Frances (Fanny) Wright

# Views of Society and Manners in AMERICA

In a Series of Letters from that Country to a Friend in England, during the Years 1819, 1820, and 1821, by an Englishwoman.

London, 1821 ♦ Excerpts

My Dear Sir,

Although I am uncertain how far the sentiments contained in this little volume may be in unison with yours, I cannot resist that impulse of the heart which induces me to inscribe its pages to you.

Viewing, as I did, your adopted country with the eyes of a foreigner, I may have been sometimes hasty, and, therefore, mistaken in my judgments. Though I do not apprehend that my inaccuracies can extend to facts of any importance, it is possible that a citizen of America may detect slight errors which the foreign reader cannot be aware of, and which the Author herself could not wholly guard against, however authentic the sources when she drew her information. . . .

**Letter XIX, January 1820** [excerpts]

The establishment of the Federal Constitution was an era in the history of man. It was an experiment never before made; and one upon which the liberties of a nation, perhaps of a world, depended. It was natural, therefore, that all should regard it with anxiety, and some be doubtful of its results. While the people were yet apprehensive lest they might have delegated too much power to the new government, it was most singularly fortunate that the man existed whose integrity was no less tried than his name was popular. How various soever the clashing interests and opinions of the day, the name of the first president was always a rallying point of union; even those most inimical to the administration, bore testimony to the virtues of Washington; and perhaps nothing speaks better for the hearts and heads of the American people, than the unanimous re-election of that venerable patriot, at the same time that the ranks of the opposition to the measures of the government were daily thickening. . . .

Mr. Jefferson affords a splendid elucidation of a remark contained in my last letter,—that the literary strength of America is absorbed in the business of the state. In early life, we find this distinguished philosopher and elegant scholar called from his library into the senate, and from that moment engaged in the service, and finally charged with the highest offices of the commonwealth. Had he been born in Europe, he

would have added new treasures to the store of science, and bequeathed to posterity the researches and generous conceptions of his well-stored and original mind, not in hasty "notes," but in *tomes* compiled at ease, and framed with that nerve and classic simplicity which mark the "Declaration" of his country's "independence." Born in America,

"The post of honour is a *public* station;" [1]

to this therefore was he called; and from it he retires, covered with years and honours, to reflect upon a life well spent, and on the happiness of a people whose prosperity he did so much to promote. The fruits of his wisdom are in the laws of his country, and that country itself will be his monument. . . .

I have already had occasion to observe upon the change wrought by the last war [War of 1812] in the condition of the republic; it not only settled its place among the nations, but cemented its internal union; even those who from party ill-humour, had refused their concurrence with the measures of government, and their sympathy in the feelings of their fellow citizens, were gradually warmed by the enthusiasm that surrounded them, or by the pressure of common danger forced to make common cause. At the close of the contest, one general feeling pervaded the whole great union. . . .

**Letter XX, January 1820** [excerpts]

It is not very apparent that public virtue is peculiarly requisite for the preservation of political equality; envy might suffice for this; *You shall not be greater than I.* Political equality is, perhaps, yet more indispensable to preserve public virtue, than public virtue to preserve it; wherever an exclusive principle is admitted, baleful passions are excited; divide a community into classes, and insolence is entailed upon the higher, servility or envy, and often both united, upon the lower. . . .

. . . Liberty is here secure, because it is equally the portion of all. The state is liable to no convulsions, because there is no where any usurpations to maintain, while every individual has an equal sovereignty to lose.* No king will voluntarily lay down his sceptre, and in a democracy all men are kings.

It is singular to look round upon a country where the dreams of sages, smiled at as utopian, seem distinctly realized; a people voluntarily submitting to laws of their own imposing, with arms in their hands respecting the voice of a government which their breath created, and which their breath could in a moment destroy! There is something truly grand in this moral restraint, freely imposed by a community on itself.

