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FRANKLIN'S CLAIMS TO GREATNESS

SOCIETY OF COLONIAL WARS

IN RHODE ISLAND

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FRANKLIN'S CLAIMS TO GREATNESS

WITH REMARKS

On the Religious Aspects of Patriotism

AN ADDRESS BEFORE

The Rhode Island Society of Colonial Wars

December 30, 1922

BY

HARRY LYMAN KOOPMAN

Issued by the courtesy of
HENRY DEXTER SHARPE, Esquire
In the administration of
WILLIAM BATES GREENOUGH
GOVERNOR
1923

FRANKLIN'S CLAIMS TO GREATNESS

With Remarks on the Religious Aspects of Patriotism

MY SUBJECT is Franklin's Claims to Greatness, but I wish to connect it with what I understand to be the aims of your organization: to keep alive the past of our Country in order that its future may live. To do this I must make a wide detour into the field of religion.

Every man in this room, so far as religion is concerned, is a man without a country. This is largely true of modern Europeans, but is peculiarly and painfully true of Americans. In political relations we have a very vivid sense of nationality. For an American living abroad to become nationalized in the country of his residence gives us something of a shock, and if a man at home renounces his citizenship, as Thoreau did, we can only explain his action as that of an enthusiast or a madman.

Now the Greek, the Roman, the Hebrew, carried this same feeling over into his religion. He was a part of his religion as the American feels himself a part of his nation. His gods and demi-gods were his ancestors, the founders of his institutions, and when he was acting as a man of his race or nation he was acting in a direct line of succession from those superior beings. Every mountain and lake and stream and headland was associated with some divinity. This was true of our own New England when it was inhabited by the red men. What was the effect of this belief upon the worshipper? This is what Santayana says: "To the Greek...religion was an aspiration to grow like the gods by invoking their companionship, rehearsing their story, feeling vicariously the glow of their splendid prerogatives, and placing them, in the form of beautiful and very human statues, constantly before his eyes."

Our religion is an exotic, an importation, and not even from the nearest continent, but from a continent with which we feel no connections and no affiliations. It even has elements derived through Egypt from the Dark Continent. Our religion is a universal religion, not related to place or time. I confess that until I began to follow this line of thought with the expectation of presenting it to you this evening I had never realized that our acceptance of a universal religion comes under Emerson's great law of Compensation; that in gaining universality we had lost some very precious elements of religion, of unreplaceable value to the mass of mankind. I had recognized no implied renunciation in the words of Jesus to the woman of Samaria. She had said to him: "Our fathers worshipped in this mountain, and ye say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship." He answered her: "The hour cometh when ye shall neither in this mountain nor yet in Jerusalem worship the Father. God is a spirit, and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth."

That is indeed the very summit of religion, but how many, alas, are still stumbling up the lowest slopes of Zion! When the Roman Church took over the invisible assets of the Roman Empire it utilized first of all the prestige of that great world power, thus maintaining a universal character. But in another respect it very shrewdly preserved localism. The Greeks and the Romans had their special local worship of various deities, male and female, and these objects of worship the church did not destroy, but simply christened; so today all over Europe, especially southern Europe, we find that close bond of localism in popular worship; and there can be no doubt that it represents something very dear to the human heart and something very important to society. Two thousand years, indeed, have not sufficed to raise human nature to the height of universality in religion. Either it has retained the old localisms, or it suffers for lack of them.

If universality is the key to the future, then what happened in religion is destined to happen in politics, and some day we shall

throw over patriotism as we have thrown over national and racial limitations in religion; but that day has not yet dawned, and its full realization must be far distant. In the meantime, while we may be outgrowing patriotism as an antagonistic emotion, there is very much that it still can do for the world as an uplifting emotion; and this we shall find just where religion found it, in the contemplation of the great of old. No American can read Pindar, all whose poems tie up the activities of the present with the great Hellenic past, without feeling that American literature, and American poetry in particular, have been neglecting a great opportunity and an unequalled service.

