

__ Abbé Claude Robin __

New Travels through North America in the Year 1781

Nouveau Voyage dans L'Amérique Septentrionale en l'Année 1781

1782 __ Letter XIII __ Excerpts

A French Catholic abbot, Claude Robin served as a chaplain with the French army in America during the last year of warfare, witnessing the surrender of Cornwallis at Yorktown in 1781. A year later he published a narrative of his war experiences, relating his impressions of the triumphant Americans and their "national character"—so different from the Europeans—that would surely direct their newly won independence into stable nationhood. In his last section, Robin lauded the American traits that most amazed him—their self-sufficiency, ingenuity, and, "to the wonder of the world," their ability to transcend regional differences and unite in rebellion against a shared oppressor, Britain (oblivious to these very traits in its subjects). Eight years later France would erupt in its own rebellion, spurred by similar Enlightenment ideals but with tragically different results.

__ LETTER XIII¹ __

York [Yorktown, Virginia], November 15, 1781.

THIS great and happy event, in which the French have had so considerable a share, will soon give a new turn to American affairs. The southern states, so long harassed and distressed, will now assume new spirit and activity. The power of Congress, heretofore weak and wavering, will be consolidated, and the prejudices against our nation will vanish. To what a pitch of grandeur will not these new states shortly arise!

Extending more than six hundred leagues from north to south, and much more from east to west, situated in temperate and serene climates where the variety of latitudes and the natural fertility of the

soil will soon supply them with all those productions which other nations cannot procure without traversing immense seas and oceans, what advantages will they not enjoy!

__ Robin reviews the vast natural resources of the continent. __

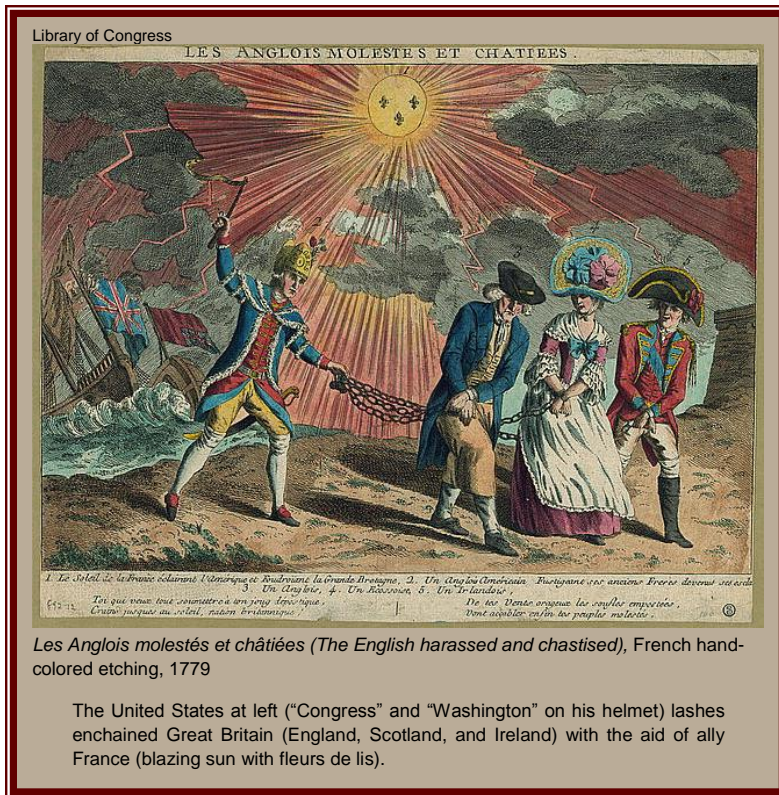
Our European cities and towns, for the most part, afford us to this day striking proofs of the calamities, ignorance, misery, and barbarity of our ancestors in their unpleasant, unhealthy fixations [settlements], in their walls planted round with battlements, their formidable turrets of defense, their close and compact buildings, almost without air or light, and their crooked, muddy streets, equally incommo-
dious and disgusting; but the American towns are upon a different plan. Not walled in as if mankind were to live in eternal distrust of each other, they are built on agreeable salubrious [healthful] spots of land, washed by pure and navigable waters, surrounded by fertile fields, laid out in spacious streets crossing each other in direct lines, and ornamented with buildings everywhere beautiful, convenient, and regular.

If America in point of soil [natural resources] bids fair to exceed Europe, what will she not do in her legislation and her manners?²

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¹ See the introductory summary at the bottom of p. 3. Introducing chapters with phrase summaries was a standard publishing format at the time.

² *Manners*: norms of behavior prescribing one's entire presentation of self in society, including decorum, diction, mode of intellectual expression, etc.; broader than the modern meaning of etiquette.



But what a spectacle do these [American] settlements even now already exhibit to our view, considering that they are but of little more than a century standing, and have been constantly under the control of English policy (always suspicious and tyrannical), which seized the fruits of their industry and rendered itself the sole possessor of their commerce!

