democratic revolution took place. Many Americans, like Jefferson, were fascinated by the *a priori* humanistic political philosophy of the French Revolution, according to which all men are born absolutely equal. The French doctrine of the inalienable rights of man, sanctioned by natural law, soon exercised a preponderating influence in the United States. This influence was strengthened by the emigration from the original thirteen states to the West.

In the new commonwealths founded there, every man had to work for his living; there were no rich and educated classes, and consequently no social distinctions. Every man, for the time being, was the equal of his neighbor. As a result of the combined influence of French thought and the reaction of Western ideas on the more civilized East, a strong movement in favor of absolute democracy set in. The first three decades of this century are characterized by a general movement in the states for removing those property qualifications from the suffrage, which the statesmen of the revolutionary era deemed absolutely essential to the welfare of the state. This was the era of the establishment of universal suffrage in the United States. In 1828, the democratic revolution culminated in the election of a people's President —Andrew Jackson—with ideas of government approximating to Napoleonic *plébiscites*. Men sprung from the people, and as ignorant as the people, must replace the trained statesmen of the preceding years. The masses, striving for what Aristotle calls "absolute equality," rejected John Quincy Adams on account of his very superiority to them, just as the Athenian citizen ostracized the too just Aristides. Purity of purpose and intelligence were discouraged, and a premium was placed on the qualities that distinguish the demagogue.

From this time on, absolute democracy, based on universal suffrage, has obtained practically unquestioned in the United States. It has become a fetish; instead of *jure divino* monarchy, we have *jure divino* democracy. "Vox populi, vox Dei." The evils in our political life, that were apparent already in the fourth decade of this century, have been greatly increased by the influx of ignorant immigrants to whom the suffrage was naturally given, by making the Negroes voters, and finally by the ever-increasing complexity of our social conditions, rendering an intelligent exercise of the suffrage infinitely more difficult. Under the *régime* of absolute democracy, our cities have become hotbeds of political corruption, our commonwealth governments are controlled by dishonest bosses, our national legislature is manifestly incompetent, and the honesty of its members is openly challenged. A prominent New York merchant said recently that he would not decide about a large business transaction until "those devils in Congress had gone home." In the theatres, amidst popular applause, jokes are made about the incompetence of our legislators. Political corruption is so common that people merely shrug their shoulders. Patriotism is subservient to partisanship. The intelligence, honesty and wisdom of the community are devoted, not to governing the country, but to organized and largely futile attempts to prevent its misgovernment. As Mr. Lecky says, "in hardly any other country do the best life and energy of the nation flow so habitually apart from politics."

These evils are clearly recognized, yet few, very few, have the moral courage to attack their source—universal suffrage. No politician would dare do so, for it would be to his own undoing. And so ingrained is the spirit of political equality, that, while publicists and thinkers point out these evils in glaring colors, they in the same breath with reverent words extol their cause. As Stevenson wrote, "Man is a creature who lives not by bread alone, but principally by catchwords." How true this is, can be realized only when the rational justification for the majority of a man's opinions is subjected to a keen analysis. Unquestionably, pure democracy based upon universal suffrage is the most powerful of modern catchwords. The fault of the age is that it pays too much attention to the structure of the government, and too little to the workings of the machine.

For the English historian Lecky to raise his voice against absolute democracy does not require so much courage as it would for an American. In England universal suffrage is a comparatively recent institution, not yet in its teens, while we are taught from earliest childhood that absolute democracy is a quasi-sacred institution, a panacea for all evils. Lecky's purpose is to study "the present aspects and tendencies of the political world." Thus he does not confine his attention to the Anglo-Saxon states, but studies the workings of universal suffrage in all countries. After a keen and admirable analysis of the vote in a democratic state, he says:— "One of the great divisions of politics in our day is coming to be whether, at the last resort, the world should be governed by its ignorance or by its intelligence." With Maine, he looks with dismay at the rule of mere numbers, saying that the day will come when "it will appear one of the strangest facts in the history of human folly that such a theory was re-

garded as liberal and progressive." This is significant, for remember, it is the author of the history of rationalism who is speaking. Thus, this work is an arraignment of Rousseauism and Jeffersonism, and an appeal to the English public not to be led away by *a priori* philosophy, but to be guided, as heretofore, by reason and experience in introducing changes into the body politic. This has always been a marked characteristic of English statesmen, as contrasted with those of France.

Mr. Lecky's views correspond in the main with those of America's greatest political thinker, Alexander Hamilton. He believes that property, intelligence and vested interests should govern a country, and that it is extremely dangerous to allow people who pay no taxes to vote away the money of others. At no time, he contends, has there been a greater separation between taxation and representation. "Pure democracy is one of the least representative of governments," he writes, and, according to him, "the world has never seen a better constitution than England enjoyed between the Reform Bill of 1832 and the Reform Bill of 1867." He shows keen insight into American conditions, justly maintaining that only our written Constitution, with its civil liberty clauses, and others limiting the action of the Government, has prevented the evils that beset our political system from becoming unbearable. In the absence of any restrictions on Parliament, which, as has been said, can do anything but change a man into a woman, he sees England's greatest danger. In this he agrees with a distinguished American political scientist, Prof. Burgess, with whose writings, however, Mr. Lecky is apparently unacquainted. He wisely says that "of all the forms of government that are possible among mankind, I do not know any which is likely to be worse than the government of a single omnipotent chamber." Such a body is apt to be rash, to reflect the ephemeral mood of the hour, and to make organic changes without due deliberation.

