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V.—A NEGLECTED POINT OF VIEW IN AMERICAN COLONIAL HISTORY: THE COLONIES AS DEPENDENCIES OF GREAT BRITAIN.

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I suppose that one of the most important things in historical study is the determination of the point of view. Unless one is content to be merely an annalist, setting down in chronological order such facts as he may choose to deal with, the standpoint, conscious or unconscious, of the student or writer is pretty certain to influence in considerable measure not only his interpretation of the meaning of events, but also his perception and selection of events themselves. If the ransacking of the records of the past for partisan or controversial purposes no longer passes muster as history; if impartiality and comprehensiveness are now generally insisted upon alike in teacher and taught, it still remains true that history, in the sense of an orderly presentation of the past as nearly as possible as that past actually was, is likely to be influenced very much by the way in which the inquirer looks at the field he is studying, the point from which he surveys it.

It is a not unfounded complaint against the treatment of American colonial history that it has been, too often, local and antiquarian rather than broadly or genuinely historical. The activity of scholars in this field has, to be sure, been something prodigious. The publication of historical material, particularly in regard to the history of the English colonies, has gone on at a portentous rate, while the stream of monographs, good, bad, and indifferent, is constantly widening. Merely to keep decently well informed of what others are doing is in itself a heavy drain on the time of the student who is so unfortunate as to have any other duties in life.

Further, and as a natural result of zealous devotion to an attractive subject, we are coming to have a considerable volume of specialized treatment of the colonial period. We have studies of colonial government, of colonial slavery, of colonial tariffs, of colonial currency, of taxation and suffrage in colonial times. There are even intimations that other colonies besides Massachusetts had religious interests possibly worth attending to. Not many subdivisions of the field but have been somewhat dug into by those who, from choice or necessity, have set to work to write something about American colonial history.

What is true of the student and writer is true also, if not in so marked a degree, of the teacher. If my observation of the teaching of early American history in the better class of colleges and universities is correct, the teaching of the subject has grown immensely in content in the last ten or fifteen years. Voluminous as is the output of printed material, that material itself is increasingly used in the lecture room as well as the seminary. "Original research" is no longer merely a term to conjure with, but an instrument whose acquaintance is made by the student at a very early stage of his career. The feeling that American history is an "easy" subject is not, I think, quite so widespread as it once was. I doubt, indeed, if the subject is yet thought of by scholars in other departments as quite the equal in intellectual importance and dignity of most periods of European history, but this feeling, too, is, I think, noticeably giving place to a juster appreciation of what the study of American history really means.

What I want to do at this time, however, is not to pass any sweeping criticism on the study or teaching of American history in general or American colonial history in particular, but to call attention briefly to a point of view which, as it seems to me, has been quite too much and too long neglected. Notwithstanding the great activity in publication—perhaps, indeed, somewhat in consequence of it—American colonial history still has clinging to it a vast mass of localism and antiquarianism, burdening the subject with minute data of the slightest general interest, and obscuring if not obliterating the broader outlines of motive, influence, and development, the perception of whose significance can alone make the subject

historically interesting. The history of the colonies is too often treated, down to the time of the stamp act, substantially as Mr. Henry Cabot Lodge treats it in his "Short History"—two chapters to each colony, one on the course of events, one on social characteristics at the end of the period. That the colonies had anything in common before 1765; that they were anything but absolutely independent communities shot into the continent in 1606, 1620, 1663, and so on, and left to themselves until England discovered them about the time of the Seven Years' War, are matters which too often quite fail to appear. The suddenness with which the pre-Revolutionary agitation is made to flash upon the canvas, after a long and dreary period of colonial beginnings and petty happenings, and the lack of apparent preparation for the stirring events which follow each other in such rapid succession until the outbreak of war, are startling and disturbing to the student who has been taught to look for causes in history, or who has learned that in other periods or countries events do, on the whole, follow each other in somewhat of orderly succession. Very naturally, therefore, the colonial period, save where it is picturesque, is declared uninteresting, suitable for those investigators only whose equipment for historical research consists principally in a fair reading knowledge of English.

What we have, as it seems to me, been too much inclined to ignore is the fact that the American colonies were *colonies*. They were not independent States, but colonial dependencies of Great Britain. They were not neglected settlements in a remote New World, but valued and highly regarded parts of the British Empire. In isolating them from connection with the mother country, and centering attention primarily on the events which transpired on this side of the Atlantic, we lose sight of the all-important fact that the history of the colonies was largely determined by the attitude of England toward them, and that there was being worked out in this country, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, one of the most interesting colonial policies of modern times. My plea, in other words, is for the study of American colonial history primarily as the history, in this part of the world, of English colonial policy.

