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"The world is my country, to do good my religion."

THE AUSTRAL-ASIAN PRESS.

To a close observer of the occurrences of the last fifty years the almost imperceptible, yet certain advance of the press of Great Britain cannot fail to awaken astonishment and conjecture. Gradually increasing in height and strength, nourished by adversity, strengthened and fostered by tempests and storms, it has indeed become a mighty and a giant tree "whose height reaches unto heaven, and the sight thereof to the end of all the earth." Recognising no law but its own will—now yielding to the blast—now guiding the lightning of wrath to the proud, the tyrannical, and the vile—claiming to protect beneath its broad shadow the rights and liberties of the people, the dominion of the laws, and the integrity of the state—making its strength to be known in the very inmost conclave of councillors and kings—never was there in any age or clime aught that might be made productive of so much good or evil as that mighty, wide-reaching, penetrating energy concentrated in the existing public press of the civilized world. And in no country is this more true than in Great Britain. The immense intellect continually augmenting its resources—rendering available the wealth and information of the merchant, the subtlety of the philosopher, the stores of science, and the loveliness of art—with the increasing demand for knowledge and the numberless opportunities for mental championship to exhibit its strength, have combined to render the press as a body, the most influential and respected for its talent and integrity of any that have ever divided the public attention, or demanded the public applause. From the mere chronicler and gazetteer of court balls and of battles it has become the monitor of kings and the counsellor of senates. It would be hard to point out any advance in popular knowledge or liberality to
which it has not most materially contributed—any cause involving the interests of liberty or truth in the van of which it has not fought. Small and distant is the first cloud on the political horizon: a humble individual has been punished for a resistance insignificant, though meritorious, if it involved not some great principle; tidings of persecution and suffering roll hurrying onward until the overcharged heavens lowering with indignation burst in vengeance upon the oppressor; and in times of public ineritance or agitation—now lashing the ocean into wrath, now calming the waters into peace and serenity—its efforts have been as beneficial as its power is unprecedented and immense.

Men thus incessantly occupied in the turmoils of political and social strife, battling against or triumphantly riding upon the waves of popular opinion, have little leisure for the sweet small courtesies and amenities of private life. Enveloped in cares—glancing only hastily into the world of philosophy and imagination—the charms of domestic comfort are by them unknown, its pleasant draughts untasted. Like a solitary monument—sole creation of art amid the loveliness of nature, unadorned by her beauty, unaided by her power—must be the conductor of one of the almost breathing masses of intelligence that daily press into the world. Guiding, yet dependent upon, the current of public opinion; pre-eminently tormented by the uncertainties and contentions of life; much indeed is due to that man who forsakes nine-tenths of the pleasures of existence, becoming a slave himself, that he may secure freedom to mankind.

That the importance of the press to the public weal should be perceived and acknowledged is but a necessary consequent, and, witnessing the result of its exertions, it is not surprising that every community who found themselves able to maintain should soon aspire to possess a public journal. In accordance with this sentiment the settlement of a colony has generally been immediately followed by the establishment of a newspaper; and the vehicle of intelligence started almost before there was any information to convey. In one colony the first indication of editorial ambition was a manuscript paper edited by a publican; and in too many instances the supervision of the journals has been abandoned to the care of men whose success in their former undertakings—of whatever description—afforded little security for their enterprise or ability in
their new situation. The impolicy and danger of this course it was left to time to develop, and the evil results have been neither few nor far between.

A much greater responsibility attaches to the press of a colony than to that of an old and established nation. From the fluctuating state of society, the almost natural personality of its politics, the varying prospects of misfortune or success, much will depend upon the energy, the integrity, and the consistency of its public organs. Neither extravagantly to excite adventure nor unreasonably to depress it; not to indulge in party conflict, but rather to stimulate to generous rivalry; not to advocate a sect, but to exalt the authority of Christianity; to look at principles rather than persons; to objects worthy of enterprise rather than sanguine and greedy speculation, is the duty of the editor of a colonial newspaper. Mindful that it is at once his privilege and his responsibility to give a prevailing tone to the manners and customs of future nations, vigilantly should he watch and check the schemes and monopolies of avarice, cheer the sinking emigrant, incite to exertion and point to success, encourage the investigation of the country's resources, foster the spirit of discussion, advocate the diffusion of knowledge, and know of no rivalry with his contemporaries save that of a generous enthusiasm for the improvement of his adopted country. Have, then, the Australian press generally deserved the thanks of their fellows for their energy in the pursuit of these great ends? The answer, sorrowful, reluctant, and true, must be, No!