Am I proposing hero-worship? Certainly not in any bad sense of that word. Or ancestor-worship? Not in the least. Am I proposing that we set up the great men of the past to be imitated? Not in any direct fashion. What we shall gain from contemplating these great men is a two-fold inspiration. First, a personal one, as their lives and deeds react in our imagination upon our own; and secondly, a national one, as we realize that our nation too has made its contributions to the list of the world's greatest; that, as Paul said in his rhetorical understatement, we are citizens of no mean city. You may remind me that we have recognized our great men of the past to some extent already; and the statement is true as regards Washington and Lincoln. I yield to no one in admiration of these great men; but we have other men in our annals as great as they, or in different ways, and we have one man who united in a single personality more kinds of greatness than any other man known to history, namely, Benjamin Franklin; greatness, too, of the first rank, and on many counts, besides a throng of lesser manifestations of greatness. In this he differs from Washington and Lincoln, and, indeed, all our other national heroes. Washington was a great general, though not in the highest class. He was a great statesman, but not more distinguished than some of his contemporaries. His great quality was character, and in this he is hardly equalled in the history of the world. Lincoln was a great statesman, and his statesmanship was even surpassed by his

character, which combined strength, flexibility, and sympathy on a scale hardly realized in any other instance. But Franklin was a world figure on at least five counts, and a national figure on many others; and on each of these counts he won distinction either before all the world or in the eyes of his countrymen. The annals of biography will be searched in vain for another man who combines in such a degree so many forms of greatness. Many honor him for one of his claims to distinction in ignorance or neglect of the others. Let it be our privilege this evening to review them all or at least the chief of them.

First, in his achievements as a world figure, he was a great statesman. Had Franklin's Albany Plan of Union been adopted, there would have been no Revolutionary War, and no breaking up of the English World. He had a part in framing our Declaration of Independence, and so prominent a part in framing our Constitution that, it is safe to say, but for his efforts our present Constitution would never have existed. These achievements place him among the greatest statesmen of the world.

As a diplomatist he deserves a place not only in the first rank but in absolutely the first place. No diplomatist representing any country in any age ever accomplished so much for his country as he did. Without Franklin's services in France our Revolutionary War could not have been won, and the United States could not have come into being. One of his most brilliant diplomatic victories he was not privileged to win; but there seems to be little doubt that if our negotiation of the treaty of peace with England had been put wholly into the hands of Franklin, he would have secured not only the territories granted, but all British America.

As a scientist Franklin, not accidentally, but by following strictly scientific methods, made the most dramatic discovery that any scientist has yet made or in all probability ever will make, the identification of lightning with electricity. With this should be coupled his invention of the lightning-rod by which he disarmed the thunderbolt, an invention that has never been superseded. He moved about in our old world as if it were

perfectly new. The fact that a situation had always been accepted was no deterrent to him, but rather an incitement to make it better. This was true in science, politics and everyday life.

If all the great authors of the world, regardless of time or country, were graded according to their ability, with Shakespeare at the head, and then the names were gradually stricken off at the bottom of the list, Franklin's would be the last American name to disappear. Franklin's Autobiography has clearly won a place in World Literature that has been surpassed by no other American book; and in its own class it may justly be said to stand at the head. He was also one of the greatest of pamphleteers, a class of writers that has been absorbed by modern journalism. As an essayist, learning his art from Addison, he outstripped his master in both matter and manner. He has more to say and says it more brilliantly. Franklin stands before us as a practical moralist whose counsel has been circling the earth for nearly two centuries and never was more vital or more needed than at the present moment. In connection with his practical morality he became a proverb writer, among the most distinguished of any age, and perhaps unsurpassed in point of humor. In all these particulars Franklin is not merely an American figure, but a world figure.

Coming now to achievement on a lower but still a distinguished level, let us consider him first as an inventor. Franklin's mind was distracted by two opposite interests, one speculative thought, the other practical activity. He was very handy with tools; and he had an instinct for improving every mechanical device that came into his hands, and for making mechanical devices not at hand where he felt their need. But the enormous range of his other interests prevented him from accomplishing what he might have done in this field if he had confined himself to it. As it was, he gave us, besides the lightning rod, the Franklin stove, which combined the economy of the stove with the ventilating quality of the fireplace; he invented bi-focal spectacles; he published the first illustration that ever appeared in a

newspaper; he invented, though he did not perfect, the Argand burner; he invented a copying-press for letters, though it appears that he had been anticipated; he made a clock with only three wheels that told hours, minutes, and seconds; and he wrote an extensive treatise on stilling waves with oil. He discovered that northeast storms travel from the southwest, and so laid the corner-stone of weather forecasting. Besides all this, among other practical services, he taught Americans how to light and clean their streets, and organized our first fire company. He was our first great Postmaster General, and up to date has apparently been the most successful, for he always showed an annual surplus.