I have been increasingly surprised at the small amount of attention that has been given to this phase of the subject. The larger general histories, for the most part, make but incidental or occasional reference to the colonial system of England, or to the connection between English history and American history in colonial times. One would read widely in the better known books without discovering many points of contact between the colonial administration and the English administration. Such subjects as the influence of the charter on the form of government, the powers and duties of the governor, or the functions of the colonial agent are in general little referred to. The charter granted a tract of land with uncertain boundaries; the governor, as the representative of arbitrary power, was more or less of the time in hot water with the assembly; and the colonial agent, appearing from no one knows where about the time of the stamp act, was the medium for unpleasant communications between the colony and the ministry. As for the navigation acts, a brief summary of the provisions of a few of them—usually, be it said, betraying the fact that the writer himself has not read the acts—accompanied by the easy remark that the acts were generally disregarded, is as much as can be gleaned of this large and difficult subject from most general narratives. Only in the pages of a few monographs do we as yet find scholarly recognition of the colony status as a cardinal fact in American colonial history.

Besides the obvious advantage of giving greater unity of interest to a field in which there has long been undue diversity, the adoption of English colonial policy as the point of view for the treatment of the earlier American period would have other advantages which it seems to me would be worth while to secure.

In the first place, it would rid American history of the provincialism which has so generally ignored all the English colonies in America save the thirteen that succeeded in making good their independence. The fact of the case, I take it, is that down to the time when resistance to the British Government brought certain of the continental colonies into special prominence, it was not the continental colonies, but the sugar colonies of the West Indies, that were in the eyes

of Great Britain the most important. The trade of the sugar colonies was of far more consequence, relatively speaking, than that of the colonies on the mainland, and it was the commercial aspect of American colonization that was most important in the view of Englishmen during the eighteenth century. It can hardly be necessary to do more than to point out how completely the West Indian colonies have disappeared from view in the customary treatment of American history. Because thirteen of the continental colonies formed the United States of America, we have somehow forgotten that the same acts of which the revolting colonies complained were, for the most part, accepted without much complaint by a considerable number of other colonies actually of more consequence at the moment in the view of England. I am inclined to think that the Revolution, to cite no other illustration, acquires a new significance when we consider that the colonies which rebelled were, as a whole, not the ones most vitally affected by the earlier obnoxious acts of Parliament and King.

In the second place, the adoption of the colonial point of view sets a new value on the documentary bases of colonial development. The charters of the colonies come to be viewed not as mere articles of incorporation or patents of privilege, but as the legal foundations of colonial life, as colonial constitutions of fundamental significance. We shall resurrect the colonial governor and study his instructions—now almost totally neglected—and his correspondence. We shall set to work on the vast mass of papers that contain the records of the lords of trade, the privy council, and the other boards and officials which from time to time had a share in the management of American affairs. We shall study the long series of acts of Parliament relating to America, available for any one in the volumes of the English Statutes at Large, but little read, I fear, by students. A considerable portion of this material, I am aware, still remains in manuscript, but I am constantly surprised at the small use made of the considerable portion available in print or transcript. A great field of documentary material, of the closest relation to the foundations of American society, still remains practically untouched. There is no better corrective for historical provincialism than the

study of charters, statutes, and official documents from the standpoints alike of the persons who created them and of those for whom they were made.

Certain special topics which have received considerable attention in recent years gain much in significance when viewed consistently, not as isolated occurrences in this colony or that, but as illustrations of the colonial policy of the mother country. There is, for example, no true appreciation of the nature or development of colonial slavery without constant attention to the primary agency of England in forcing the institution upon the American colonies. The long list of restrictive acts of assembly to which royal assent was refused is of itself sufficient to dissipate more than one of the high-sounding generalizations which have obscured this difficult but fascinating subject. I need not dwell particularly on the industrial and commercial development of the colonies, since the inseparable connection between that development and the acts of trade and acts relating to colonial manufactures is obvious. In all these matters it is the policy of the mother country, to be sought in the statutes, the charters, and the unbroken stream of official instructions, that wields the determining influence.

