

1-1-1885

The Philosophy of Emigration

J. M. Woolworth

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nebhisttrans>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Woolworth, J. M., "The Philosophy of Emigration" (1885). *Transactions and Reports, Nebraska State Historical Society*. Paper 45.
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nebhisttrans/45>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Nebraska State Historical Society at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Transactions and Reports, Nebraska State Historical Society by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

block of lots in the city of Lincoln was reserved and appropriated for that purpose, known as "historical block." There was organized about that time the "Nebraska State Historical Library Association," which was one of the organizations I have referred to. Through the efforts of those feeling an interest, and to hold the real estate named, this society was revived on the 20th of last month. Whether desirable or advisable to unite the two state historical organizations is a matter for consideration on the part of both.

THE PHILOSOPHY OF EMIGRATION.

ADDRESS BY HON. J. M. WOOLWORTH,

January, 1880.

It is fit that in this year of grace, 1880, and in this month of January, we should, by public exercises now held for the first time, mark a period in the history of the state.

It was in March, 1854, that the Indians, by treaty, ceded these regions to the United States, and in May, that a system of government was framed for them. In October, Francis Burt, the first governor landed on these shores. In a few weeks he died, and the work of organization devolved on Thomas B. Cuming, the secretary. On the 21st day of October he ordered a census of the new population. On the 23d of November he divided the territory into counties and precincts, and apportioned the members of the Council and House of Representatives among them. On the 12th of December an election of members of the legislature was held. On the 20th of that month Gov. Cuming constituted the judicial districts, assigned the judges to them, and appointed the terms of court; and on the 16th of January, 1855, he convened the legislative assembly at Omaha.

The work of organization was complete. The three essential branches of a political machinery, framed after the pattern which the long experience and best wit of man has contrived, now went into operation, never afterward, in all the course of time, to stand still.

From 1855 to 1880, in twenty-five years—a fraction of a century ago—one of those awful periods of time by which men measure the age of the world. These periods—centennial, semi-centennial, quar-

ter-centennial—seem to the imaginations of men peculiar and sacred. In the lives of men and of peoples they are points of pause, rest, and reflection; for their little while they are consecrated to memory and anticipation. It is fortunate for the Society that in this twenty-fifth year after the organization of regulated government, here at one of these sacred points in the existence of political society, it should enter upon its more public career, and manifest to the people of this commonwealth the beneficence of its object—that, namely, of gathering, cherishing, hallowing, and illustrating the names and events which, otherwise, must soon survive only in tradition and legend.

My general purpose in this address is an inquiry into the causes which impel men to plant new seats in unoccupied regions of country.

And I first remark, that this movement is not accidental, local, or temporary. On the other hand, it embraces all enlightened peoples, and beginning with the first dawn of intelligence, it has been going forward unchecked to this day.

From the cradle of the race the face of man has been toward the setting sun. Behind him have been the scenes of his childhood, the affections of his father's house, the altar at which he has been taught to worship God; before him have been new regions, in whose recesses his imagination has pictured better homes and freer life. Behind him have been what his elders have achieved; before him, visions of what he shall achieve. It is the order of nature; as the shades of evening gather in the east, morning breaks in the west. His march has always been from east to west, and is strewn with the relics of empires. From India, by way of Babylon, Ninevah, Jerusalem, and Egypt to Greece, with her Thebes and Athens and Corinth; to Carthage and Rome and the cities of the Moor; to beautiful France, mighty Germany, and glorious Britian; enveloping this country of ours and stretching on to Australasia, New Zealand, and the islands of the sea, it has, through all recorded time, been from east to west, one steady, direct, continual, triumphal, desolating march—too long and steady, too direct and continuous to have been an accident; too triumphant to have been marshaled by human will, and leaving in its pathway ruins too mighty, solitudes too vast, and deserts, where once was beauty, too inhospitable, to have been the wish or the work of human hearts.

Mark, too, another related fact, that in the work of colonization

there is something which, in a singular way, has always engaged the imaginations of men. The early history of every people has been a field of tradition, legend, and romance, in which the national sensibility has gathered delightful sustenance, and to the men of those times characters are attributed so large, potential, and heroic that the national imagination imputes divine qualities to them.