Mr. Lecky teaches the lesson that political liberty, or the right to aid in creating the government, is much less important than civil liberty, which protects the individual from the government he creates. His criticism of the tendencies in English political life is very pessimistic. The House of Commons he declares to be declining; the caucus and party machine have been introduced, and the professional politician and demagogue are more and more pushing aside men of high character and ability. His estimate of Gladstone as "a supreme master of the art of evasion," while reminding us of Lowell's dictum about the facility of the same statesman, "for extemporizing life-long convictions," will shatter many an American's ideal. But, as in the case of America, so with regard to England, Lecky emphasizes the fact that its national character is not decadent, "though its [England's] constitution is plainly worn out, though the balance of power within it has been destroyed, and though diseases of a serious character are fast growing in its political life." This partially contradicts a statement in another place, that, "in the long run, the increasing or diminishing importance of character in public life is perhaps the best test of the progress or decline of nations." Democracy, he concludes, is not liberty, but tyranny of the majority and interference with the individual in nearly every act of his daily life. "Violations of liberty do not lose their character because they are the acts, not of kings or aristocracies, but of majorities of electors." The fact that Mr. Lecky finds identically the same evils cropping up in England as exist amongst us, will be a source of mental uneasiness to those, who, under the guidance of the late George William Curtis, have always held that the "spoils system" was the *causa causarum* of most of our troubles. For in England the "spoils system" does not exist, and fortunately there are no indications that it ever will.

The consideration of the above questions, those purely political in nature, and of which naturally only the most meagre outline can be given here, occupies somewhat less than half of Mr. Lecky's 1100 pages. The balance of the work is devoted to a discussion of all the questions of the day, such as the influence of the Catholic Church on voters, Sunday legislation, the liquor question, marriage and divorce, socialism, labor questions and woman-suffrage. Mr. Lecky's standpoint is that of the individualist and *laissez-faire* economist. But he is never *doctrinaire*, and, in discussing all of these questions at considerable length, shows a broad spirit, combined with vast knowledge and admirable Anglo-Saxon commonsense. In fact, rationality and sanity are predominant characteristics of the work. Economists who, having in view merely the more just incidence of income taxes and *ad valorem* import duties, desire to introduce these forms of taxation in America, without considering the premium they give to dishonesty, should weigh Mr. Lecky's words, written in reference to an entirely different matter:—"To me, at least, the first and greatest service a government can render to morals seems to be the maintenance of a social organization in which the path of duty and the path of interest as much as possible coincide; in which honesty, industry, providence and public spirit naturally reap their rewards, and the opposite vices their punishment."

The work as a whole is very stimulating to thought. It is a keen analysis of modern political tendencies, full of trenchant criticisms and valuable suggestions. Its spirit is that of one who has the interests of civilization most closely at heart. And as a result of the author's earnestness, the literary quality of the work is a decided improvement upon that of his History of England. The language is limpid, forcible and very rarely commonplace. From page after page one would like to cull compact sentences, pregnant with meaning. The work is not a systematic treatise, such as a political scientist would write; it is written, rather, from the standpoint of the scholar and statesman combined. Its main fault is that it is almost purely destructive. The remedies Mr. Lecky proposes for the evils that are springing up in England, if efficacious at all, would be only partially remedial. Proportional representation, "fancy franchises," the referendum, would not go to the root of the trouble. Mr. Lecky is too practical a man to propose such a heroic remedy as restriction of the suffrage, for he knows too well that, although universal suffrage was granted before the people were fully ripe for it, yet it would be absolutely impossible to restrict it now, unless, perhaps, by violent revolution. And then the cure would be worse than the evil. Universal suffrage must be taken as a permanently established institution, and the only way to cure the many evils that have followed in its wake, is through the political education of the masses.

But Mr. Lecky does not believe in the spread of popular education. Like Prof. Goldwin Smith, he contends that in every society, a large number of the people must perform purely physical tasks, requiring but little intelligence, and that education unfits men for work of this nature. Such work is, however, absolutely essential. Someone must handle the spade and clean the streets. Besides, the half-education that the lower classes always inevitably receive, makes them very apt to take hold of glittering Utopias, and converts an unintelligent and negatively dangerous voter into one positively so. Thus Mr. Lecky's work is excessively gloomy, for he has reached an unsurmountable barrier. This fact is in harmony both with his opinion that "King Hazard" exercises a powerful influence over the destinies of humanity, and with his rejection of the views of the evolutionary school of historians, who, naturally, are all optimists. The evils that he points out are undoubtedly not exaggerated, and their cause is truly indicated; and yet we maintain that pure democracy is a decided step in advance in historical evolution. The trouble has been that the suffrage was granted too hastily, and the optimistic, and also, as we think, the scientific view is, that the people, after a longer apprenticeship, will be able to exercise the suffrage honestly, seriously and intelligently. We are living, unfortunately, in the beginning of this period, for in historical evolution a few decades count for naught.