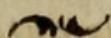


ON

NATIONAL CHARACTER.

BY THOMAS JARROLD, M. D.

(Read January 25, 1811.)



ONE of the great uses of history is the display it makes of the character of man. Actions, without their corresponding and connecting circumstances, are robbed of much of their interest, by being thus deprived of their character. The motives which lead to an action, the mode of its execution, and its influence, are all necessary to be known, in order to its character being appreciated; and it is the office of the historian to place these in a conspicuous point of view.—Although history is the only true and legitimate source from whence a knowledge of the national character can be derived, it is but seldom appealed to for that purpose; on the contrary, the customs of a people are erroneously made the foundation of their character. Captain Cook's account of the islanders he visited, is deemed

sufficient data to form an estimate of their characters from; thus national prejudices are engendered and kept in existence.

A fair appeal to history might cause our pity, but not our contempt of any people; but by forming an opinion of the character of other nations by their customs, we feed our vanity till it usurps the place of the understanding, and that which has but little relation to character is made the basis of it. For, most national customs have their origin in utility, not in disposition, or in pre-conceived opinions. A Russian drinks rancid oil, and we infer that he is one of the most brutish and uncivilized of all the human race; we are disgusted at his conduct; but the climate of Russia requires the inhabitants to use strong and nutritious diet; and no article is so much so as oil. Our own peasantry would use oil, were they to reside in Russia, on account of its utility. The Hot-tentots anoint themselves with grease and oil; the utility of the custom is apparent, from the defence it gives from insects. The inhabitants of the South Sea Islands lacerate their persons; an ancient Britain daubed himself with paint; each had a reference to the same object, utility. To terrify an enemy, or to conciliate a friend, have ever been the leading

objects in directing the mode of dress and other attentions to the person.

In general, the customs formed during the age of barbarism are continued through successive generations, modified by circumstances; but to the custom itself the people are inseparably attached. It is wrong to call it character; it is habit, to which the people are attached. When Ferdinand attempted to assimilate the dress and customs of the Spaniards to those of the French, the people revolted from his government. What character can be given to the transaction, but that of a fondness for national customs, common to every people? and also, when Peter of Russia ordered his subjects to be shaved; although his people loved him as their father, they were unwilling to submit to this supposed degradation, this yielding up an ancient custom. What happened in Scotland when the Highlanders were required to change their dress, is familiarly known to most of us. With such evidence before us, and much more might be adduced, we may infer that national customs are well calculated to keep up national distinctions, and even national animosities; but they do not express the character. The same dignity of office commands equal homage, whatever the costume of that office may be. A Mo-

hawk chief is not less honored than an English magistrate.

Were there an universal standard of taste, the customs of a people might be scrutinized by its laws; but even taste does not govern character; this last rises above and is independent of those things over which taste has any influence. Objects of taste, when applied to character, are what the cornice is to a building; they beautify; but if the people of every country hastily and on insufficient grounds estimate the character of others, the subject has not been overlooked, or neglected, but has exercised the talents of men of vast capacities. Voltaire gives the subject the title of the *Philosophy of History*; Lord Kaimes, Montesquieu, and Adam Smith, have aided the enquiry; and every historian and political economist, have made national character a leading object of their researches: among whom, Hume holds a conspicuous place.

Every one conversant with the writings of these philosophers, will recollect that they derive national character from religious opinions, civil government, and the state of industry. The subject may be branched into many particulars; but they all resolve themselves into these three points;

in my apprehension, these assigned causes are only consequences. Let us examine the subject. Religion, they say, forms a prominent feature in the character of every people: granted. But religion, having the same object of worship, assimilates its followers; it by no means diversifies their character, however remote their residence; its tendency is to make of one family all nations of the earth; it creates no new principle, nor calls into exercise any new passion; the spirit of devotion is the spirit of filial affection; that act of the mind towards the supreme Being is worship, which exercised towards a parent, is honour and reverence.

