

**ARISTOCRACY AND
JUSTICE:
SHELBURNE ESSAYS,
NINTH SERIES, PP. 1-240**

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Aristocracy and Justice: Shelburne Essays, Ninth Series, pp. 1-240 by Paul Elmer More

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PAUL ELMER MORE

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Aristocracy and Justice

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NINTH SERIES

By Paul Elmer More

"We think that a wise Mean, between these barbarous Extrems, is that which self-Preservation ought to dictate to our Wishes."
— HALIFAX, *The Character of a Trimmer.*



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NATURAL ARISTOCRACY

Aristocracy and Justice

NATURAL ARISTOCRACY

IN a certain New York club of authors and scholars, the conversation turned one evening, as it is so accustomed to turn, on the politics of the day; and some astonishment was caused when one of the circle, a distinguished student of sociology well known for his radical opinions, said with emphatic conviction that we were talking of little things, and that the one great question of the day was whether a democratic society could develop a natural aristocracy. By chance I had with me that night an excellent new book on *The Political Philosophy of Burke*, by Professor John MacCunn, late of the University of Liverpool, and as we left the club I showed it to one of my fellow writers, with a word of commendation. "Ah," he said, handing it back unopened, "Burke! he's dead, is he not?" Well, Burke, I dare say, is dead for us, as so many other great memories have perished, and Lord Morley (plain John Morley then, a fairly practical statesman) was indulging in the usual enthusiasm of the biographer when, twenty-five years ago, he closed his luminous volume with the prophecy that "the

4 ARISTOCRACY AND JUSTICE

historic method, fitting in with certain dominant conceptions in the region of natural science, is bringing men round to a way of looking at society for which Burke's maxims are exactly suited; and it seems probable that he will be more frequently and more seriously referred to within the next twenty years than he has been within the whole of the last eighty." The historic method has an odd way of discrediting the authority of history, and certainly in the lustrum since Lord Morley's predicted score of years the world of Lloyd George and Mr. Roosevelt has not been referring abundantly to Burke's maxims. Yet, with the words of my radical sociological friend in my ears, I could not help reflecting on the coincidence that Professor MacCunn, a writer thoroughly imbued with modern ideas, should have led the whole of Burke's political philosophy up to the same question of natural aristocracy. "For Burke's feet," he says, "were never on surer ground than when, as we have seen, he argued that a civil society, by the very conditions of social struggle and growth, must needs evolve 'a natural aristocracy, without which there is no nation.'" And then, being sufficiently trained in the new historic method, he proceeds to show how Burke entirely missed the real problem of society — as if human nature had first sprung into existence with the Reform Bill.

Of the urgency of the problem a reflective man

will scarcely doubt. The only thing, in fact, that might lead him to question its urgency is its hoary antiquity. Plato wrestled with it when he undertook to outline the ideal republic, and many of his pages on the range of government through its five forms — aristocracy, timocracy, oligarchy, democracy, and tyranny — sound as if he had been reading yesterday's newspapers of London and New York. In the orgy of misrule that brought Athens to humiliation in the last years of the Peloponnesian war he had seen oligarchs and timocrats tearing at each other's throats like mad dogs; he had seen the triumph of the democratic party, and, knowing its instability, he had composed the long dialogue of *The Republic* to show how, if possible, it might be saved from impending tyranny. He wrote, so far as the public was concerned, in a spirit of despair, almost as if foreseeing the domination of an Alexander and the cold despotism of Rome; and in that saddened scepticism he was thinking more of holding up the aristocratic idea of justice for any pious seeker of the future than of creating an actual commonwealth. Yet, however his application of the law of the individual to the machinery of politics may appear at times fantastic, his argument never really gets far from the everlasting questions of government.

The oligarchy which he knew and described was what we should rather call a plutocracy. He