

Gilbert K. Chesterton's London Letter

The Antiquity of the Revolution

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IN the loose notes of this series I have never pretended to review books properly, but only to touch on them lightly and take a text here and there. I happen to have a book before me upon which, in a special sense, I should wish to touch lightly, and all the more so as I naturally cannot feel lightly. But the text it offers at this crucial time seems to me of such momentous importance to the relations of the American and English peoples that I must take my chance of any misunderstandings in mere matters of taste.

My brother, Cecil Chesterton, who died in France after fighting, I am glad to say, in the final victory that swept away Prussian imperialism, left behind him a little book which he had finished at odd moments, even on the march; so intensely did the interest of his subject possess and pursue him. It is a short *History of the United States of America*; and it has just been published by Messrs. Chatto & Windus. But I do not deal with the book as a book; rather as an incident, an illustration of a fresher and much franker version of the invaluable Anglo-American friendship. In this it is both useful and unique; something that has never been done yet, and ought to have been done long ago.

History and Fable.

It is perhaps needless to say that the educated English know very little about American history. The educated English know very little about English history. But it would be unjust to their patriotism to identify the two things too literally, or to deny that there is a difference. We may fairly say that about their own history they are not entirely ignorant; they are only entirely wrong. They are generally taught fables instead of facts; but they are taught something. Sometimes the fables are entitled to be called legends, that is living and human lies. They are now popular traditions, even if they are in praise of very unpopular people.

Good Queen Bess has become a familiar and even fireside figure, as a fairy tale; though, in fact, for any one dealing with her it would have been difficult to call her good, and possibly dangerous to call her Bess. The same is true, for instance, of Pitt; I mean the Younger Pitt, more aptly described as the Bottomless Pitt. He has always been toasted by Tory fox-hunting squires; though nobody could be less like the fox-hunting squire; he was considerably more like the fox. He had no bond with them except drink; and was more pompous when drunk than a gentleman is when sober. Nor was he a Tory, but a timid progressive, otherwise a prig; and quite capable of being a pacifist.

However, the only point here is that English notions of English history may be aristocratic fictions in origin, but they are democratic delusions in

practice. Their notions are like their novels; it may be a limited library, but it is a circulating library. But they lost touch with American history when Washington cut the painter with the same sincerity as the cherry tree; and whenever since then that history has crossed their path it has been at cross purposes.

They do not even know the names of many great American figures, as they do know enough of Guy Fawkes to make a Guy, or enough of Boney to make a Bogey. They never made a guy of Thomas Jefferson or a bogey of Benjamin Franklin. The great names of Alexander Hamilton or Andrew Jackson are simply a blank to many who know long lists of petty German princes or featureless Westminster dolls and wirepullers.

The name of Henry Clay is more widely and respectfully known. He is a cigar. It is generally realised, among the more thoughtful, that John Brown's body lies a mouldering in the grave, and that Jeff Davis is for some reason permanently suspended from a sour apple tree; but touching on what previous train of events has led these two deceased gentlemen to so tragic a state, the mass of Englishmen are very vague indeed.

This is the state of things which I think my brother wished to remedy by writing a short, popular and picturesque sketch of the American story. He had a great enthusiasm not only for America but, what is not always the same thing, for Americans. And it is not for me to praise his book, though I think it excellent, but merely to remark upon why such books are needed and what they should aim chiefly at achieving.

English Views of America.

In justice to my countrymen once more, it must first be understood that if they have ignored American history it has not been because they have despised American democracy. They have never despised America; they have generally admired, sometimes envied, and at the worst dreaded the American influence. Unfortunately they have often loved and even feared for the wrong reason.

It may be stated by saying that they have talked incessantly about the future of America; and hardly believed there was any such thing as the past of America. In a word, they have admired or doubted or dreaded America as a new country.

But America is not a new country. It is at least hardly newer than the Russia of Peter the Great or the Prussia of Frederick the Great; no newer than half the modern European states in their modern formation. Only it was an experiment in democracy made a considerable time ago, and most of these were experiments in despotism made about the same time, a considerable time ago.