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[1] "When vice prevails and impious man bears sway / The post of honour is a private station." Joseph Addison, *Cato: A Tragedy in Five Acts*, 1713, Act IV, Sc. 4. [NHC note]

* A grievous exception to this rule is found in the black slavery of the commonwealths of the south. May the wisdom of the masters preserve them from that "revolution of the wheel of fortune" contemplated by their venerable philanthropist Mr. Jefferson, as "among possible events," or "probable by supernatural interference!" The heart of the by-stander will acknowledge with him, that "the Almighty has no attribute that can take side with them in such a contest." Footnote in original. [NHC note: reference to Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Query XVIII: Jefferson's warning that God's justice for slaveowners could include switching the positions of master and slave.]

I do not wonder that Europeans refuse credence to those who report truly of the condition of these commonwealths. That a nation of independent sovereigns should be a nation of all others the most orderly, and the most united, may well pass the understandings of men accustomed to the rule of the sword. It may be questioned, whether the institutions of America could with propriety be transplanted to Europe. The attempt failed in France, and the same causes may produce the same failure elsewhere. . . .

**Letter XXI, February 1820** [excerpts]

. . . the quarter of the Republic to which the eye of a stranger turns with most curiosity, is the vast region to the west of the Alleghanies. The character of these republics is necessarily as unique as their position, and their influence is already powerful upon the floor of congress.

In glancing at their geographical position, the foreigner might hastily be led to consider them as growing rivals rather than friendly supporters of the Atlantic states. It will be found, however, that they are at present powerful cementers of the union, and that the feelings and interests are such as to draw together the north and south divisions of the confederacy. . . .

It may be worth observing, that there is something in the character of the American population, as well as in the diverse products of the soil, which seems favorable to the growth of manufactures. I do not allude merely to their mechanical ingenuity, which has shown itself in so many important inventions and improvements in ship-building, bridges, steam-boat-navigation, implements of husbandry and machinery of all kinds, but to that proud feeling of independence, which disinclines them from many species of labor resorted to by Europeans. There are some farther peculiarities in the condition and character of the scattered population of the west, which rendered the birth of manufactures simultaneous with that of agriculture. In planting himself in the bosom of the wilderness, the settler is often entirely dependant upon his own industry for every article of food and raiment. While he wields the axe, and turns up the soil, his wife plies the needle and the spinning-wheel, and his children draw sugar from the maple, and work at the loom. . . .

The wonderful aptitude of the Americans for labour of every species, however removed, seemingly, from their accustomed habits, is easily explained, if we consider, first, the mental energy inspired by their free institutions, and, secondly, their general and practical education. An American youth is usually trained to hit a mark with the certainty of an old English cross-bowman; to swim with that dexterity which procured for the young Franklin in London the name of the *American aquatic*;[2] to handle a musket like a soldier, the mechanic's tools like a carpenter, the husbandman's like a farmer, and, not very unfrequently, the needle and scissars like a village taylor. . . .

[2] See Franklin's *Autobiography*: "I stripped and leaped into the river, and swam from near Chelsea to Blackfryar's, performing on the way many feats of activity, both upon and under water, that surpris'd and pleas'd those to whom they were novelties." Franklin was an accomplished swimmer and swim instructor and, in 1968, was inducted into the International Swimming Hall of Fame.

In considering America generally, one finds a character in her foreign to Europe,—something which there would be accounted visionary; a liberality of sentiment, and a nationality of feeling, not founded upon the mere accident of birth, but upon the appreciation of that civil liberty to which she owes all her greatness and happiness. It is to be expected, however, than in the democracies of the west, these distinctions will be yet more peculiarly marked.

It seems to be a vulgar belief in Europe, that the American wilderness is usually settled by the worst members of the community. The friend I write to is well aware that it is generally by the best. The love of liberty, which the emigrant bears with him from the shores of the Connecticut, the Hudson, or Potomac, is exalted and refined in the calm and seclusion of nature's primeval woods, and boundless prairies. Some reckless spirits, spurning all law and social order, must doubtless mingle with the more virtuous crowd; but these rarely settle down as farmers. They start ahead of the advanced guard of civilisation, and form a wandering troop of hunters, approximating in life and, sometimes, in character to the Indians, their associates. At other times they assume the occupation of shepherds, driving on their cattle from pasture to pasture, according as fancy leads them on from one fair prairie to another still fairer, or according as the approaching tide of population threatens to encroach upon their solitude and their wild dominion. . . .