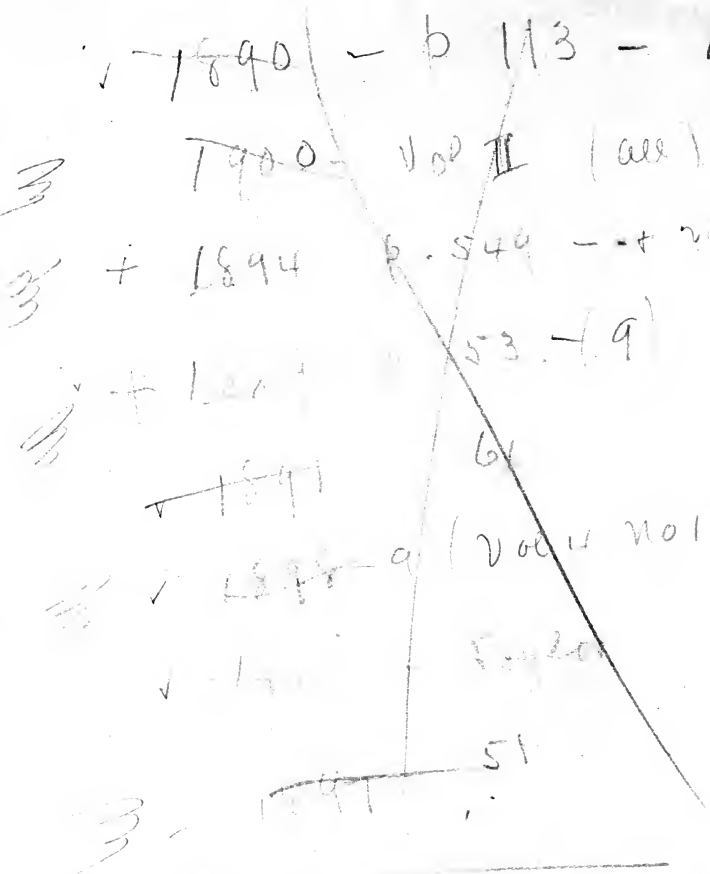
I am not without hope, further, that such study as I have urged might result before long in turning attention to the important subject of American law. In a generation which has attacked American history with vigor at almost every point, it is strange that the history of our law should have been so generally neglected. Perhaps the hasty and superficial methods of most of our law schools must bear a part of the blame. In the history of our legal institutions is to be found, I believe, one of the richest fields yet awaiting the investigator. But only the comparative method, based on the recognition of the supremacy of England, will reap the harvest. That provision of the charters authorizing the making of "laws not repugnant to the laws of England," is the starting point of historical inquiry. How the common law was understood and applied, how far English statute law was availed of, the modifications introduced by acts of assemblies, the place of the courts in the scheme of colonial government, the influence of the judiciary on public opinion—all these are questions on

which we must have much more light before the history of colonial America can be truly written. And I suspect that it will be found that the political as well as the legal institutions of the colonies bear many marks, as yet only darkly discerned, of the molding influence of English administration and law.

I need do no more than refer, in passing, to the advantage which is to be found, in teaching the history of the colonial period, in laying events in America alongside of events in England and observing the connection. No writer, as it seems to me, has yet sufficiently shown how much essential correspondence there is between the two. From the establishment of Virginia in 1606 to the Declaration of Independence one hundred and seventy years later, there is hardly any important political movement in England that is not with more or less clearness reflected in America. The rise and decline of Puritanism, the civil war and the Cromwellian régime, the Restoration, the revolution of 1688, and the long series of wars down to the peace of Paris in 1763, all exercised distinct influence on the course of colonial affairs. I am aware that such comparative treatment is, happily, not uncommon, but I can but think that it is as yet not half common enough. There is no need to distort events, to assume meanings and correspondences where there are none, or to ignore what is unique or characteristic in the colonies themselves. All that is urged is due attention to such parallelisms as are unmistakable.

Finally, it seems to me that a clearer recognition of the colonial status as the primary fact in American history down to 1776 means a gain, not alone in truth and continuity, but also in dignity and proportion. So long as we treat American history essentially as a thing apart, as a subject which not only can be isolated but ought to be isolated, we not only tend to lose sight of such connection with other history as there is, but we tend also to emphasize the wrong things and urge the study of the subject on insufficient grounds. What is needed, I think, is to bring American history into closer connection with other history, to show more fully wherein we have been affected by what has gone on in other parts of the world. No nation, I suppose, has ever cared less about history or shown less disposition to profit by the experience of others than our

own; but that is no reason why the facts of our origin and our large indebtedness to others for ideas should not be exhibited as they were. Now that we are ourselves embarked on some perilous colonial experiments there would seem to be additional reason for examining the way in which we were dealt with when we ourselves were only colonies. There is, I think, the possibility of large fruitfulness in such an inquiry. But I do not urge this neglected point of view merely because it is interesting or pertinent, but rather because it seems to me to be the point from which we can best understand our past, best see American colonial history in its relations, best explain the origin and early growth of what we have ourselves become.



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