To enter into a detailed account of the early history of the Australian press would not only be foreign to our purpose, but fatiguing and un instructive to our readers. Dates, names, and particulars are entertaining only from their connexion with a prominent and attractive subject, and there is nothing so conspicuously interesting in the antiquity of colonial squabbles as to warrant the filling of our pages with minutiae of either the combatants or their tactics. That the 'Sydney Gazette' was, under the government of General Darling, notorious for its adulation and servility, and that it afterwards fell under the superintendence of an emancipated convict and a ticket-of-leave man, is important only so far as it shows the low state of society in New South Wales at that period; and that the 'Australian' and the 'Monitor' vied with each other in abuse of the government in proportion to the lack of its patronage, merely illustrates the danger
of favouritism and the unworthy motives that too often influence men who want nothing but the power to become formidable opponents, and who compensate for their lack of ability by the plenitude of their malice and vituperation. Those who seek for a record of the degradation of literature and the prostitution of talent will find ample food for their spleen in Dr Lang's severe and able history; and the would-be philosophers, who moralize on the blindness and iniquity of mankind, and learn to forget their own wickedness in contemplating the sins of their fellow creatures, will be at no loss for subjects upon which to exercise their skill if they turn to the chapter on 'the Colonial Press' in the work we have just referred to. They may perhaps find a parallel in the just wrath of Lang to their own most virtuous indignation, and omitting the trifling circumstance of having done nothing to crush the iniquities—either here or elsewhere—he so powerfully denounces, may complacently indulge in the triumphs of victorious integrity, without sharing its trials or participating in its wrongs.

Whatever may be the details of the early history of the Australian press, its general features, are nearly alike—professions of profound disinterestedness and warm zeal for the general good; servility to government when enjoying its patronage, and virulence of opposition when undistinguished by its favour, combined with the utmost malignity of personal attack upon all opponents, and vituperation of all contemporaries. The history of one is the history of all—et hoc genus omne—and Lang's review of the opposition of Dr Wardell at Sydney applies with equal force to the acrimonious contests of the journals of South Australia. Whether this semi-literary pugnacity is indigenous to the Austral-Asian climate we know not, but who that is informed upon the subject will deny the force of our quotation:

"It was unfortunate, however, for the colonial public, that the opposition papers of the colony, during the government of General Darling, were by no means distinguished for that scrupulous regard to truth without which no person can merit the confidence of the public. There was a ravid desire to publish whatever had a tendency to bring either the governor or persons in any way connected with the government into general disfavour; and information of this kind was accordingly received with the utmost eagerness, and often without the least regard to the character of the quarter from which it came.

"People do not go to the colonies merely to preach up liberty and the rights of men; they go for the most part, as it is most accurately certified in the custom-house books, to better their fortunes. If this paramount
object can be gained through government patronage or a government situation, Things as they are is their motto, and servile adulation of the powers that be their profitable employment: if the government patronage, however, is otherwise engaged, and the government situations all bespoken, they strike for liberty and independence!

"It was confidently reported and currently believed in the colony that the ablest opposition editor we have ever had in the colony, the late Dr Wardell, LL.D., did not become a patriot, i.e. a person opposed to the government, till he had been refused a lucrative government appointment."—Lang’s History of New South Wales, vol. i, pp. 281-283.

There has prevailed, indeed, a rabid desire for newspaper warfare in our colonies, which, like all other manifestations of insanity when divested of its mischief, is ludicrous in the extreme. The axiom of Taylor, that if one is interested all are alike demonstrably concerned in the resolution of metaphysical problems, seems to be applied with the utmost diligence by the colonists to the pursuits and characters of their neighbours. We have seen the governor forego his dignity, and reason instead of command—the lawyer forswear his nature, and write without a fee—the physician forsake the study of medicine, and issue prescriptions on social and political economy—the merchant draw debtor and creditor accounts of propriety, and not of property, with his customer—the clergyman pray for all in the pulpit and condemn to utter despair one-half of his fellows from the press—and all rush with the most ridiculous hurry into the hurly-burly of politics and personality, until the whole settlement became in a ferment with the contests of parties wondering at their own virtue and their opponents’ vice. The ear becomes deafened by the clamour of opposing tongues, and propriety flies scared at the indecorum with which she is defended; while scandal roams around seeking for food, and resolved to compensate for the paucity of material by extent and variety of virulence and invention.