How in the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* and the tales of Herodotus, recited in every Grecian city, in the picturesque pages of Livy, the tales of Scott, and the *Idyls* of Tennyson, and the records of the Pilgrims, of Washington and his generals, of Adams and Jefferson and Hamilton, and their compeers, do the founders of the great nations glow and expand under the inspiration of patriotic pride; and in the contemplation of their work and character, with what a peculiar, profound, and responsive emotion does the national heart always overflow. *Conditores imperiorum* the Romans called them, and Virgil, with consummate tact, introduces his hero by the large phrase "Who planted seats in Latium." The reason for which is, that in this work of making the earliest settlements in new regions—in this work of laying the foundation and framing the structure of what becomes at last an orderly, stable, and embellished society, there is something so engaging, so beneficent, so adventurous, so far reaching, that the imagination of men, and the emotions of gratitude and ancestral pride, and a personal sense of kinship with what is heroic and admirable are caught by the contemplation and carried away captive.

The different forces have impelled, various motives have induced men to emigrate. The plethora of citizens who thronged the streets of Grecian cities; the need of Rome to fortify the conquest of her army by the introduction of her laws; the mercantile sagacity of the Netherlands extorting a thrifty trade; the plunder of the natives, and the gold and silver of their mines, which freighted the *Argosy* of Spain; the genuine passion for the national glory which has always inspired the Frenchman—these are the immediate motives which have prompted those nations to settle new regions. But observe how all these diverse motives are derived from, and have reference to the mother State. None of them center in the colony. That is the assistant, the contributor to the advancement and glory of the home government. It is never the ultimate nor even an independent good. The structure of the colonists has been framed, as their purpose has

been conceived, at home. Hence they have been the repetition and continuance; reproduction, hardly modified by new conditions, of the parent government. The civil polity which ruled, and the literature and arts which adorned Athens, rendered orderly and graceful the attic Amphipolis and Thurii. The Roman cities of Gaul, Hispania, and Africa displayed anew the forum, the comitia, and the temples of the immortal gods of the imperial city. Spanish, French, and Dutch colonies have known no theories of government, no forms of worship, no traditions, customs, modes, aspirations, but such as they have carried with them. There has not been the play of invention or variety of contrivance, or the vigor of a venturesome, independent, individual enterprise. The longing of the exile's heart for the pleasant abodes of his fathers has been assuaged by their reproduction in the new land, but the man has not been made more manly by endurance; nor his fiber stiffened by struggle; nor his nerves steadied by resolution. He has always been an exile, sick for the old home—not a colonist bent on building a new and a better home.

English colonization is of another character. The Englishman is singularly fitted for foreign enterprise. He is the Roman of modern times. He has the same arrogance without the least consciousness of the rights of others; the same imperious temper that dominates every foreign sentiment and every alien force; the same intense, aggressive, sublime egotism, which projects itself upon every people it is amongst, and compels a service, whether hearty or hateful, to the glory of England. Expedient, adventurous, self-seeking, self-reliant, persistent, he is the sort of man for the work of planting new seats in new regions.

And so from that little island, with an area little larger than Nebraska, have gone out emigrants into all lands, until, with her colonial possessions, Britain is an empire of universal dominion. As Webster said: "The morning drum-beat, following the sun and keeping company with the hours, circles the globe with the martial music of England."

The colonial enterprises of Great Britain have, in their origin, spirit, and purpose, been in strong contrast to the other modern European nations. They have not been projected by the ministry, their structure has not been framed at home; they have never had the public assistance, often not the public observation. They have been private individual adventures sent out, upheld, and maintained by private funds

and having the protection and support of the Imperial Government only when success has proved their right to be. If, as in the case of New Zealand, the form, structure, modes, customs of the new community have been prescribed at home in the infancy of the enterprise, the contrivance has soon shown its inaptness for the new conditions and circumstances, expedience and compliance have asserted themselves.

