

**THE ROMANES LECTURE,
1896. THE ENGLISH
NATIONAL CHARACTER**

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The Romanes Lecture, 1896. The English National Character by Mandell Creighton

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MANDELL CREIGHTON, D.D.

Oxford

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THE ROMANES LECTURE

1896

The
English National Character

BY THE RIGHT REV.

MANDELL CREIGHTON, D.D.

LORD BISHOP OF PETERBOROUGH

HONORARY FELLOW OF MERTON COLLEGE, OXFORD

DELIVERED

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THE
ENGLISH NATIONAL CHARACTER.



It may seem that the subject on which I have chosen to address you is alike hazardous and commonplace. There is nothing new to be said about it, and there is always a danger of saying too much. The subject, however, occurred to me at a time when, I suppose, most of us were wondering whether we ought to feel hurt, or flattered, at the sudden interest in our doings which other countries unanimously displayed. We found some difficulty in recognizing the representation of ourselves which our neighbours put before us; and our thoughts turned towards an examination of the contents of our national self-consciousness. Whatever conclusions we reached about the main subject, I think we are in fairness bound to admit that the impression which we produce is some element in what we are. To be misunderstood is, doubtless, a misfortune; but then intelligibility is of the nature of a virtue. The character of an individual is not so much what he thinks himself to be as what others

15

1847

think him. If he lacks the capacity for making clear what he is, that is a defect which must count against him.

Of course the analogy between nations and individuals cannot be pursued very far. Individuals are many; nations are few. Individuals are judged for their own actions; nations have a continuous character, and each generation is paying the penalty for the prejudices created by the actions of its predecessors. Moreover, in judging individuals, we adopt standards which vary according to the scale on which their life was lived; for instance, a statesman is not judged so much by his private life as by his public policy. When this method is extended to a nation, all appreciation of the finer forms of its activity tends to disappear, and only very broad characteristics are taken into account. Further, it must be remembered that at present nations stand towards one another in the relation of commercial firms. In the ordinary course of things they have no occasion to express an opinion about each other's methods of carrying on business; but when competition becomes brisk, and interests conflict, any old stories are useful which will damage their rival's credit. I remember when I was a junior fellow, being at dinner where conversation turned upon University business. In a pause, one who had been silent addressed the only stranger present: 'I think you ought to know that in Oxford we are all so well acquainted with one another's good qualities that we only talk about those points which are capable of amendment.' International criticism is

undoubtedly framed on the same basis, a basis to which no exception can be taken, when it is once understood.

But I have a larger reason than one of temporary interest, which indeed I cannot undertake to satisfy, for attempting to consider this subject. National character is the abiding product of a nation's past; and that conception of the past is most valuable which accounts; not so much for the present environment of a people, as for the animating spirit which produced it, and which must still exist if it is to be maintained. It is not enough that history should account for the growth of institutions, the spread of empire, the march of commerce, or the development of ideas. Other institutions in the past may have been more solid, but they have passed away; other empires may have been vaster, but they have vanished; commerce may have been equally adventurous in other times, but its harbours and marts are in ruins; literature may have spoken in richer tones, and science may have constructed more massive systems, but they are now the inspiration of a few students. All these things came to an end, because national character failed in power to keep what it had acquired; and rapid growth was followed by quick decay. There must be an equilibrium between the powers of getting and keeping; and this must be wrought into the character of the nation itself. The great product of England is not so much its institutions, its empire, its commerce, or its literature, as it is the individual Englishman, who is moulded by all these influences, and is the ultimate test of their value. He exists as a recognizable type of character, with special

aptitudes and capacities, to be appraised ultimately, if you will, by reference to your conception of the goal of the world's progress. Just as a biography would fail if it did not leave you with a clear notion of its hero's character, how it was formed, and how it was applied, so any view of history falls short of its purpose which does not exhibit the formation and exercise of national character, as the motive power of national life, prompting to action and growing by use.

In attempting to follow out this line of thought, it is necessary to find a starting-point. I will not venture on speculations about the influence of race or climate, but will confine myself within the limits of recorded facts. I am not concerned with the origin of our national character, interesting as that may be, but with its nature and the forms in which it has declared itself in history.

Now the most important point about English history is that the English were the first people who formed for themselves a national character at all. We always tend insensibly to regard the past with the eyes of the present; and, though we know better, we think about the past as though nations always existed. A distinction, however, must be made between races and nations. Races or tribes came into history with certain characteristics which were doubtless the result of their previous conditions; but these conditions are unrecorded and can only be dimly conjectured. We can see these races mixing with other races, and entering into new surroundings. The result of this process is that populations become nations, because