There are, it is true, too many inducements to personal slander in our colonies to weigh most powerfully with men who have too often shown that the increased circulation of their paper serves as an excuse for the most entire dereliction of propriety and principle. The rolls of the colonial law courts will bear ample testimony, in the numerous actions for libel which they record, to the truth of our statement; and as, without publicity, slander would lose its sting,

* Any person acquainted with the history of South Australia will be immediately struck with the appositeness of Dr Lang’s remarks on the conduct of the press of that colony.
the columns of a newspaper are the most usual and effectual instruments of those who seek by anonymous falsehood to gratify their malice. But admitting all this—admitting, for the nonce, that the moral and social atmosphere of our Australian settlements is so pestilential as to obstruct and almost destroy the growth of every kindly and virtuous feeling—we cannot for one moment admit it as a palliation of the conduct of those whose only claim for support is their utility, and whose highest and holiest task is the dispersion of those noxious vapours which they have criminally contributed to strengthen and retain. Either they are the contemptible panderers to the depraved appetites of a vicious population, or they voluntarily dabble in the filthy pool. Shall we admit the first proposition, and resolve that our young and flourishing settlements are hotbeds of every evil—concentrations of iniquity irremediable and unparalleled—or shall we not discard the degrading supposition, and, pronouncing the miserable excuse worthy of the vileness that rendered its invention necessary, dismiss both the pretext and its propagators to the infamous oblivion they deserve.

Are we too censorious? Ask any respectable inhabitant of either of our colonies, from the early settler in New South Wales to the last immigrant in South Australia. It is no long time since that an English newspaper, devoted to Australian interests, published a letter from a Southern Australian, lamenting the mischief which we denounce; the same paper, about nine months since, rebuked the contemptible malignity displayed by the Van Diemen's Land journals to the present governor; and the inflated arrogance and childish enmity of the Port Phillip press are notorious. If any of our readers should still doubt the justice of our strictures, let them refer to the character given by the colonial journals of each other, and the question will be at once and for ever decided.

Some of the Australian journals, glorying in the pretended advocacy of liberal principles, have dared to claim for themselves the title which distinguishes an influential and honourable party in English political warfare; but, once for all, we tell them that that respectable and talented body reject their aid as they would trample on their enmity. The insignificance under which, despite their imitative croak, they languish, must protect them from the notice of the English Radicals; and we are fully persuaded that there is not one of that body—supposing him to be aware of the existence of
such journals—but would, upon looking at their effusions, forthwith indignantly crush the miserable print, and, consigning it to the fire-back, deliver himself from the infliction of struggling dulness, and the world from the presence of a nuisance.

There are, however, times and seasons when the hurricane of personal rancour subsides; and, by way of relaxation, the journals of the colonies turn from abusing each other to vituperating the rival settlements. To an uninformed individual the contrariety of opinion must be exceedingly perplexing. If he looks at the Herald, one half of the community are involved in the darkness of moral desolation; if he believes the Gazette, it is the opposite side that gropes in the deprivation of light. If he turns from parties to colonies, he will not find a single settlement that is not by turns the subject of the most violent attack by its neighbours and the most laudatory commendation by its inhabitants; and, if we may believe the testimony of each to the merits of the other, never did there exist countries so wholly destitute of all natural and artificial advantages—so utterly sunk in the abyss of political, commercial, and social degradation—as New South Wales, Van Diemen's Land, Port Phillip, and Southern and Western Australia.

But, “Buzz, buzz, we know it!” and we ought not to trouble our readers with a picture of that of which they are already sufficiently aware.

As the population of a colony increases, the facility for scandal is diminished. The spirit of commercial intercourse is inimical to slander, and the defamation of character is forsaken for the discussion of principles. Yet it is amusing to trace the effects of early habit in the essays of the more mature colonial journals. Whatever may be the disputed topic—however extended in its application or beneficial in its results—there is an under-current of sarcasm, invective, and innuendo, that mingles with and debases the most conclusive reasoning; and in very few of the numerous essays that issue from the colonial press do we find pure logical argument, uncontaminated by personality and uninfluenced by opposition or power. From its more numerous population, and diffused wealth and intelligence, New South Wales is now comparatively free from the contention which we condemn, and the journals are sufficiently occupied in supplying the demand for information and in discussing the current colonial topics,—mingled ever and anon with a decla-
matory renunciation of home control, and tirades upon liberty, independence, honour, and the like,—to find room in their columns for the effusion of every little miscreant who has a portion of brain to guide the mean malignity of his heart. There is, however, one instance in which they have eminently erred. When the spirit of speculation possessed the whole colony until it ran a-muck against all sober and legitimate transactions, rioting in fictitious prosperity, and drunk with credit, where was the journal that had the honesty and the boldness to stand forward and condemn the insane precipitation? Not one essayed to stem the deceptive tide, but all, joining frantically in the exulting shout, contributed to swell the torrent that hurried but to a precipice fraught with danger and destruction. The conductors of the press forgot their duty in their deference to popular opinion and their chace after popular applause; and remembered not that the trumpet which can sound but the advance is useless in an army exposed to the mischances and vicissitudes of war. Admitting, as we do, that when the dire results were experienced, one or two of the journals pointed out the cause and condemned the system, we can by no means allow that late reparation to atone for all the mischiefs and misfortunes which were the effects of that blind and sanguine career which in the first instance they should have endeavoured to check; and they will pardon us for saying that such a dereliction spoke little for their judgment, whatever it may testify for their zeal. Yet, with all these limitations and subtractions, we feel bound to admit, that in literary, political, and commercial utility, talent, and integrity, the Sydney journals rank above all the press of all the other Australian colonies put together—first in merit, first in importance, first in everything but abuse and ill-will.