With such a nature and such a career in colonization, it is easy to see what is in the Briton which impels him to seek new places for abode and conquest. He is, and always has been a politician—he is, by the education of centuries, steeped in politics. From Magna Charta, indeed from a time long before Magna Charta, he has been absorbed in questions of government and society; he has been busy in complaining of mischief and contriving remedies by legislation. There never was a nation of such a vast, complex, varied, radical body of statutes as England, and each one of them is the ultimate formula to which long discussion, contention, and passionate struggle has at last been reduced. If that is a true saying, “happy is the nation which has no annals,” then surely is Britain the most unhappy of all lands, for her annals are full. Thus educated, the passion of the Englishman is for social and public affairs, for whatever justifies a claim of right to share in the office and work of directing them. The young man coming from the public school or the university is full of the struggles of the Roman Forum or the English Commons, and he longs for the conflict. He has heard Roman laws and English statutes called by their author’s name, and he is inflamed by a desire for such immortality. Or the ambition may be more subdued—content with a seat in the inferior magistracy or in the direction of public charities, or the management of private enterprise, but it is an ambition, of whatever pretension, which is born in him, and demands gratification.

The colony, the new conditions which obtain there, the plastic elements of unsettled society, to be molded to new forms, landed estates easily acquired, with castle, hall, or lodge, and whatever contributes to dignity and conspicuous station, charities, associations, monied, social, and political, houses, towns, roads, and whatever forms an embellished society, all these appealing to aspirations, natural to him and developed by education, invite him thither to the work of organization, and of projecting himself upon and perpetuating himself in

the forms, methods, traditions, customs, institutions, and principles of the immature society, which one day shall become the stable, orderly, regulated, consolidated, immortal state.

And so it is that the Englishman—expedient, venturesome, self-reliant, political, and ambitious to direct affairs, turns from the old home to a new, distant, unsettled, and undeveloped land; and so it is that British colonies planted in every land and by every sea under the whole heavens, have formed an empire, whose provinces are nations, whose subjects are of every race, whose dominion by weight of arms and sway of laws, and breadth of civilization, and supremacy of will exceeds that of imperial Rome.

The colonization of our country is in its circumstances, motives, spirit, purpose, and polity, in striking contrast to all other like enterprises. It contributes largely to constitute the century an epoch in history.

The early English settlers of our country possessed all those characteristics which we have enumerated—but they possessed them to a degree so much greater than their countrymen in general that they seem of another order and a higher quality. They were gentlemen by birth; they belonged to the rank of the gentry of England or of the upper middle class. They had been educated in public schools and universities and to all good learning of their time. They added a wide observation and a profound acquaintance with the most profound truths, and most of them were men of property, well able to bear the expense of their enterprise and the risk of their adventure. In Virginia they were the cavaliers of the civil wars of England, to whom the disasters of the royal arms made removal from the commonwealth expedient; the ancestors of Washington, Jefferson, Monroe, and Madison. In New England they were the Puritans who sat in the Long Parliament, and filled the armies of Cromwell, and who bore such sons as the Adamses, the Winthrops, the Endicotts. Like the best of Englishmen, they were expedient, but so that they were wise in great affairs; and venturesome, but so that they risked their all for a great cause; and self-reliant, but so that their wills were iron; and they were politicians, but of such sort that they not only founded commonwealths, but founded commonwealths on new doctrines and with a new construction.

That you may duly appreciate this quality, pause here a moment to

mark what was their training in politics. It was in the school of the Revolution. There, at the fireside, in the club, in the pulpit, in Parliament, in every place of debate and conversation, and by every means by which men tell what they know, think, believe, hope for, even in the clang and carnage and awful dispute of battle, they had all their lives heard high discussion of every principle of English government and every event in English constitutional history, every theory, and doctrine, and sentiment, and tradition of free institutions and regulated liberty. To all which the Puritans added profound convictions of religion, which, while it gave a somber hue to their lives, gave also an intensity, depth, and force to their character which made them fit to be founders of empires.

And now mark a happy circumstance in their enterprise—the neglect, the ignorance, and heedlessness on the part of the Crown of what they then essayed. Charters were granted of such extensive powers that, under their sanction, government was remitted to the hands of the colonists, or else, as in the case of Plymouth, the settlement planted without authority was organized, regulated, nourished, developed, according to the intelligence and will of the settlers alone. All which, as it began without the assistance, proceeded without the observation of the Crown.