But it may be said, that religious principles are acted on only as they are understood, and that persons of different capacities can only understand in proportion to their capacities. This is placing the difference of character not in religion but in the capacities of individuals, which is shifting the ground; but admitting the objection, what does it prove? It proves that the resemblance is incomplete; not that the bent of character produced by religious principles is diversified.

If the pure worship of God be the same in its principle and tendency wherever the worshipper may live, so is its counterpart, superstition. The negroes of Africa, the philosophers of

Athens, the abstemious Bramin, the licentious Turk, vary in the forms of worship; but the spirit of their religion is the same. They all seek to purchase heaven through the agency of a priest. Should a negro become a mahometan, he might change his dress, and perhaps his dinner hour, but the man would be the same; he would not be under the influence of any new motive; he would change his agent, not his character. The question is narrowed to a point; is superstition in its nature the same every where? If so, it must infuse the same spirit and produce the same character. An army is divided into regiments, as the world is into kingdoms; each regiment is known by its dress, its hours of exercise, its peculiar habits and customs; but the character of the regiment is not formed by these fortuitous circumstances. The whole army is led by one general and inspired by one spirit, and the spirit of an army is its character. A nation may worship an ox, or a hero, the sun or a saint, without the slightest shade of difference of character being produced. Let us suppose the same people worshipping these deities in succession; could we in that case discover by the character of the people, which of the deities they were worshipping?

But if national character be not the effect of religious sentiments, is it not decided by the

form of civil government ? At a period but little removed from the present, the spirit of the laws, and even the form of worship of all the great states of the continent of Europe were the same. But these strong conspiring causes did not produce an uniformity of character. The French were gay, the Germans grave, the Spaniards dignified, the Portuguese mean, and the Italians base ; we must therefore look for some other cause of this contrariety of character.

Small states, by being less secure, are supposed to be mean, cringing and national ; and large states, feeling their security, to be oppressive and violent. Should this remark be admitted as correct, it by no means relieves the subject of its difficulties ; because there is not a similarity of character in states of the same size, although under the same laws, and observing the same form of religious worship. But before we pursue the subject further, let us consider the extent of the influence of industry on character.

In nations, as well as in individuals, industry appears to be the effect of a previously acquired character, not the origin of it. Rude and uncivilised people are never industrious ; industry is the effect, not the cause, of civilization. Industry supposes energy, frugality, and security ; it supposes a

fixed government, and a firm individual character. Industry is the wealth of a state and its security. It gives a perpetuity and an impulse to all our blessings. When once in motion it rolls forward, and, like the ocean, surmounts and overwhelms every obstacle. But it is not self-moving; it receives its impulse from wants that are felt, and is an evidence of the state of civilization; but it does not create that state. When we see a luxuriant tree, we attribute its luxuriance to a rich soil and a skilful gardener. In like manner, industry may be attributed to intelligence in the people, and wisdom in the government.

Besides the causes that have been mentioned, climate is commonly considered as having a powerful influence on the character of a people; but a mere glance at history will refute the idea. Men of every character reside in every climate; in the east, the Malays are as brave, and the Chinese as ingenious, as the people of any country. The inhabitants of St. Vincent were courageous to a proverb; and the people of Mexico astonished their discoverers by their attainments in useful knowledge. Climate affects a stranger, but to a native every climate is agreeable, and admits of the developement of his mental energy and corporeal strength. There is no imperfection in the creation of God, but there would be if man

was only adapted to one climate ; if another situation changed his character and lessened his consequence.

Should a different plan be adopted, and in place of examining each assigned cause of national character the whole were taken collectively, still we should be as much embarrassed as in ascribing to family character its precise origin ; for, nations contiguous to each other, the genius of whose laws and whose religion are the same, are not similar in the leading features of their character : witness, the French and the Spaniards, the Malays, and other nations of India, the original inhabitants of St. Domingo, and of St. Vincent. As we therefore are not able to form a correct estimate of the character of a people by a knowledge of their laws, their religion, or their climate, let us appeal to history.