The settlement of Port Phillip owes its parentage principally to the enterprising inhabitants of Van Diemen’s Land, and the settlers seem to have imported along with the perseverance no small share of the virulence of the elder colony. We have seen nothing that bears even the semblance of a likeness to the newspaper disputes of both of these colonies save the memorable contentions that agitated Eartanswill, when the celebrated Messrs Pott and Slurk hurled their wrath at each other about coal-scuttle and toll-bar, and rejoiced in the sunshine of editorial grandeur and renown. The descriptive and vituperative epithets seem copied from the slight
memoranda preserved by the illustrious Pickwick, and were not the priority of claim indisputable, we should be almost induced to adjudge it in favour of the self-important and garrulous press of Port Phillip and Van Diemen's Land—"That vile and scurrilous print,"—"that dastardly calumniator,"—"that filthy and venomous reptile,"—"that ungrammatical twaddler"—intermixed with choice personalities—reflections upon integrity, and allusions to trunks, dunghills, sewers, and similar depositories are the flowers of rhetoric that plentifully besprinkle the pages of the combatants. Each confidently refers to his advertisements and his articles as proofs of his success and his merit, and as each is the judge of his own cause, neither fails in coming to a highly satisfactory decision. It is pleasant to trace the hereditary qualities which preserve distinction, and the good people of Launceston and Hobart Town, while they enjoy the high independence and chaste and vigorous declamation of sundry of their own journals, must feel no less gratification at the close affinity of their descendants' contests, than we do at the near relation which both preserve to their illustrious prototypes, so inimitably handed down to the admiration of posterity by the prince of humour and graphic delineation, the immortal Boz.

Some of the Port Phillip journals have lately inserted a few original compositions similar in plan to the tales of 'Chambers's Edinburgh Journal.' We cannot say much for their merits, but the attempt should be encouraged, for even dulness is preferable to malignity. The 'Port Phillip Gazette' has published some poetry of average merit, and a few sketches seemingly in imitation of Boz; of these, however, the less we say the better, as they are far below the majority of the thousand and one copies of that celebrated author that have appeared in the mother country.

Passing from Port Phillip to South Australia, the same arrogance, with even less regard to consistency and principle, presents itself, the 'South Australian Register' having, in conjunction with its contemporaries, jumped Jim Crow with an ease and agility that must ever commend it to the applause of the whole generation of turncoats. Contemptibly servile to Colonel Gawler in the early period of his government, it became all at once as violent in its opposition as it had been before complaisant and adulatory. Some land transactions, in which the proprietor thought himself aggrieved, added to the withdrawal of the government printing, was the cause
of this new found ardour for independence; we cannot, therefore, say much for the disinterestedness that evinced itself just at the time when flattery was no longer useful. The rival paper (the 'Southern Australian') showed equal facility in the adaptation of principle to interest, and from being the most virulent in its opposition became the most unscrupulous in its defence. The 'Chronicle' seems to be merely the echo of the 'Register,' and of the 'Independent;' a new journal, we do not know sufficient to pronounce any judgment upon its merits. At lucid intervals some ability has been displayed in the compilation of statistical details, but their columns have been too often polluted by angry and interested personal animosity to render their opinions of much weight or worth to any but themselves.

Of the Van Diemen's Land papers we need say but little, and what we have said of the Port Phillip journals applies with equal force to the past disputes of the parent colony.* Impatience of all subordination, abuse of superiors, and tyranny over equals and dependents, have disfigured their pages, until their intolerant malignity has almost excited the envy of the Southern Australian journals. A spirit of improvement is, however, manifesting itself, and we trust to witness in their future productions less of personality and more of talent and good feeling than they have hitherto displayed.

The Western Australian journals exhibit very little personal vituperation, and wisely confine themselves to discussions calculated to inform and inspirit the colonists: the statistical reports that frequently appear in their columns greatly increase their value, and, in spite of their often expressed contempt for the rival settlements, they are entitled to a foremost station in the ranks of the colonial press.

We have thus reviewed somewhat lengthily and severely the character of the Austral-Asian press, and whilst we freely admit the talent occasionally displayed, we cannot accept of mere ability as an excuse for premeditated slander and libellous attack. Looking at their exaggerated appeals to the public for its support, and the very little that they have achieved to merit it, we cannot conceal from ourselves the lamentable fact, that in the majority of our Austral-Asian

* One of the Van Diemen's Land journals some time since challenged a contemporary to point out his mother, at the same time vilifying the maternal pedigree of his opponent in much the same manner as that of an angry scold at Billingsgate.