And thus happily left to themselves, observe what these men did. In 1819, in Virginia, a government was framed, with an executive of limited powers and a representative body of legislators, which was the first popular assembly in the western hemisphere, and two years afterward a written constitution was adopted by ordinance, in which the purpose of government was declared to be “the greatest comfort and benefit to the people, and the prevention of injustice, grievances, and oppression.” Those maxims of liberty which form the bill of rights in the constitution of every state in the American Union to-day are there set forth almost in the very phrase which we now use—provision against arbitrary taxation and in favor of freedom of trade, immunity from military impositions, and the independence of religious societies, and reserving to the representatives of the people power to levy war, conclude peace, acquire territory, and enact laws, and to the people themselves, in their primary and sovereign capacity, the right to select their officers and rulers by universal suffrage.

And so it was in New England. Her colonies were almost pure

democracies. They were "governments of the people, by the people, for the people." But they also led the way in another and a most beneficent direction. Independent of each other in structure, they were all involved together in warfare with the Indians in their midst and the French on their border. And they soon became involved in a common dispute with the mother country for those principles and institutions which, by the sanction either of her neglect or the grants of her charter, they had secured to themselves. And then they were driven to mutual counsel, assistance, and support. And so there came out of their fortuitous necessity, by their rare aptness for political affairs, the confederation of New England—that association which was the germ, invitation, example, prototype of that most consummate contrivance of political wisdom, the union and constitution of the United States.

I pointed out to you how the emigrant Greek, Roman, Spanish, Dutch, French, and English carried with him the civil polity, the modes of life, and the religion in which he was reared, and how the misery of separation from the homes of his fathers and the institutions of his native country was assuaged by their faithful reproduction in the new land. But the colonies of America advanced beyond all the practices of English government and all the maxims of English freedom, and by a prescient, a vigorous, a resolute intelligence, opened a new prospect, a new purpose, a new life, and a new destiny for the race.

Coming now to the inquiry as to our country and times, we observe the march of the generations and of empire still steady, persistent, continuous from east to west. Hardly was the colony of Massachusetts Bay well planted before the younger Winthrop led thence an adventurous company to new settlements in the valley of the Connecticut, and the cavaliers of Virginia, to Kentucky and the valley of the Ohio, to found there new commonwealths as noble as their own. Each decennial census has shown the center of population steadily advancing from the Chesapeake and Massachusetts Bays to the Mississippi. And the question is, what force, embracing all sections of the country and operative always, compels this general movement of the populations?

The attempt has been made to explain it by a desire of each individual to better his physical condition; to make for himself a home; to acquire wealth, money, possessions more quickly and easily than is

possible in an old community. But this explanation does not take into account the breadth and duration of the movement of men from the East to the West; it attempts to account for a universal phenomenon by a circumstance and an accident. You cannot predicate individual motives of the masses of men. Each chivalrous knight who went to the rescue of the holy places, was inspired by a desire for personal glory, but that most picturesque procession of the Crusaders gathered out of every Christian people, was marshaled by no such accident, but rather by an enthusiasm encompassing all Europe, to redeem the sanctities of their religion from the sacrilegious hands of the Saracen.

A solution of our question which refers the general and perpetual act of emigration to the individual, is like attributing to the single drops of the water of the sea, the universal fact of the great tide, which, following the heavenly order and compassing all oceans, pours its mighty course from continent to continent.

Nor may the fact be attributed to a natural love of adventure and change. Doubtless the charm of adventure is something; the mere fact of removal is something. The exchange of familiar and therefore tame scenes and companionship for other lands, other seas, other skies, and other air, strangely quickens, freshens, and stimulates the pulses, sensations, thoughts, emotions, and aspirations. This is a common experience, and touching the universal fact is something, and yet it is inadequate to account for the sacrifice of so much that the heart loves, and for the endurance of so much that the heart revolts from.