History is the record of the actions of men ; the motives which led to these actions, and the mode of their performance constitute their character ; if we were to select a nation, say our own, as an example, and after carefully scrutinising the conduct of the preceding generation, were to state the character of that generation ; it is highly probable that the opinion so formed would be correct. If

we were in like manner to unfold the transactions of each succeeding generation, and assign to them their respective characters, it would be evident on comparing them together, that all along the character of the nation was the same, only new circumstances occasioned new expressions of it. If we even turn back to the period of which Tacitus and Cæsar were the historians, and compare the Germans and French of those days, with the Germans and French of the present, we shall discern the same people; and if we take a wider scope, and place before us the maxims of all the rude and barbarous nations that we are made acquainted with, we shall be able to divide them into classes, and to form an estimate of their present and future character. For instance, it is a maxim of most barbarous nations, that theft, and what is always connected with it, lying, are honourable. With other nations, truth and honesty are sanctioned. In the first class we may place the Spartans, the Romans, the Scythians, with all their descendants; and thus we embrace nearly the whole of Europe. In the other class we may place many nations of Africa, perhaps some tribes of America, the Chinese, and the Laplanders. Parke bears ample testimony to the kindness, the integrity, and

truth of some African nations. A mother bewailing the loss of her son, found consolation in reflecting that he never told a lie; no, never. Do we not receive Negroes into our families in full confidence of their honesty? We could not receive a Tartar in the same manner. Dr. Franklin relates that some Indians, noticing the fraud and deception practised by the white people, asked if they had had no mothers to instruct them; evidently implying the office of those of their nation. When referring to the page of history we learn that nations of the first class, when their wants increase beyond their power to supply them, by the robbery of strangers enlarge their views, and that which was called theft is now called war; and he who was the leader of a gang of banditti, is now called general. There is no instance of a nation who in their days of barbarism were great thieves, that did not afterwards make good soldiers. On the other hand those nations whose maxims inculcate honesty, are, at every period of their history, seekers of peace. They do not want courage when forced to exercise it; but they endeavour to avoid the occasion of its being called forth. Hence the Chinese built their wall. Other instances might be advanced to shew how far the

maxims adopted by a people influenced their character; but the present is sufficient for our purpose. One general remark it may however not be improper to make: the maxims adopted by a people carry us beyond the period of their authentic history, and are therefore entitled to much consideration, because they have not their origin, and cannot be enforced by religion or civil government; but they are opinions and voluntarily received by the people, and are an expression of their disposition and character. Hence it appears much safer to argue from the maxims than from any enactment of the legislature, or from any custom that may be followed, and yet they have been almost wholly neglected by enquirers into national character. But with all the aid that can be obtained from history, assisted by the early maxims of a people, the subject is still involved in difficulty; for, there is a striking contrast of character in nations under similar circumstances at the remotest period of their history. To remove this difficulty we must go back to the period when a nation consisted of a small number, and was but as one family; and such a period many nations have known. Thus circumstanced, the father, the patriarch of the family, would inculcate his principles and infuse

his spirit; and hence it is probable the diversified characters of nations have arisen.

Here a most important practical question arises; it has been stated that a nation so pertinaciously adheres to its early received maxims, and so uniformly pursues its first principles in conduct, that the same character ever presents itself. Hence some infer that a child of rude and uncivilized parents, taken from them at its birth, and brought up in the family of an intelligent, well bred European, would both in manners and in mental refinement appear as one of the family. The question to solve is this; would that consequence follow? I presume not. Education, I willingly allow, refines, exalts and assimilates mankind; but no number of the most approved and excellent schoolmasters, would be able to elevate a nation of savages to the rank even of Swedes or Germans in one generation. I do not know that history affords us a precise example of this fact; but there are several which approach towards it, besides many decisive individual cases. Every colony of civilized persons settling among barbarians may be considered as a colony of schoolmasters; but in what instance has a rapid civilization followed? The ancient Germans lived almost under the walls of Rome, and

