

Macaulay on American Government.

In the latest number of *Harper's Magazine* appear four letters from the late historian, Macaulay, treating of our republican form of self-government. Two of these letters are remarkable, first in the knowledge evinced, by the author, of our municipal affairs, and secondly for their prophetic insight. These letters were written twenty years since, at a time when cultivated Englishmen knew less of us than they do now—and that is not complimenting them with much information—and when the little known was obscured by the glare of our material prosperity.

Lord Macaulay has the merit of being the first eminent author to call our attention to the fact, becoming more apparent every day, that forms of government have very little to do with the material prosperity of the people. Like religions, governments are rather the creatures than the creators, and follow a people instead of leading them. Thus, while the Russians and Germans have despotisms, the English an aristocracy, Americans a republic, the causes of failure or success in material interests are common to all.

We have been educated upon a different theory. We have been taught that we owe our comfortable equality in the world's goods to the eagle and the American eagle and the sublime recognition of human rights to be found in a written Constitution. Our wide domain, with its rich virgin soil affording sustenance and homes to millions, went for nothing. It was considered patriotic to credit the eagle and Constitution with all.

The sad experience of later years has taught us a different lesson. In spite of the tonic found in the eagle's lofty scream, in the teeth of an amended Constitution, the want that comes of an inequality of distributed property is upon us, and labor finds itself without adequate remuneration. The poor man begins to realize that a million of money is as cruel, selfish and mean under the free institutions of America as beneath the iron heel of an European despotism. Four years of financial reverses have left our eagle very much in the condition of the parrot after its contest with the monkey, when it remarked with philosophical pluck that it had survived "a hell of a time."

Lord Macaulay saw, twenty years since, that which four years have taught us. After stating the proposition of his correspondent, who had claimed for a Jeffersonian Democracy all that we enjoyed in the way of wealth, the clear-headed historian says:

"By the same process of reasoning one may arrive at many very agreeable conclusions, such as that there is no cholera, no malaria, no yellow fever, no negro slavery, in the world. Unfortunately for me, perhaps, I learned from Lord Bacon a method of investigating truth diametrically opposite to that which you appear to follow. I am perfectly aware of the immense progress which your country has made and is making in population and wealth. I know that the laborer with you has large wages, abundant food, and the means of giving some education to his children. But I see no reason for attributing these things to the policy of Jefferson. I see no reason to believe that your progress would have been less rapid, that your laboring people would have been worse fed or clothed or taught, if your government had been conducted on the principles of Washington and Hamilton. Nay, you will, I am sure, acknowledge that the progress which you are now making is only a continuation of the progress which you have been making ever since the middle of the seventeenth century, and that the blessings which you now enjoy were enjoyed by your forefathers who were loyal subjects of the kings of England. The contrast between the laborer of New York and the laborer of Europe is not stronger now than it was when New York was governed by noblemen and gentlemen commissioned under the English great seal. And there are at this moment dependencies of the English crown in which all the phenomena which you attribute to purely democratical institutions may be seen in the highest perfection. The colony of Victoria, in Australia, was planted only twenty years ago. The population is now, I suppose, near a million. The revenue is enormous, near five million sterling, and raised

without any murmuring. The wages of labor are higher than they are even with you. Immense sums are expended on education. And this is a province governed by the delegate of a hereditary sovereign. It therefore seems to me quite clear that the facts which you cite to prove the excellence of purely democratic institutions ought to be ascribed not to those institutions, but to causes which operated in America long before your Declaration of Independence, and which are operating in many parts of the British empire. You will perceive, therefore, that I do not propose, as you thought, to sacrifice the interests of the present generation to those of remote generations. It would, indeed, be absurd in a nation to part with institutions to which it is indebted for immense present prosperity from an apprehension that, after the lapse of a century, those institutions may be found to produce mischief. But I do not admit that the prosperity which your country enjoys arises from those parts of your polity which may be called, in an especial manner, Jeffersonian. Those parts of your polity already produce bad effects, and, will, unless I am greatly mistaken, produce fatal effects if they shall last till North America has two hundred inhabitants to the square mile."

