

THE PROSPECTS OF BRITAIN

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The Prospects of Britain by James Douglas

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JAMES DOUGLAS

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OF BRITAIN**

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OF

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BRITAIN.

BY

JAMES DOUGLAS, Esq.

OF CAVERS.

**ADAM BLACK, EDINBURGH;
AND LONGMAN, REES, ORME, BROWN, AND GREEN,
LONDON.**

MDCCCXXXI.

THE
PROSPECTS OF BRITAIN.

THE storm which threatens Europe is no passing cloud. We are getting more and more deeply involved in one of those great catastrophes which change the fortunes of mankind. Between the heaves of the earthquake there may be many and considerable pauses, but at every succeeding shock the rents of the social edifice become wider, till the whole fabric at last must lie level with the ground. An unseen power is smiting the idol of human dominion at its base. The feet on which it rests are broken, the iron and the clay are literally separating. The composite governments which resulted from the union of barbarian conquerors and Roman subjects have lost the cement that bound them, and are crumbling into dust.

The political convulsions of the present day may

be considered as the revival of an ancient quarrel, long smothered, but never appeased. The governments established by the German tribes, when they took possession of the Western Empire, were a mixture of freedom and servitude. The Gothic institutions were liberal even to licentiousness in the favour that was shewn by the conquerors to themselves; but iniquitous and oppressive to the original natives of the soil. The vanquished, however, are at last rallying against the victors, and reconquering those equal rights which had long ago been wrested from them by the conquests of the barbarians. Other conquerors have sought to identify themselves with the nations they subdued; but the Gothic race, by the oppressive privileges with which they distinguished themselves from the mass of the people, perpetuated through a length of ages the remembrance of their foreign origin and their usurped authority. Thus in France the original Franks or the nobles, and the Gauls or the citizens and peasantry, never were fairly incorporated; and though their languages mingled and became one, the races were not blended, but the former remained the superior, the latter an inferior caste.

The nations of Europe, ever since the termination of the dark ages, have been gradually rising up

against the yoke of bondage which the barbarians had imposed, sometimes resisting the privileges of their oppressors, and at other times endeavouring to share in them. But the first decided and equal struggle took place in the war of the English Commonwealth, when the pretensions of all parties were fully brought to the arbitration of the sword. The three great divisions, the Episcopalians, the Presbyterians, and the Independents (and these divisions were political as well as religious), gave a clear representation of the changes which society had undergone, and was yet to undergo. The high churchmen and kingsmen were no unworthy representatives of the past, filled with recollections of ancient loyalty, and in some respects of ancient superstition. The Presbyterians, or rather the moderate party, for, "after a sort," all were royalists, and many were churchmen, might be considered the representatives of the times then present, and of the state of transition in which the country was placed. While the Independents in politics and religion, few in number, but exalted in genius, caught an inspiration from the future, and mingled in their vast plans, the fore-shadow of coming ages, with a somewhat discordant and inapplicable remembrance of the classic republics. As might have been expected the

moderate scheme of church and state, after some depressions and fluctuations during the reign of the latter Stuarts, gained the permanent ascendancy at the Revolution; while the Independents, with their platform of government, had to retreat to the woods of America, till time should mature their strength, and circumstances should open an unbounded region for the accomplishment of their designs.

The magnificent thoughts of the old Romans, and their plans for the subjugation of the world, revived in the breasts of the Commonwealth's men of England; but all the institutions of the country being originally monarchical, and the habits and opinions of the majority of the people being in favour of kingly power, they wanted the proper materials to work upon, and their designs could never be carried into full effect. It was not from the want of virtue or public spirit that a democracy was not established in England, as MONTESQUIEU supposes; but because the mass of the people were averse to a republican form of government. Two-thirds of the people would at any time have given their votes for a king. But the observation is striking and still more applicable to France than to England: "Ce fut un assez beau spectacle dans le siecle passé de voir les efforts impuissans des Anglois pour etablir parmi eux la demo-

cratie. Comme ceux qui avoient part aux affaires n'avoient point de vertu, que leur ambition étoit irritée par le succès de celui qui avoit le plus osé, que l'esprit d'une faction n'étoit réprimé que par l'esprit d'une autre, le gouvernement changeoit sans cesse. Le peuple étonné cherchoit la démocratie, et ne la trouvoit nulle part. Enfin, après bien des mouvemens des chocs et des secousses; il fallut se reposer dans le gouvernement même qu'on avoit proscrit."

When the American Revolution broke out, it took a much more determined course. Feudal institutions and large accumulations of property were unknown. The Americans were without a nobility, and they had no other recollection of kings except their oppression. They were a new people in a new world. The past held small sway over them, and they were open to the influences of that new era in society which is about to renovate or overturn more ancient governments.

But though this new spirit had first broken out into action in America, it had previously been working a change in the mind and literature of Europe. The writings which were everywhere read and admired were decidedly hostile to the institutions under which men lived, and to the laws which they obeyed. All governments are founded upon opinion, and this

great change in opinions inevitably led in the long run to a change in the institutions of every country, whether wrought by the peaceful concessions of the rulers themselves, or extorted by the convulsions of civil war. The governors were the first revolutionists. Frederick and Joseph spared no ancient abuses that did not turn to the profit of kings. Almost every government in Europe underwent some ameliorations.

These changes, however, did not keep pace with the rapid advance of general opinion, and it was evident that kings would soon desert that revolutionary philosophy of which they were at first such distinguished disciples. France, which had long ago been pointed out by HARRINGTON as the country which would succeed England in the struggle for liberty, first began that contest upon the Continent, which, though it may seem to cease for a time, will never terminate till the ancient governments of Europe are overturned. We have seen the first flame break out and threaten to involve Europe in one general conflagration,—when at last, quenched in blood, it subsided into ashes, and all seemed quiet ; till from these smouldering remains new fires have been rekindled, as intense as ever, and likely to be still wider in their range and destruction.

We have already witnessed a French, we have still