must have felt their own inferiority. Knowledge, which had elevated the Romans, was in its practical effects exhibited to the Germans; but they were scarcely if at all improved by it. America has been peopled by Europeans more than two centuries; but the aborigines have not received the instruction that was offered to them, and that still continues to be held out. Besides these general facts, many attempts have been made to educate individuals born of uncivilized parents; but no good effect has been produced. The Dutch carried this plan to a considerable extent in attempting to train up young Hottentots in European manners; but the first opportunity that has presented, they gladly threw off their dress, and all the benefits civilization held forth to them, for the filth, the danger, and the wretchedness of their former state. The Americans have trained up young Indians in their principal cities; but they have gone back again to their tribes, filled with contempt at the manners of Europeans. The African society also with the most laudable intention educated many negro children in England; and if I am not misinformed, they ran to a certain level in the acquisition of knowledge, and there became stationary. There was a point, far

below that which European children readily gain, beyond which they could not go. But it is unnecessary to multiply instances; for, there is not a barbarous nation with which Europeans are acquainted, one or more of whose youths have not been trained up and educated with much care in European sentiments and manners: but in every instance without producing a change of disposition. The wilderness and the desert, the tomahawk and the scalping knife, have presented allurements which they could not resist. All they possessed they gladly abandoned; all they had been taught to anticipate, they without hesitation relinquished, and pressed from the crowded city, where all they received was forced upon them, to mix with those who knew no law but their inclination, and whose inclinations were regulated by no principle, but was the mere expression of the passions. Was there only a solitary instance upon record of a child of savage parents, fostered with the utmost care and kindness in a civilized family, being impatient of restraint and hearing of the manners of its parents, endeavoured to imitate them; the subject would not be entitled to consideration. But when every one so circumstanced has resisted civilization, the disposition cannot depend on capricious-

ness, but must have its origin in the nature and constitution of man.

When a pheasant, a wild duck, a hare, or any other undomesticated animal, is attempted to be brought into that state, the effort fails; no person has so tamed a pheasant that it will not, when liberty is given, fly away and not return again; yet the domestication of that species of animals is very practicable. But in order to illustrate the various stages of this process, it may be advisable to select an animal with which we are more familiar. The duck is of this description. It will be granted that wild and tame ducks are of the same species, and differ in no other respect, than that one is domesticated and the other not. In what therefore does domestication consist? It is not in being familiarised to the presence of man; for many have been familiarised without being domesticated. It is a disposition, not a habit; an act of the affections, not the restraint of discipline. A tyger domesticated would be as harmless as a cat; and a cat undomesticated would be as fierce as a tyger. There is no natural propensity in any animal to domesticate. The whole is an effect produced by circumstances. It follows therefore, that there must be a physical change produced on the animal; far from

being alarmed at the presence of man, and untractable, it is attached to his person, and submits to his discipline. As a change of disposition, of constitutional feeling is produced, how is it effected? Let us illustrate the subject by an instance: suppose a pair of wild ducks to be the subject of domestication; they are confined to a yard or a pond, and habituated to the presence of their owner, by whom they are fed and caressed. After a length of time they lose part of their wildness; in this state a nest is formed, and a due number of eggs are laid for a brood of young; but the mother duck is not permitted to sit upon them; they are taken from her and put under a most domestic hen; when the eggs are hatched the hen is unceasing in her attention, informing the young by tones, well understood by them, that they are in safety. But notwithstanding this, the wildness of their nature predominates, and they shun the presence of man, and if not prevented, as soon as they could fly, would take wing and leave the place where they had been brought up. But we will suppose they do not obtain an opportunity to escape, but remain confined to the poultry yard; they are evidently wild, but yet they are not so much so as the old ones that produced the eggs, from which they were

