

**THE FOUNDATION OF THE
AMERICAN COLONIES: A
LECTURE DELIVERED BEFORE THE
UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD, JUNE
12, 1860**

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The Foundation of the American Colonies: A Lecture Delivered Before the University of Oxford,
June 12, 1860 by Goldwin Smith

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Smith, Goldwin

from the Author

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OF
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A Lecture

DELIVERED BEFORE

THE UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD,

JUNE 12, 1860.

BY

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A LECTURE, &c.

COLONY is an ambiguous word: the Phœnician colonies were factories; the Roman colonies were garrisons; the Spanish colonies were gold mines, worked by slaves; France justly placed the products of her Algerian colony in our Exhibition under the heading "Ministry of War." The Greek cities, in the hour of their greatness, founded new cities the counterparts of themselves. England has had the honour, an honour which no disaster can now rend from her, of becoming the parent of new nations. To colonize in this the highest sense is the attribute of freedom. Freedom only can give the necessary self-reliance. In freedom only can the habit of self-government requisite for a young community be formed. The life of the plant must be diffused through all its parts, or its cuttings will not grow.

It is evidently a law of Providence that man shall spread over the earth, make it fruitful, fill it with moral being. When all its powers are brought into play, when it has a civilized nation on every shore, when the instrument is, as it were, fully strung, we know not what harmony may result. The great migrations of mankind are the great epochs of history. In the East, the succession of empires has been formed by the successive descents of warlike tribes on the plains of Mesopotamia, on the countries bordering the Persian gulf, on Hindostan and China. In the West,

the evidence which tends to prove that the Greek and Roman aristocracies were conquering races, tends also to prove that Greece and Rome were the offspring of migrations. The migration of the German tribes into the Roman empire divides ancient from modern, heathen from Christian, history. So far the propelling cause was the want of fresh pastures, or at highest, the restlessness of conscious strength, the sight of ill-defended wealth, the allurements of sunnier lands. The American colonies are the offspring of humanity at a more advanced stage and in a nobler mood. They arose from discontent, not with exhausted pastures, but with institutions that were waxing old, and a faith that was ceasing to be divine. They are monuments of that vast and various movement of humanity, the significance of which is but half expressed by the name of the Reformation. They are still receiving recruits from a movement which is now going on similar to the movement of the sixteenth century, and perhaps not less momentous, though, as we are still in the midst of it, not so clearly understood. The enterprises of the Puritans, like their worship, seemed to our forefathers eccentricities, disturbing for a moment the eternal order of society and the Church; but that which in the eyes of man is eccentricity, is sometimes in the course of Providence the central power.

Before the actual commencement of the Reformation European society began to feel those blind motions of the blood which told that the world's year had turned, and that the middle ages were drawing to their close. A general restlessness shewed itself, among other ways, in maritime adventure. The Columbus of England was John Cabot, borrowed, like

the Columbus of Spain, from a nation which, crushed at home, put forth its greatness in other lands. At the close of the fifteenth century John Cabot, with his more famous son Sebastian, sailed from Bristol, the queen, and now, with its quaint streets and beautiful church, the monument, of English commerce, as English commerce was in its more romantic and perhaps its nobler hour. The adventurers put forth, graciously authorized by King Henry VII. to discover a new world at their own risk and charge, and to hold it as vassals of his crown, landing always at his port of Bristol, and paying him one-fifth of the gains for ever. This royal grant of the earth to man, like the similar grants made by the Papacy, may provoke a smile, but it was the same delusion which in after times cost tears and blood. The reward of the Cabots was the discovery of North America; and Sebastian, in his second voyage, saw the sun of the Arctic summer night shine upon the icebergs of the pole. The great Elizabethan mariners took up the tale. They had two aims,—gold, and the north-west passage to the treasures of the East. Without chart or guide, with only, to use their own phrase, a “merrie wind,” they went forth on voyages which might have appalled a Franklin, as free and fearless as a child at play. Frobisher sailed north of Hudson’s Strait in a bark of twenty-five tons. As he dropped down the Thames, Elizabeth graciously waved her hand to an enterprise for which she had done nothing; a great art, and one which has something to give the Queen her pedestal in history. Gilbert, with a little fleet of boats rather than ships, took possession for England of Newfoundland. As he was on his way homeward, off Cape Breton, in a wild night, the lights of his little vessel disappeared. The

last words he had been heard to say were, "Heaven is as near by sea as it is by land."

