

Lincoln and Lost Causes

It has already been remarked here that the English know a great deal about past American literature, but nothing about past American history. They do not know either, of course, as well as they know the present American advertising, which is the least important of the three. But it is worth noting once more how little they know of the history, and how illogically that little is chosen. They have heard, no doubt, of the fame and the greatness of Henry Clay. He is a cigar. But it would be unwise to cross-examine any Englishman, who may be consuming that luxury at the moment, about the Missouri Compromise or the controversies with Andrew Jackson. And just as the statesman of Kentucky is a cigar, so the state of Virginia is a cigarette. But there is perhaps one exception, or half-exception, to this simple plan. It would perhaps be an exaggeration to say that Plymouth Rock is a chicken. Any English person keeping chickens, and chiefly interested in Plymouth Rocks considered as chickens, would nevertheless have a hazy sensation of having seen the word somewhere before. He would feel subconsciously that the Plymouth Rock had not always been a chicken. Indeed, the name connotes something not only solid but antiquated; and is not therefore a very tactful name for a chicken. There would rise up before him something memorable in the haze that he calls his history; and he would see the history books of his boyhood and old engravings of men in steeple-crowned hats struggling with sea-waves or Red Indians. The whole thing would suddenly become clear to him if (by a simple reform) the chickens were called Pilgrim Fathers.

Then he would remember all about it. The Pilgrim Fathers were champions of religious liberty; and they discovered America. It is true that he has also heard of a man called Christopher Columbus; but that was in connection with an egg. He has also heard of somebody known as Sir Walter Raleigh; and though his principal possession was a cloak, it is also true that he had a potato, not to mention a pipe of tobacco. Can it be possible that he brought it from Virginia, where the cigarettes come from? Gradually the memories will come back and fit themselves together for the average hen-wife who learnt history at the English elementary schools, and who has now something better to do. Even when the narrative becomes consecutive, it will not necessarily become correct. It is not strictly true to say that the Pilgrim Fathers discovered America. But it is quite as true as saying that they were champions of religious liberty. If we said that they were martyrs who would have died heroically in torments rather than tolerate any religious liberty, we should be talking something like sense about them, and telling the real truth that is their due. The whole Puritan movement, from the Solemn League and Covenant to the last stand of the last Stuarts, was a struggle against religious toleration, or what they would have called religious indifference.

The first religious equality on earth was established by a Catholic cavalier in Maryland. Now there is nothing in this to diminish any dignity that belongs to any real virtues and virilities in the Pilgrim Fathers; on the contrary, it is rather to the credit of their consistency and conviction. But there is no doubt that the note of their whole experiment in New England was intolerance, and even inquisition. And there is no doubt that New England was then only the newest and not the oldest of these colonial experiments. At least two Cavaliers had been in the field before any Puritans. And they had carried with them much more of the atmosphere and nature of the normal Englishman than any Puritan could possibly carry. They had established it especially in Virginia, which had been founded by a great Elizabethan and named after the great Elizabeth. Before there was any New England in the North, there was something very like Old England in the South. Relatively speaking, there is still.

Whenever the anniversary of the Mayflower comes round, there is a chorus of Anglo-American congratulation and comradeship, as if this at least were a matter on which all can agree. But I knew enough about America, even before I went there, to know that there are a good many people there at any rate who do not agree with it. Long ago I wrote a protest in which I asked why Englishmen had forgotten the great state of Virginia, the first in foundation and long the first in leadership; and why a few crabbed Nonconformists should have the right to erase a record that begins with Raleigh and ends with Lee, and incidentally includes Washington. The great state of Virginia was the backbone of America until it was broken in the Civil War. From Virginia came the first great Presidents and most of the Fathers of the Republic. Its adherence to the Southern side in the war made it a great war, and for a long time a doubtful war. And in the leader of the Southern armies it produced what is perhaps the one modern figure that may come to shine like St. Louis in the lost battle, or Hector dying before holy Troy.