The superstition that makes one bigoted in behalf of error is not always born of ignorance. In the above extract Macaulay refers to the danger to a community that comes of an equality of political rights. With all our free schools, free churches, free speech, free press and free everything, including a free use of the revolver and unlicensed Billingsgate, we have failed to see that there is little or no connection between a declaration of political rights and an equality in the enjoyment of property.

In like manner we are besotted in the belief that our political institutions are perfect. While a network of railways held under a few combinations are sapping the very life-blood from a land they were created to develop; while a false financial system fattens the rich as it impoverishes the poor; while monopolies built up under bounties from the very government we bless grind down labor—we have seen for ten years a larger and more enlightened territory than that of the old thirteen States held under military rule, and our civil service become a thieving process to enrich dishonest officials.

This, however, is not the state of affairs predicted by the historian. He calls attention, in a previous letter to the one quoted, to the fate that will befall us when the issue is fairly made between accumulated capital and labor. He says—

"I have long been convinced that institutions purely democratic must, sooner or later, destroy liberty or civilization, or both. In Europe, where the population is dense, the effect of such institutions would be almost instantaneous. What happened lately in France is an example. In 1848 a pure democracy was established there. During a short time there was reason to expect a general spoliation, a national bankruptcy, a new partition of the soil, a maximum of prices, a ruinous load of taxation laid on the rich for the purpose of supporting the poor in idleness. Such a system would, in twenty years, have made France as poor and barbarous as the France of the Carolingians. Happily the danger was averted; and now there is a despotism, a silent tribune, an enslaved press. Liberty is gone, but civilization has been saved. I have not the smallest doubt that, if we had a purely democratic government here, the effect would be the same. Either the poor would plunder the rich, and civilization would perish, or order and prosperity would be saved by a strong military government, and liberty would perish. You may think that your country enjoys an exemption from these evils. I will frankly own to you that I am of a very different opinion. Your fate I believe to be certain, though it is deferred by a physical cause. As long as you have a boundless extent of fertile and unoccupied land your laboring population will be far more at ease than the laboring population of the Old World, and while that is the case the Jeffersonian politics may continue to exist without causing any fatal calamity. But the time will come when New England will be as thickly peopled as old England. Wages will be as low, and will fluctuate as much with you as with us. You

will have your Manchesters and Birminghams, and in those Manchesters and Birminghams hundreds of thousands of artisans will assuredly be sometimes out of work. Then your institutions will be fairly brought to the test. Distress everywhere makes the laborer contentious and discontented, and inclines him to listen with eagerness to agitators who tell him that it is a monstrous iniquity that one man should have a million while another cannot get a full meal."

That, under a self-government, with the suffrage extended to every free male citizen aged twenty-one, the representative represents, is a fact of which our political economists take no account. Therefore, as Macaulay predicts, when the deadly antagonism between property and labor comes to an open rupture here, property, instead of being protected, as in Europe, by the government, will find with us the government its enemy. A collegiate education and a possession of the millions, with an army to protect it, make some difference, for the possessor of the million sees clearly that it is not a monstrous iniquity that one man should have his million while another cannot get a full meal, and frequently no meal at all. The poor culture of the common schools leaves the starving laborer in doubt as to the justice or injustice of such inequality. And really we are forced to admit that the reasoning of an empty stomach may be as sound as that of one dyspeptic from being over-fed. Until now the weight and influence of our government has been, as in Europe, in behalf of property. Now there are symptoms of a change. As the representative represents, suffering labor possessed of the majority demands immediate legislation. In all our larger cities charity has become a regulated burden, and ere long we shall have the millionaires of all sorts taken by the throat through legislation. — *Washington Capital.*

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