The American has certain qualities of the Roman of the ancient, and the Briton of modern times—tenacity of purpose, love of dominion, and an aggressive egotism. Like them, he is fitted by nature for foreign enterprise. And as these qualities with him are enlivened by vivacity, sensibility, emotion, he, far more than they, delights in adventure. The risks, the struggle, the promise, the freedom of colonial life have for him even more than for others a charm and an attraction.

But there is another quality which he has in common with the Roman and the Briton—he is passionately political—he is the citizen. The training of the schools arouses this passion; his first lessons are of the contests of Roman freedom, and the great names and great events of Roman history live forever in his imagination. The story

of English liberty, the field where arms have conquered it, and high disputes in which it has been vindicated, are familiar passages of his early reading. His mind has been developed, his memory stored, his reason disciplined, by the study of the politics of his own country—the grand contentions which preceded the Revolution and the Rebellion, the due measure of state and national jurisdiction, the modes and results of elections, the awful question of human slavery, its extinction and abolition, its sanctity under the constitution, and iniquity under a just morality, finance, reconstruction, wars, conquests, purchases of territory, and the achievements of peaceful, beneficent, wide-spreading commerce, and the arts, and literature, and invention. Our annals, too, have been full. To the solution of the problems they reveal, no people ever brought a profounder spirit, a more resolute inquiry, a more vigorous contention.

When entering upon the field of daily action, the American citizen encounters the intense activity of our civil life. Our institutions are intensely social, and our society is intensely political. The ballot is in every hand, and every office is the potential inheritance of every citizen. Elections are of annual or more frequent occurrence, and measures nearly affecting the interests of every person are in constant agitation. Public assemblies, public speech, newspapers, periodicals and pamphlets, and the full publication of all deliberative and legislative bodies, hold the public attention to public affairs and keep it excited, curious, and in ferment.

The conditions of the West offer to the young and adventurous opportunity for the most abundant gratification of the political passion. Ease in acquiring land, freedom from prescriptive rights, unsettled methods, immature institutions, lax social customs, and opportunity for adventure, a free field for struggle, invite with alluring promises. The young citizen, with all the world before him where to choose, bids adieu to the home of his father, its settled, prescribed, regular, inflexible modes, and its constrained, contracted promises and hopes, with a sense of relief, and tries the new life of unformed society, resolved to be a man, to do a man's part in the ordering of the new community, to assert himself among its active forces, impress them with his personality, guide them by his intelligence, and have a part in the making and be a part of the product of the immortal state.

This is the solution of the phenomenon of cultivated mind turning

to uncultivated nature in the pioneer settlements of the West. It is not personal, although personal motives mingle with it; it is not individual, but it stimulates and ennobles individuals; it is not local, but so general that it is assisted by the national policy, and in turn ministers to the national glory. And so it has happened that Indian country after Indian country is ceded to the government; that territory after territory is organized; that men come, and plant, and sow, and reap, and ply commerce, and contrive institutions, and wage the awful strife of life; that state after state is admitted into the Union on an equal footing with the original thirteen; in order that men may live in peace and social rest, bear among them the various lots of life, perform the great social labors, and thrive and rejoice in the arts of usefulness and of beauty, and perfect the loftier arts of virtue and of empire, and share together the protection and the glory of the nation that is one formed of many—the Union of States, one and inseparable.

And so it shall be—nor hardly may we anticipate its period—all this western country, from the British to the Mexican line, half the area of the continent, remains to be populated, fields to be tilled, mines developed, cities planted, arts nourished, and states formed, until they shall be as the stars of Heaven for multitude. Fear not for the mighty growth, it shall not crush, but rather illustrate these benign institutions of nation and of state—co-existing and related, the one the complement of the other—the two together ministering to the common peace, and wielding a different supremacy for the safety of all; and form that very perfectness of political contrivance, which, as it was equal to the small beginnings of the nation, shall still be equal to the exigencies of the mighty empire; under the beneficence of its jurisdiction, under the stable order of its judicious laws, under the stimulating instruction of its temperate agitation, and under the blessings of an intelligent, profound, vital, religious faith, civilization shall be advanced beyond what the heart of man can now conceive.