Although he retired from business at forty-two in order to devote himself to more congenial pursuits, he left a fortune of a quarter of a million dollars, and was potentially one of the world's greatest business men. There are grounds also for calling him potentially one of the world's greatest soldiers. He had an honorable military career, but his interests lay in other directions. He was colonel of the troops in defense of the Pennsylvania frontier, and was offered but declined the rank of general. By a curious accident of history, it was Franklin's energy that made Braddock's advance and therefore his defeat possible. If he had been trained as a soldier one cannot imagine any great commander, from Alexander to Foch, who would have been eager to try conclusions on the battlefield with a man of such resource and such swiftness of action. It is hardly too much to say that from the days of Ulysses to Franklin there appeared no man so fertile in expedients as to make a third in their company.

As a founder of great institutions he is the most distinguished in our annals. He may justly be called the founder of the University of Pennsylvania. He established the American Philosophical Society, and, by the example of his Junto, out of which grew the Philadelphia Library Company, he created the subscription libraries that furnished the reading of the American public for more than a century and then passed on the torch of enlightenment to our public libraries.

He has a claim to be called the founder of modern philanthropy and the first great American philanthropist. Two foundations of \$5,000 each left by him, one to Boston and one to Philadelphia, have now grown, one to more than his entire fortune, and the other and more active fund to double that size. The soul of these benefactions is not charity, but opportunity. To me the picture of Franklin's philanthropy persisting to our day, and ever increasing in scope, recalls nothing so much as the carved hand bearing a torch, reaching out from Rousseau's tomb in the Panthéon—only in Franklin's case the torch is a symbol, not of destruction, but of warmth and light.

Perhaps his least distinction was won in his own trade of printer, and even in that he attained an honorable place both for what he produced and for what he wrote on the subject.

I have omitted many of his interests and activities, but I shall close the list with one more which perhaps ought to figure as another claim to world renown—his amazing capacity for friendship. Few men ever had more or more distinguished friends, loved them better, or enjoyed more of their love. His affection extended to his friends' children, whose careers he followed with unflagging interest. Apart from his unequalled services in France purely as a diplomatist, he won also, by his geniality as our personal and social representative, a popularity that no later American abroad has ever approached.

Franklin's long life bridged the space between Newton, whom he as a youth was disappointed of seeing, and Fitch, the inventor of the steamboat, whom he congratulated after Fitch's successful trial trip on the Delaware. In all that space, which contains some of the world's greatest men, there is none greater than Franklin and hardly anyone half so interesting.

Coming back now to my original theme, I would insist that, if we confine our attention and admiration to one or two great men, we are living below our opportunity, both narrowing our sympathies and scanting our source of inspiration. Moreover, there is a certain injustice in leaving out of the account men who had a large share in making America what it is, and whose

example still points our way for the future. The value of contemplating not only one great man (even as great as our subject of this evening) but all our entire roll of honor, has never, it seems to me, been illustrated so well as by our friend, J. Franklin Jameson, in his Pilgrim address at Brown University in 1920. His words, as you will see, were inspired by Paul's, and if mine were not inspired by his, at least I wish to use his words as the crown of what I have to say this evening. This is the close of his address:

"Men and women of Providence, the history of the Hebrew nation was sacred history only because the Hebrew thought it so. Are we not as truly a chosen people? I wish that we might impose upon our minds the habit of thinking always of our own wonderful history as a sacred story. I wish that, when we read in the eleventh chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews that magnificent bed-roll of the great ones of Israel, we should translate it into terms of our own history—should remind ourselves that by faith our elders obtained a good report; that by faith Bradford and Brewster, when they were called to go out into a place which they should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and they went out, not knowing whither they went. By faith they sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles with those who were the heirs with them of the same promise: for they looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God. Therefore sprang there even of these few so many as the stars of the sky in multitude, and as the sand which is by the seashore innumerable. These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country. And truly, if they had been mindful of that country from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned: but they desired a better country, that is, an heavenly; therefore God was not ashamed to be called their God; for He had prepared for them a city. And what

shall I more say? For the time would fail me to tell of Winthrop and of Williams and of Washington and of Franklin and of Adams and of Hamilton and of Lincoln and of Roosevelt, who through faith subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, waxed valiant in fight, turned to flight the armies of the aliens. And these all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise, God having provided some better things for us, that they without us should not be made perfect."

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