

**PROPHETIC VOICES
CONCERNING AMERICA:
A MONOGRAPH**

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Prophetic voices concerning America: a monograph by Charles Summer

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Charles Sumner

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CONCERNING

A M E R I C A.

A MONOGRAPH.

BY

CHARLES SUMNER.

I have a far other and far brighter vision before my gaze. It may be but a vision, but I will cherish it. I see one vast confederation stretching from the frozen North in unbroken line to the glowing South, and from the wild billows of the Atlantic westward to the calmer waters of the Pacific main,—and I see one people, and one law, and one language, and one faith, and, over all that wide continent, the home of freedom, and a refuge for the oppressed of every race and of every clime.—JOHN BAUGER, *Speech at Birmingham*, December 18, 1862: *Speeches by Rogers*, Vol. I. p. 225.

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LEE, SHEPARD, AND DILLINGHAM.
1874.

THIS monograph appeared originally in the "Atlantic Monthly." It is now revised and enlarged. In the celebration of our hundredth birthday as a nation, now fast approaching, these prophetic voices will be heard, teaching how much of present fame and power was foreseen, also what remains to be accomplished.

C. S.

MONOGRAPH.

THE discovery of America by Christopher Columbus is the greatest event of secular history. Besides the potato, the turkey, and maize, which it introduced at once for the nourishment and comfort of the Old World,¹ and also tobacco, which only blind passion for the weed could place in the beneficent group, this discovery opened the door to influences infinite in extent and beneficence. Measure them, describe them, picture them, you cannot. While yet unknown, imagination invested this continent with proverbial magnificence. It was the Orient and the land of Cathay. When afterwards it took a place in geography, imagination found another field in trying to portray its future history. If the Golden Age is before, and not behind, as is now happily the prevailing faith, then indeed must America share at least, if it does not monopolize, the promised good.

Before the voyage of Columbus in 1492, nothing of America was really known. Scanty scraps from antiq-

¹ In the Description of England, prefixed to Hollinshed's Chronicles and dated 1586, one of these gifts is mentioned: "Of the potato and such venereal roots as are brought out of Spain, Portugal, and the Indies to furnish up our banquets, I speak not." Introduction, Book II., Chap. VI., Vol. I. p. 281. (London, 1807.)

uity, vague rumors from the resounding ocean, and the hesitating speculations of science, were all that the inspired navigator found to guide him. Foremost among these were the well-known verses of Seneca, so interesting from ethical genius and a tragical death, in the chorus of his "Medea," which for generations had been the finger-point to an undiscovered world.

" . . . venient annis
 Secula seris quibus Oceanus
 Vincula rerum laxet, et ingens
 Patent tetus, Tiphys que novos
 Detegat orbés, nec sit terris
 Etfima Thule."¹

These verses are vague and lofty rather than specific; but Bacon, after setting them forth, says of them, "A prophecy of the discovery of America"; and this they may well be, if we adopt the translation of Archbishop Whately, in his notes to the Essay on Prophecies: "There shall come a time in later ages, when ocean shall relax his chains and a vast continent appear, and a pilot shall find new worlds, and Thule shall be no more earth's bound." Fox, turning from statesmanship to scholarship, wrote to Wakefield:² "The prophecy in Seneca's 'Medea' is very curious indeed." Irving says of it: "Wonderfully apposite, and shows, at least, how nearly the warm imagination of a poet may approach to prophecy. The predictions of the ancient oracle were rarely so unequivocal."³ These verses were adopted by Irving as a motto on the title-page of the revised edition of his "Life of Columbus."

¹ Act II., v., 374.

² June 29, 1809. Memorial- and Correspondence, by Lord John Russell, Vol. IV., p. 393.

³ Life of Columbus, Appendix, No. XXII., author's revised edition, Vol. III., p. 402.

Four, if not more, copies are extant in the undoubted handwriting of Columbus, — precious autographs to tempt collectors; two in his work on the Prophecies, another in a letter to Queen Isabella, and still another entered among his observations of lunar eclipses at Hayti and Jamaica. By these the great admiral sailed. Humboldt has preserved a copy in the following questionable form, without even mentioning the variation in prosody and in an important word from the received text:—

" Venient annis secula seris
 Quibus Oceanus viscula rerum
 Laxet et ingens pateat tellus
 Tethys que novos detegat orbés
 Nec sit terris ultima Thule."

This is more curious, as the verses are correct in the letter of Columbus, preserved by Navarrete.¹

The sympathetic and authoritative commentator, who has illustrated the enterprise with all that classical or mediæval literature affords,² declares his conviction that the discovery of a new continent was more completely foreshadowed in the simple geographical statement of the Greek Strabo, who, after a long life of travel, sat down in the eighty-fourth year of his age, during the reign of Augustus, to write the geography of the world, including its cosmography. In this work, where are gathered the results of ancient study and experience, the venerable author, after alluding to the possibility of passing direct from Spain to India, and explaining that the inhabited world is that which we inhabit and know, thus lifts the curtain: "There may be in the

¹ Coleccion de los Viajes y Descubrimientos, Tom. II. p. 272.

² Humboldt, Examen critique de la Géographie, Tom. I. pp. 101, 102.
 See also Humboldt, Kosmos, Vol. II. pp. 516, 556, 557, 645.

same temperate zone *two and indeed more inhabited lands*, especially nearest the parallel of Thine or Athens, prolonged into the Atlantic Ocean."¹ This was the voice of ancient science.

Before the voyage of Columbus two Italian poets seem to have beheld the unknown world. The first was Petrarca; nor was it unnatural that his exquisite genius should reach behind the veil of Time, as where he pictures

"The daylight hastening with winged steps
Perchance to gladden the expectant eyes
Of far-off nations in a world remote."²

The other was Pulci, who, in his *Morgante Maggiore*, sometimes called the last of the romances and the earliest of Italian epics, reveals an undiscovered world beyond the Pillars of Hercules.

"Know that this theory is false; his bark
The daring mariner shall urge far o'er
The western wave, a smooth and level plain,
Albeit the earth is fashioned like a wheel.
Man was in ancient days of grosser mould,
And Hercules might blush to learn how far
Beyond the limits he had vainly set
The dullest sea-boat soon shall wing her way.

"*Men shall descry another hemisphere,
Since to one common centre all things tend;
So earth, by curious mystery divine
Well balanced, hangs amid the starry spheres.
At one Antipodes are cities, states,
And through all empires, ne'er divided of yore.
But see, the sun speeds on his western path
To glad the nations with expected light.*"³

This translation is by our own eminent historian,

¹ Lib. I. p. 65; Lib. II. p. 118.

² " . . . che 'l di nostro vola
A gente, che di là forse l'aspetta."

³ Canto XXV. st. 229, 230.