Again, it is characteristic that while the modern English know nothing about Lee they do know something about Lincoln; and nearly all that they know is wrong. They know nothing of his Southern connections, nothing of his considerable Southern sympathy, nothing of the meaning of his moderation in face of the problem of slavery, now lightly treated as self-evident. Above all, they know nothing about the respect in which Lincoln was quite un-English, was indeed the very reverse of English; and can be understood better if we think of him as a Frenchman, since it seems so hard for some of us to believe that he was an American. I mean his lust for logic for its own sake, and the way he kept mathematical truths in his mind like the fixed stars. He was so far from being a merely practical man, impatient of academic abstractions, that he reviewed and revelled in academic abstractions, even while he could not apply them to practical life. He loved to repeat that slavery was intolerable while he tolerated it, and to prove that something ought to be done while it was impossible to do it. This was

probably very bewildering to his brother-politicians; for politicians always whitewash what they do not destroy. But for all that this inconsistent consistency beat the politicians at their own game, and this abstracted logic proved the most practical of all. For when the chance did come to do something, there was no doubt about the thing to be done. The thunderbolt fell from the clear heights of heaven; it had not been tossed about and lost like a common missile in the market-place. The matter is worth mentioning, because it has a moral for a much larger modern question. A wise man's attitude towards industrial capitalism will be very like Lincoln's attitude towards slavery. That is, he will manage to endure capitalism; but he will not endure a defence of capitalism. He will recognise the value, not only of knowing what he is doing, but of knowing what he would like to do. He will recognise the importance of having a thing clearly labelled in his own mind as bad, long before the opportunity comes to abolish it. He may recognise the risk of even worse things in immediate abolition, as Lincoln did in abolitionism. He will not call all business men brutes, any more than Lincoln would call all planters demons; because he knows they are not. He will regard many alternatives to capitalism as crude and inhuman, as Lincoln regarded John Brown's raid; because they are. But he will clear his mind from cant about capitalism; he will have no doubt of what is the truth about Trusts and Trade Combines and the concentration of capital; and it is the truth that they endure under one of the ironic silences of heaven, over the pageants and the passing triumphs of hell.

But the name of Lincoln has a more immediate reference to the international matters I am considering here. His name has been much invoked by English politicians and journalists in connection with the quarrel with Ireland. And if we study the matter, we shall hardly admire the tact and sagacity of those journalists and politicians.

History is an eternal tangle of cross-purposes; and we could not take a clearer case, or rather a more complicated case, of such a tangle, than the facts lying behind a political parallel recently mentioned by many politicians. I mean the parallel between the movement for Irish independence and the attempted secession of the Southern Confederacy in America. Superficially any one might say that the comparison is natural enough; and that there is much in common between the quarrel of the North and South in Ireland and the quarrel of the North and South in America. In both cases the South was on the whole agricultural, the North on the whole industrial. True, the parallel exaggerates the position of Belfast; to complete it we must suppose the whole Federal system to have consisted of Pittsburg. In both the side that was more successful was felt by many to be less attractive. In both the same political terms were used, such as the term 'Union' and 'Unionism.' An ordinary Englishman comes to America, knowing these main lines of American history, and knowing that the American

knows the similar main lines of Irish history. He knows that there are strong champions of Ireland in America; possibly he also knows that there are very genuine champions of England in America. By every possible historical analogy, he would naturally expect to find the pro-Irish in the South and the pro-English in the North. As a matter of fact, he finds almost exactly the opposite. He finds Boston governed by Irishmen, and Nashville containing people more pro-English than Englishmen. He finds Virginians not only of British blood, like George Washington, but of British opinions almost worthy of George the Third.