America fought England with a declaration of independence, not very long after Prussia fought Austria without a declaration of war. The United States have no need to fall back on barren prophecy or to take refuge in Utopia. They are not so poor that they need fall back on having a future. For the real danger of the day, in international affairs, is that the new forces merely boast of being new, that is of having nothing but a future.

What is really wrong with "Bolshevism" is that it treats a truth as revolutionary when it is rather rudimentary; a root from which more lasting trees of liberty have grown. It is a truth that humanity is more than nations, but it is also a truism; it is certainly not the new truth that will destroy those nations, but rather the old truth that created them. It is a fact that men are brothers; but it is not a fact that they are all long lost brothers. And even if it were, we should be able, as in a romance, to seek in very old records for the original declaration of their brotherhood. What makes most new religions a devastating bore, for instance, is the fact that they make the moral platitude a winning post and not a starting post. They dig it up like a discovery, instead of laying it down like a foundation. In other words, they are unhistorical; and therefore nearly always unphilosophical.

A Study of Beginnings.

Now this is notably a matter in which America can play the important part, not of a new nation, but of an old nation; and can play the part of an old nation better than older nations. For the American republic, if not founded in primitive times, was in the highest and most heroic sense founded on primitive ideas. Its political theory had the unique intellectual beauty of beginning at the beginning. It is committed to the conviction that such is the beginning, whatever may be the end. It is the spirit that holds these truths to be self-evident; not the spirit that fondly believes these truths to be sensational.

For this reason alone I hope there may be a revival of the real study of American history; not as a country of crude commercialism or superficial colonization, but, on the contrary, as the one country where the most ancient ideals of man are still near enough to be felt through the confusion; where Jefferson has given beforehand the answer to Jay Gould; where, as Stevenson said of Moses, behind all the Mosaic corruptions we can still see through the modern tangle the tables and the shining face.

G. K. CHESTERTON.

Cecil Chesterton's *History of the United States* will be published in New York by the George H. Doran Company—Editor, *Books and the Book World*.

A Bronte Memorial

By BARRETT H. CLARK.

THESE early years of the twentieth century offer numerous opportunities for centenary celebrations. The idea of commemorating the birth of great national figures deserves the highest commendation. The custom should be encouraged. Aside from the fitness of the event and the material sort of justice rendered to the memory of a great writer, statesman, artist, there is a more immediate and more valuable result: these celebrations do more to call to our attention books we have never read, pictures we had never seen and music we had never heard than a host of articles and books could do.

The centenary celebration often leaves a mass of material, a sort of commemoration of the commemoration. A

case in question is the volume just issued of Brontëana. The Charlotte Brontë centenary in 1916 has resulted in a very interesting book: *Charlotte Brontë, 1816-1916, a Centenary Memorial*, prepared by the Brontë Society and edited by Butler Wood. This is a collection of essays from many hands. Among the contributors are Mrs. Humphry Ward, recently president of the society; Edmund Gosse, G. K. Chesterton, A. C. Benson, Richard Garnett and Sir Sidney Lee. These are but six of the thirteen contributors.

Mrs. Humphry Ward's *Some Thoughts on Charlotte Brontë*, full as it is of information and curious anecdotes, is in reality *Some Thoughts on Mrs. Humphry Ward Apropos of Charlotte Brontë* (she, too, dear reader, was a novelist). Mrs. Ward of the reminiscences will not fail to impress you as an important personage;

of course, the author of *Jane Eyre* is all very well, but Mrs. Ward has "grand" connections, and she was (it is hinted) appreciated by Charlotte Brontë's editor in much the same way as was Charlotte herself. The essay would not be complete without a fling at Bennett and Wells, those upstart youngsters!

The Chesterton contribution is a sound bit of criticism in the main. *Jane Eyre*, he contends, is the best detective story in

the language. "In the main," I say, because I must protect myself under the cloak of generalities. Must I confess it? I have never read *Jane Eyre*! But I have already determined to do so. That is one thing the present book has accomplished. The stimulation of such collections is their chief asset and most valuable result.

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