hatched. The discipline and counsel, if I may be allowed the term, of the hen have in a measure softened and corrected their disposition; and being regularly visited without being injured, has also had its effect in lessening their terror at the sight of man. As the summer approaches these also bring forth eggs, which in like manner with the former, are placed under some very tame and familiar hen, and are hatched in due season. The young, like their progenitors, are wild and untractable; but the hen exercises her influence and authority; she persuades and threatens, and some further impression is made; they are not quite so fearful of man as the last brood, but still are eager to escape, and among wild ducks would be as though they had been hatched among them. By pursuing the same plan a few generations more, the object aimed at is obtained; wildness no longer exists; for, a radical change has been effected, not only in the habits, but in the disposition of the animal. The young as soon as hatched are now tame; they require no discipline, no restraint; the building in which they were brought up is their home, and to it they return as the night approaches. So great is the change produced by domestication, that it has the semblance of adding to the world a new

race of animals ; the dog that by nature is fierce, like the wolf, becomes the companion and guardian of man ; the propensities of the animal have acquired a new bias.

Now what takes place in an animal on its being domesticated, is I apprehend a full illustration of the constitutional, or in other terms, the physical change which passes upon a nation in its progress from the barbarous to the civilized state of society. Perhaps no subject which comes before the political economist is so important as this ; and there is no one which he has so entirely overlooked and neglected. It would be very satisfactory to me to enter fully into the subject, and by an appeal to history, to establish the sentiment advanced ; but the rules of the society prevent my taking more than a glance of the subject at present.

A nation in a state of barbarism, remains age after age, without any variation in their manners, or any improvement whatever, unless some circumstance arises to compel a change. The circumstance which in every instance has been instrumental to this purpose is, an increase of population. The rivers and the forest have not afforded a sufficiency of food, in consequence of which agriculture, in a rude manner, is commenced ; and tribes

which had been wandering now become stationary. The seed their hands had planted requires their presence to protect it.* Thus an important point is gained, and a new æra commences; the wives and children are in greater safety; consequently the families become larger and require an increase of industry to provide the means of subsistence. The effort this requires enlarges the ideas and encreases the knowledge of the people; and, after a succession of generations, their habits and their constitutional propensities change; they no longer delight in the practices their ancestors were attached to; having passed

* Mr. Malthus in his work on population, asserts that when the population of a state has encreased beyond the existing means of subsistence, the superabundant part must be removed; he appears not to have taken into his consideration the possibility of a change of system, and the effect that change may have on the produce of the soil, and on the fecundity of the people; but especially he does not apprehend that an increased population is the great agent for the civilization of mankind; no people have ever increased in civilization in consequence of wealth, abundance, and a thin population, but as the effect of an increase of industry, and industry is the creature of want, supposed or real. There is not enough, and therefore individuals labour to obtain more; and by this effort their mental energies are roused, and they go forward. I have no hesitation in stating that there is no progress in civilization, but what is compelled by the very circumstance which Mr. Malthus lays down as the foundation of human misery, an increasing population.

from the savage to the agricultural state of society, they are now passing on to the next step of their progress, the imitative state. Every change here noticed has been effected by the natural consequence of an increase of population, as the history of the world bears ample testimony ; indeed every page records the fact, that progress in civilization and in population correspond, and are cause and effect. Ascertain the one, and a correct judgment may be formed of the other.

Let me here call the disciples of Mr. Malthus to a consideration of this subject, and to a candid enquiry whether what that gentleman has held forth to the world as its great curse, is not its greatest political blessing. That there is fixed in the nature and constitution of man a check by which the unlimited increase of the species is prevented is readily acknowledged ; civilization is that check. If we banish war, famine and pestilence (and it is in the power of man so to do,) and let population roll forward with its utmost speed, the effect will be to dignify man by the expansion of his faculties. But as this takes place he becomes less of the animal, and the average number of children to a marriage sink : if they are five at a given period, a little increase of population and its

consequent civilization, sinks the number to four. Such is the testimony of the registers of nations, and not that disheartening sentiment Mr. Malthus makes them speak.