Gold lured these adventurers to discover countries, as it lured the alchemist to found a science. In their thirst for gold they filled their ships with yellow earth. Had that yellow earth really been the precious metal, it would have made the finders richer only for an hour, and brought confusion upon commerce and the whole estate of man. The treasures of the precious metals seem to be so laid that new stores may be found only when the circle of trade is greatly enlarged, and the wealth of mankind greatly increased. And if the precious metals are the only or the best circulating medium, and it is necessary that the balance between them and the sum of human wealth should be preserved, this may perhaps be reckoned among the proofs that the earth is adapted to the use of man.

England had a keen race for North America with Spain and France. The name of Espiritu Santo Bay on the coast of Florida commemorates the presence of those devout adventurers who marched with a train of priests, with all the paraphernalia of the mass, with bloodhounds to hunt the natives and chains to bind them. Spanish keels first floated on the imperial waters and among the primeval forests of the Mississippi. The name of Carolina, a settlement planned by Coligny, is a monument fixed by the irony of fate to the treacherous friendship of Charles IX. with the Huguenots on the eve of the St. Bartholomew. North America would have been ill lost to the Spaniard; it would not have been so ill lost to the Huguenot.

But the prize was to be ours. After roaming for a century from Florida to Greenland, English enterprise furlled its wandering sail upon a shore which to

its first explorers seemed a paradise, and called the land Virginia, after the Virgin Queen. Raleigh was deep in this venture, as his erratic spirit was deep in all the ventures, commercial, political, military, and literary, of that stirring and prolific time. So far as his own fortunes were concerned, this scheme, like most of his other schemes, was a brilliant failure. In after times North Carolina called her capital by his name—

*“Et nunc servat honor sedem tuus, ossaque nomen
Hesperia in magna, siqua est ea gloria, signat.”—*

if that can appease the injured, unhappy, and heroic shade.

Virginia had seemed an earthly paradise. But on reading intently the annals of colonization, we soon discover how hard it is for man to fix his dwelling where his fellow has never been; how he sinks and perishes before the face, grand and lovely though it be, of colossal, unreclaimed, trackless nature. The Virginian colonists had among them too many broken gentlemen, tradesmen, and serving-men, too few who were good hands at the axe and spade. They had come to a land of promise in expectation of great and speedy gains, and it seems clear that great and speedy gains are not to be made by felling primeval woods. That the enterprise was not abandoned was due in a great measure to the cheering presence of a wild adventurer, named Captain John Smith, who, turned by his kind relations as a boy upon a stirring world, with ten shillings in his pocket, and that out of his own estate, had, before he was thirty, a tale to tell of wars in the Low Countries and against the Turks, of battles and single combats, of captivities, of wanderings and voyages in all quarters of the globe, as strange

and moving as the tale of Othello ; and who, if he did not win a Desdemona, won a Turkish princess to save him from the bowstring at Adrianople, and an Indian princess to save him from the tomahawk in Virginia. Again and again the settlement was recruited and re-supplied. The original colony of Raleigh quite died out ; and upon the place of its transient abode nature resumed her immemorial reign. The settlement was made good under James I., and at last prospered by the cultivation of tobacco ; so that the royal author of the " Counterblast " unwillingly became the patron of the staple he most abhorred. Even this second colony once re-embarked in despair, and was turned back by the long-boat of the vessel which brought it reinforcements and supplies.

To mankind the success of the Virginian colony proved but a doubtful boon. The tobacco was cultivated first by convicts, then by negro slaves. The Dutch brought the first cargo of negroes to the colony ; but the guilt of this detested traffic does not rest in any especial manner on the Dutch : the whole of commercial Europe was tainted with the sin. Sir John Hawkins, Elizabeth's gallant admiral, was a slaver, and the Crown itself was not ashamed to share his gains. The cities of Spain were seats of the slave trade, as well as of religious persecutions ; and both these deadly diseases of humanity had been stimulated by the Crusades. Even the Puritans of New England were preserved from the contagion rather by their energetic industry as free labourers, and the nobility of their character, than by clear views of right. They denounced kidnapping ; they forbade slavery to be perpetual ; but bondage in itself seemed to them lawful because it was Jewish. It is an addi-