But I do not say this, as will be seen in a moment, as a criticism of the comparative Toryism of the South. I say it as a criticism of the superlative stupidity of English propaganda. On another page I remark on the need for a new sort of English propaganda; a propaganda that should be really English and have some remote reference to England. Now if it were a matter of making foreigners feel the real humours and humanities of England, there are no Americans so able or willing to do it as the Americans of the Southern States. As I have already hinted, some of them are so loyal to the English humanities, that they think it their duty to defend even the English inhumanities. New England is turning into New Ireland. But Old England can still be faintly traced in Old Dixie. It contains some of the best things that England herself has had, and therefore (of course) the things that England herself has lost, or is trying to lose. But above all, as I have said, there are people in these places whose historic memories and family traditions really hold them to us, not by alliance but by affection. Indeed, they have the affection in spite of the alliance. They love us in spite of our compliments and courtesies and hands across the sea; all our ambassadorial salutations and speeches cannot kill their love. They manage even to respect us in spite of the shady Jew stockbrokers we send them as English envoys, or the 'efficient' men, who are sent out to be tactful with foreigners because they have been too tactless with trades unionists. This type of traditional American, North or South, really has some traditions connecting him with England; and though he is now in a very small minority, I cannot imagine why England should wish to make it smaller. England once sympathised with the South. The South still sympathises with England. It would seem that the South, or some elements in the South, had rather the advantage of us in political firmness and fidelity; but it does not follow that that fidelity will stand every shock. And at this moment, and in this matter, of all things in the world, our political propagandists must try to bolster British Imperialism up, by kicking Southern Secession when it is down. The English politicians eagerly point out that we shall be justified in crushing Ireland exactly as Sumner and Stevens crushed the most English part of America. It does not seem to occur to them that this comparison between the Unionist triumph in America and a Unionist triumph in Britain is rather hard upon our particular sympathisers, who did not triumph. When England exults in Lincoln's victory over his foes, she is exulting in his victory over her own friends. If her

diplomacy continues as delicate and chivalrous as it is at present, they may soon be her only friends. England will be defending herself at the expense of her only defenders. But however this may be, it is as well to bear witness to some of the elements of my own experience; and I can answer for it, at least, that there are some people in the South who will not be pleased at being swept into the rubbish heap of history as rebels and ruffians; and who will not, I regret to say, by any means enjoy even being classed with Fenians and Sinn Feiners.

Now touching the actual comparison between the conquest of the Confederacy and the conquest of Ireland, there are, of course, a good many things to be said which politicians cannot be expected to understand. Strange to say, it is not certain that a lost cause was never worth winning; and it would be easy to argue that the world lost very much indeed when that particular cause was lost. These are not days in which it is exactly obvious that an agricultural society was more dangerous than an industrial one. And even Southern slavery had this one moral merit, that it was decadent; it has this one historic advantage, that it is dead. The Northern slavery, industrial slavery, or what is called wage slavery, is not decaying but increasing; and the end of it is not yet. But in any case, it would be well for us to realise that the reproach of resembling the Confederacy does not ring in all ears as an unanswerable condemnation. It is scarcely a self-evident or sufficient argument, to some hearers, even to prove that the English are as delicate and philanthropic as Sherman, still less that the Irish are as criminal and lawless as Lee. Nor will it soothe every single soul on the American continent to say that the English victory in Ireland will be followed by a reconstruction, like the reconstruction exhibited in the film called 'The Birth of a Nation.' And, indeed, there is a further inference from that fine panorama of the exploits of the Ku-Klux Klan. It would be easy, as I say, to turn the argument entirely in favour of the Confederacy. It would be easy to draw the moral, not that the Southern Irish are as wrong as the Southern States, but that the Southern States were as right as the Southern Irish. But upon the whole, I do not incline to accept the parallel in that sense any more than in the opposite sense. For reasons I have already given elsewhere, I do believe that in the main Abraham Lincoln was right. But right in what?