We have conducted the human race from the agricultural to the imitative stage of civilization ; let us view him in that situation. In the purely agricultural state the faculties of man are dull, and it is difficult to excite an interest in any new pursuit. They are agriculturalists merely to procure the means of subsistence, having no relish for mental pursuits. But when they have burst this barrier, they see with delight what nations more civilized have effected, and they strive to imitate them ; and it is at this stage of civilization, that the imitative powers of man are by far the strongest. It is now that nations undertake those stupendous works which astonish future generations. There is little envy among them ; for, there is no invention. They are pleased because they can imitate, and thus claim a connection with those to whom they look with admiration and respect. If at the lowest link of the chain we place the New Hollander, and designate him by the name of savage, if at the next advance we find the Otaheitean, and many tribes of Americans, people whose business it

is to procure the means of subsistence, and to injure their neighbours; we come next to the point at which the human faculties begin to unfold, and the man to appear; when the malignant passions, which he had nursed in a state of barbarism, now give way, and he begins to seek for rank and consequence among civilized nations. In this stage of civilization are the Russians, the Negroes, the Mexicans and the Peruvians.

Dr. Clarke in his account of the Russians, lately published, describes their imitative powers as most astonishingly great. A painting of the most exquisite art, they copy with so much accuracy, that even with a good judge it passes for the original; and this capacity for imitation embraces every object, whether of the most exquisite or of the rudest structure; but they invent nothing. Many Russian youths have been instructed by the best masters in their own nation, and in foreign universities; but there has never yet been a book written by a Russian, worth translating into another language, or the smallest improvement made by them in any art or science. Their judgment is weak; give them a written description, and they would not comprehend it; but place before them a model, and they will without hesitation undertake to

copy it. A little below the Russians are the Africans, a people so ill treated by their brethren of mankind, that they have been kept back from civilization. Their population has been lessened by European baseness, and thus their progress has been stopped; but still they are advanced to the imitative stage; and it is because they imitate well that they are bought as slaves, and that they are made domestics. The aborigines of America were not in general advanced far enough in civilization to be made useful to their conquerors; they could not be made to work, in other words to imitate, and therefore negroes were bought with money to supply their place. A slave has no inducement to exercise the talent he possesses: but that the negroes possess the imitative talent will not be denied; when introduced into our families they speedily catch our manners; in our West India Islands they are good artisans; but at St. Domingo their real state of civilization is best appreciated. With respect to the Mexicans and Peruvians, history furnishes ample testimony of their being advanced to the first stage of civilized nations. Arrived at that full and overflowing state of population, which requires a new system in obtaining the means of subsistence. Mungo Capac, a man in

many respects like the father of our country, the great king Alfred, was placed among them; he taught them the arts of civilized life; and the whole nation at once imitated them, so that when the Spanish ships arrived on their coast, drawings of them were made and sent by post to Mexico. But the history of that period is known to you, Gentlemen. In referring to it you have only to ask the question, whether that people were not as far advanced in civilization as the Russians are now, and whether their civilization was not of the same description; whether it did not consist in imitation. When a nation has remained several generations in this degree of refinement, and the population again presses forward, further advances are made. The mind becomes stronger as it is more exercised, till step after step the highest, and the best state of man is attained. The limits of an essay, do not admit of a full discussion of the subject, or it might be shewn that every nation that has attained to a high degree of civilization, has passed through the gradations that have been mentioned.

I must also call the society to a farther consideration than the limits of this paper will admit, of the physical change which civilization produces on its subject; a change

only to be effected by many generations, but which when once accomplished is permanent; so that a nation, when it has attained a degree of civilization, never loses it; it becomes part of the constitution, I may say, of the nature of the man; in the same way as domestication becomes part of the nature or constitution of an animal. A people may become stationary; they may become ignorant; but they never a second time become savages.



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