Spacious and level roads already traverse the vastly extended forests of this country. Large and costly buildings have been raised, either for the meeting of the representatives of the States, for an asylum to the defenders of their country in distress,³ or for the convenience of instructing young citizens in language, arts and science. These last, which are for the most part endowed with considerable possessions and revenues, are also

furnished with libraries and are under the direction of able masters, invited hither from different parts of Europe. Shipyards are established in all their ports, and they already rival the best artists of the old world in point of naval architecture. Numerous mines have been opened, and they have now several foundries for casting of cannon, which are in no respect inferior to our own; . . .

Every house and dwelling contains within itself almost all the original and most necessary arts [skills]. The hand that traces out the furrow knows also how to give the shapeless block of wood what form it pleases, how to prepare the hides of cattle for use, and extract spirits from the juice of fruits.⁴ The young rural maiden . . . knows how to spin wool, cotton, flax, and afterwards weave them into cloth. Iron conductors⁵ are seen everywhere upon the buildings, which while they preserve the inhabitants from the fatal effects of lightning, immortalize the memory of Franklin, that venerable sage, who is the admiration of the Parisians, and show at the same time how much they are disposed to profit by his inventions.

When the illegal, oppressive acts [of the British Parliament] were framed and sent over to destroy their privileges, with what prudence, resolution, and courage did they not unite to defend them! — and here we ought to pause and fix our attention to form a proper judgment of the Americans. Men, scattered through extensive countries [regions], different in climate and clashing in their interests and modes of worship, to the wonder of the whole world, formed associations which coincided as exactly in their decisions as if the whole matter had been preconcerted. Great Britain vainly flattered herself that by shutting up the port of Boston [1774], she had effectually intimidated these provinces and raised ruinous dissensions among them. Yet after this arbitrary act, their complaints were but the more urgent, and the common danger did but strengthen their union the more . . .

___ Robin praises the Americans' response to British oppression before the Revolution as reasoned and unified. ___

England must have seen with astonishment the colonies discussing their rights with so much boldness and truth, taking measures so wisely, and discovering such undaunted resolutions, but what must have

³ Institutions for destitute war veterans.

⁴ I.e., ferment fruit to create alcoholic beverages.

⁵ Lightning rods.

been her fears when after her formidable armaments had arrived to subdue them, she saw them dare to advance and dispute every inch of ground with these numerous veteran forces?

. . . England, no doubt, actuated by an ambitious policy, was thoroughly persuaded at first that a small number of her troops would suffice to fight and subdue the Americans: and if these troops, with the immense hosts that succeeded them, failed in their endeavors and were conquered, I will be bold to say it is a phenomenon in the political world that no empire or kingdom has seen the like of in past ages, and perhaps nothing like it will ever happen again.

. . . With regard to America, their wisest men [British] reasoned like children. The object was

too great for their comprehension, and as they had hitherto only viewed the Americans in the calms of rural and commercial life, they forgot, or did not know, or would not recollect, that native *cowardice* itself, for with *that* they falsely upbraided [accused] them, can be roused into heroism at the prospect of approaching ruin — and thus their folly and ambition has transferred a glorious sovereignty to the western world,⁶ which will, we hope, contribute largely in its effects to the happiness and well being of mankind in general, but philosophy lets us see that it will take several ages to complete the great revolution which has been begun in our day.

. . .

Their manners and climate will not only for a long time incline the Americans to peace, but their political situation will probably still increase this rational propensity. They are not surrounded by restless, ambitious nations who will oblige them to be incessantly armed to guard against their designs [plans]. Although consisting of distinct bodies [states], they will never be exposed to those frequent altercations among themselves which vex the republics of Europe — their respective rights are too clearly established, too generally received, and too intimately connected not to tend constantly to the destruction of the oppressor.

. . .

. . . At this moment new empires are bursting into existence, and mankind will unavoidably begin to perceive the necessity of exercising their *reason* to a better purpose than heretofore. More connected by commerce, they will receive and communicate knowledge with greater facility than ever. The genius and talents of one individual man, and the spirit of party divisions, will no longer have the same influence as formerly. The shameful errors of fanatics and the contracted notions of bigots and devotees will now vanish, and though they should revive under a thousand different forms, this new and rational philosophy will, notwithstanding, at last recall all the nations of the world to a unity of sentiment and worship.⁷ Perhaps the hope of such an event may be vain, but the idea is certainly flattering and comfortable to the human mind.

I am, &c.

T H E E N D.

___ Summary preceding Letter XIII ___

Advantages arising to America from the capture of Lord Cornwallis—The future importance of this country—Her various local advantages over Europe—Political happiness arising from the abolishment of the feudal system of laws in America—The free and independent situation of the American peasantry—National character of the people in America not yet arrived to maturity—Their natural ingenuity and inventive turn—The political conduct of the English Ministry, respecting America, previous to the breaking out of the war—Proceedings of the first American Congress—General Gage and the Boston port bill—The American alliance with France—Reflections arising therefrom—A long peace in America after the war—Religion will probably be the first cause of dissension in the United States—A unity of faith and worship most likely to render mankind happy in every part of the world.

⁶ I.e., through its ineptitude and arrogance, Britain has "given" the western world a glorious new nation, the United State of America.

⁷ In the preceding paragraphs, Robin encouraged philosophers to study the shared precepts and values of world religions, positing that the most tolerant and best governed nations are those in which the people share the same enlightened faith and form of worship.