The fact is, that every sapient prophecy with regard to America has been disproved. We were forewarned that she was too free, and her liberty has proved her security; too peaceable, and she has been found sufficient for her defence; too large, and her size has insured her union. These numerous republics, scattered through so wide a range of territory, embracing all the climates, and containing all the various products of the earth, seem destined, in the course of years, to form a world within themselves, independent alike of the treasures and the industry of all the other sections of the globe. Each year they are learning, more and more, to look to each other for all the various articles of food and raiment; while the third great human necessity,—defence, they have been from infancy practised to furnish in common. The bonds of union, indeed, are more numerous and intimate than can be easily conceived by foreigners. A people who have bled together for liberty, who equally appreciate and equally enjoy that liberty which their own blood or that of their fathers has purchased; who feel, too, that the liberty which they love has found her last asylum on their shores; such a people are bound together by ties of amity and citizenship far beyond what is usual in national communities.

**Letter XXII, February 1820** [excerpts] The Americans are certainly a calm, rational, civil, and well-behaved people; not given to quarrel or to call each other names; and yet if you were to look at their newspapers you would think them a parcel of Hessian soldiers. An unrestricted press appears to be the

safety-valve of their free constitution; and they seem to understand this; for they no more regard all the noise and sputter that it occasions, than the roaring of the vapour on board their steam-boats.

Were a foreigner, immediately upon landing, to take up a newspaper, (especially if he should chance to land just before an election,) he might suppose that the whole political machine was about to fall to pieces, and that he had just come in time to be crushed in its ruins. But if he should *not* look at a newspaper, he might walk through streets on the very day of election, and never find out that it was going on, unless, indeed, it should happen to him as it happened to me, to see a crowd collected round a pole surmounted by a cap of liberty, and men walking in at one door of a house, and walking out at another. Should he then ask a friend hurrying past him, "What is going on there?" he may receive for answer, "The election of representatives: walk on: I am just going to give in my vote, and I will overtake you."

It might seem strange, that the sovereign people should judge proper to exercise the right of abusing the rulers of their choice; a right which they certainly do exercise without mercy; but when we consider, that in this democracy there is generally a yielding of a minority to a majority, the case seems quite easy of explanation. Besides, after a man has assisted in the choice of his representative, he may take offence at him. It of course then follows, that he will tell him so; and that he will tell his fellow-citizens the same, and that he will endeavour to eke out his philippic[3] with the aid of all the epithets in the dictionary. Now, though this practice of vilifying the freely chosen officers of the Republic is not very reputable to the community, it evidently brings its own cure with it. Public opinion, after all, is the best and, indeed, the only efficient censor of the press: in this country it is found all-sufficient; while in other countries fines, imprisonments, and executions, are had recourse to in vain. . . .

Never was there a country in which a demagogue had less in his power than in this. The citizen here learns to think for himself. His very pride as a sovereign revolts from a blind surrender of his judgment to those who may be willing to set up as his teachers. He looks to facts; considers the conduct of his public functionaries, and pronounces accordingly. Sedition here may safely ring her larum;[4] no man regards it. The eyes of the people are fixed upon the wheel of government; and so long as it moves fairly and steadily, the servants that guide it are supported by the national suffrage. . . .

The writings of the great and good Franklin, the Socrates of modern times, the father of independent America, and the oracle of those philosophic statesmen whom the public voice has fixed at the helm, since the first election of Mr. Jefferson, exert to this day their holy influence on the national character, and, consequently, on the national councils. You cannot enter the house of a farmer, or the log-hut of a settler,

[3] philippic. A verbal denunciation characterized by harsh, often insulting language; a tirade. [American Heritage Dictionary]
[4] larum. An alarm. Middle English larum-, as in larumbelle, short for alarum. [American Heritage Dictionary]

that you will not find the writings of this sage upon the shelf. His apophthegms[5] and parables are graven upon the memory of childhood; "his life written by himself" is the pocket manual of the youth when he enters into the world; his divine precepts (for such they truly are) of justice, humanity, forbearance, industry, economy, simplicity, philanthropy, and liberty, regulate the administration of many a patriotic statesman, and the life of many a virtuous citizen. . . .