If Lincoln was right, he was right in guessing that there was not really a Northern nation and a Southern nation, but only one American nation. And if he has been proved right, he has been proved right by the fact that men in the South, as well as the North, do now feel a patriotism for that American nation. His wisdom, if it really was wisdom, was justified not by his opponents being conquered, but by their being converted. Now, if the English politicians must insist on this parallel, they ought to see that the parallel is fatal to themselves. The very test which proved Lincoln right has proved them wrong. The very judgment which may have justified him quite unquestionably condemns them. We have again and again

conquered Ireland, and have never come an inch nearer to converting Ireland. We have had not one Gettysburg, but twenty Gettysburgs; but we have had no Union. And that is where, as I have remarked, it is relevant to remember that flying fantastic vision on the films that told so many people what no histories have told them. I heard when I was in America rumours of the local reappearance of the Ku-Klux Klan; but the smallness and mildness of the manifestation, as compared with the old Southern or the new Irish case, is alone a sufficient example of the exception that proves the rule. To approximate to any resemblance to recent Irish events, we must imagine the Ku-Klux Klan riding again in more than the terrors of that vision, wild as the wind, white as the moon, terrible as an army with banners. If there were really such a revival of the Southern action, there would equally be a revival of the Southern argument. It would be clear that Lee was right and Lincoln was wrong; that the Southern States were national and were as indestructible as nations. If the South were as rebellious as Ireland, the North would be as wrong as England.

But I desire a new English diplomacy that will exhibit, not the things in which England is wrong but the things in which England is right. And England is right in England, just as she is wrong in Ireland; and it is exactly that rightness of a real nation in itself that it is at once most difficult and most desirable to explain to foreigners. Now the Irishman, and to some extent the American, has remained alien to England, largely because he does not truly realise that the Englishman loves England, still less can he really imagine why the Englishman loves England. That is why I insist on the stupidity of ignoring and insulting the opinions of those few Virginians and other Southerners who really have some inherited notion of why Englishmen love England; and even love it in something of the same fashion themselves. Politicians who do not know the English spirit when they see it at home, cannot of course be expected to recognise it abroad. Publicists are eloquently praising Abraham Lincoln, for all the wrong reasons; but fundamentally for that worst and vilest of all reasons--that he succeeded. None of them seems to have the least notion of how to look for England in England; and they would see something fantastic in the figure of a traveller who found it elsewhere, or anywhere but in New England. And it is well, perhaps, that they have not yet found England where it is hidden in England; for if they found it, they would kill it.

All I am concerned to consider here is the inevitable failure of this sort of Anglo-American propaganda to create a friendship. To praise Lincoln as an Englishman is about as appropriate as if we were praising Lincoln as an English town. We are talking about something totally different. And indeed the whole conversation is rather like some such cross-purposes about some such word as 'Lincoln'; in which one party should be talking about the President and the other about the cathedral. It is like some wild bewilderment in a farce, with one man wondering

how a President could have a church-spire, and the other wondering how a church could have a chin-beard. And the moral is the moral on which I would insist everywhere in this book; that the remedy is to be found in disentangling the two and not in entangling them further. You could not produce a democrat of the logical type of Lincoln merely out of the moral materials that now make up an English cathedral town, like that on which Old Tom of Lincoln looks down. But on the other hand, it is quite certain that a hundred Abraham Lincolns, working for a hundred years, could not build Lincoln Cathedral. And the farcical allegory of an attempt to make Old Tom and Old Abe embrace to the glory of the illogical Anglo-Saxon language is but a symbol of something that is always being attempted, and always attempted in vain. It is not by mutual imitation that the understanding can come. It is not by erecting New York sky-scrapers in London that New York can learn the sacred significance of the towers of Lincoln. It is not by English dukes importing the daughters of American millionaires that England can get any glimpse of the democratic dignity of American men. I have the best of all reasons for knowing that a stranger can be welcomed in America; and just as he is courteously treated in the country as a stranger, so he should always be careful to treat it as a strange land. That sort of imaginative respect, as for something different and even distant, is the only beginning of any attachment between patriotic peoples. The English traveller may carry with him at least one word of his own great language and literature; and whenever he is inclined to say of anything 'This is passing strange,' he may remember that it was no inconsiderable Englishman who appended to it the answer, 'And therefore as a stranger give it welcome.'