**Letter XXIII, March 1820** [excerpts]

In other countries it may seem of little consequence to inculcate upon the female mind "the principles of government, and the obligations of patriotism;" but it was wisely foreseen by that venerable apostle of liberty, that in a country where a mother is charged with the formation of an infant mind that is to be called in future to judge of the laws and support the liberties of a republic, the mother herself should well understand those laws, and estimate those liberties. Personal accomplishments and the more ornamental branches of knowledge should certainly in America be made subordinate to solid information. This is perfectly the case with respect to the men; as yet the women have been educated too much after the European manner. French, Italian, dancing, drawing, engage the hours of the one sex, (and this but too commonly in a lax and careless way,) while the more appropriate studies of the other are philosophy, history, political economy, and the exact sciences; it follows, consequently that after the spirits of youth have somewhat subsided, the two sexes have less in common in their pursuits and turn of thinking than is desirable; a woman of a powerful intellect will of course seize upon the new topics presented to her by the conversation of her husband. The less vigorous, or the more thoughtless mind, is not easily brought to forego trifling pursuits for those which occupy the stronger reason of its companion. . . .

Perhaps the condition of women affords, in all countries, the best criterion by which to judge of the character of men. Where we find the weaker sex burdened with hard labour, we may ascribe to the stronger something of the savage; and where we see the former deprived of free agency, we shall find in the latter much of the sensualist. I know not a circumstance which more clearly marks in England the retrograde movement of the national morals than the shackles now forged for the rising generation of women. . . .

In America much certainly is done to ameliorate the condition of women; and as their education shall become, more and more, the concern of the state, their character may aspire in each succeeding generation to a higher standard. The Republic, I am persuaded, will be amply repaid for any trouble or expense that may be thus bestowed. In her struggles for liberty, much of her virtue emanated from the wives and daughters of her senators and soldiers, and to preserve to her sons the energy of freemen and patriots, she much strengthen that energy in her daughters. . . .

[5] apophthegm. Variant of apothegm. A terse, witty, instructive saying; a maxim. [American Heritage Dictionary]

**Letter XXIV, March 1820** [excerpts]

Yes, it is somewhat curious to see how travellers contradict each other. One says things are white, and another that they are black; some write that the Americans have no religion, and others that they are a race of fanatics. One traveller tells us, that they are so immersed in the affairs of the Republic as not to have a word to throw at a stranger, and another, that they never think about politics at all, and talk nonsense eternally. . . . [I]f the Americans had no religion, it is to be presumed that they would have no churches; and if they were a race of fanatics, it is equally to be presumed that they would force people to go into them. We know that they *have* churches, and do *not* force people to go into them, nor force people to *pay for them*, and yet they *are* paid for, and filled.

. . . I do not perceive any want of religion in America. There are sections of the country where some might think there is too much, at least that its temper is too stern and dogmatical. This has long been said of New-England, and, undoubtedly, the Puritan ancestry of her citizens is still discernible as well in the coolness of their manners, as in the rigidity of their creed. But it is wonderful how fast these distinctions are disappearing. . . .

The perfect cordiality of all the various religious fraternities might sometimes lead a stranger to consider their members as more indifferent to the faith they so quietly profess than they really are. There is undoubtedly a considerable body scattered through the community, who are attached to no establishment; but as they never trouble their neighbors with their opinions, neither do their neighbors trouble them with theirs. The extent to which this liberality is carried, even by the most dogmatical of the churches, is now well evinced in New England. In one or two of her theological colleges, the practice continued, till within some years, of inculcating one creed exclusively under the protection of the legislature; but the legislature have now left teachers and students to themselves, and even Connecticut has finally done away the last shadow of the privileges of her congregationalists. It really does seem possible for fanaticism, or something very like it, and liberality to go together. . . .

There is a curious spirit of opposition in the human mind. I see your papers full of anathemas against blasphemous pamphlets. We have no such things here; and why? Because every man is free to write them; and because every man enjoys his own opinion, without any arguing about the matter. Where religion never arms the hand of power, she is never obnoxious; where she is seated modestly at the domestic hearth, whispering peace and immortal hope to infancy and age, she is always respected, even by those who may not themselves feel the force of her arguments. This is truly the case here; and the world has my wish, and, I am sure, yours also, that it may be the case every where.