

The Liberator.

SPEECH OF WILLIAM WELLS BROWN.

Delivered at the New England Anti-Slavery Convention,
Wednesday, May 23th, 1862.

MR. PRESIDENT,—Of the great family of man, the Negro has, during the last half century, been more prominently before the world than any other race. He did not seek this notoriety. Isolated away in his own land, he would have remained there, had it not been for the avarice of other races, who sought him out as a victim of slavery. Two and a half centuries of the negro's enslavement have created, in many minds, the opinion that he is intellectually inferior to the rest of mankind;—and now that the blacks seem in a fair way to get their freedom in this country, it has been asserted, and from high authority in the Government, that the natural inferiority of the negro makes it impossible for him to live on this continent with the white man, unless in a state of bondage. Mr. Postmaster-General Blair, in his letter to the Union Mass Meeting, held at the Cooper Institute, New York, in March last, takes this ground. The Boston Post and Courier both take the same position.

I admit that the condition of my race, whether considered in a mental, moral or intellectual point of view, at the present time, cannot compare favorably with the Anglo-Saxon. But it does not become the whites to point the finger of scorn at the blacks, when they have so long been degrading them. The negro has not always been considered the inferior race. The time was when he stood at the head of science and literature. Let us see. I claim that the blacks are the legitimate descendants of the Egyptians.

Nearly all historians agree that the Egyptians were black. Volney assumes it as a settled point. Herodotus, who travelled extensively through that interesting land, set them down as black, with curled hair, and having the negro features. The sacred writers were aware of their complexion—hence the question, "Can the Ethiopian change his skin?" The image of the negro is engraved upon the monuments of Egypt,—not as a bondman, but as the master of art. The Sphinx, one of the wonders of the world, surviving the wreck of centuries, exhibits these same features at the present day. Minerva, the Goddess of Wisdom, was supposed to have been an African princess. Atlas, whose shoulders sustained the globe, and even the great Jupiter Ammon himself, were located by the mythologists in Africa. Though there may not be much in these fables, they teach us, nevertheless, who were then considered the nobles of the human race. Euclid, Homer and Plato were Ethiopians. Terence, the most refined and accomplished scholar of his time, was of the same race. Hanno, the father of Hamilcar, and grandfather of Hannibal, was a negro. Alexander H. Everett, the ablest writer of his day upon this question, took the ground that I do. These are the antecedents of the enslaved blacks on this continent.

From whence sprang the Anglo-Saxon? For, mark you, it is he that denies the equality of the negro. "When the Britons first became known to the Tyrian mariners," says Macaulay, "they were little superior to the Sandwich Islanders." Itumo says they were a rude and barbarous people, divided into numerous tribes, dressed in the skins of wild beasts. Druidism was their religion, and they were very superstitious. Such is the first account we have of the Britons. When the Romans invaded that country, they reduced the people to a state of vassalage as degrading as that of slavery in the Southern States. Their king, Caractacus, was captured and sent a slave to Rome. Still later, Hengist and Horsa, the Saxon generals, presented another yoke which the Britons were compelled to wear. But the last drops of the bitter cup of humiliation were drunk when William of Normandy met Harold at Hastings, and, with a single blow, completely annihilated the nationality of the Britons. Thousands of the conquered people were then sent to the slave markets of Rome, where they were sold very cheap, on account of their inability to learn. This is not very flattering, Mr. President, to your ancestors, but it is just. (Laughter and applause.) Caesar, in writing home, said of the Britons, "They are the most ignorant people I ever conquered. They cannot be taught music." Cicero, writing to his friend Atticus, advised him not to buy slaves from England, "because," said he, "they cannot be taught to read, and are the ugliest and most stupid race I ever saw." I am sorry that Montgomery Blair came from such a low origin; but he is not to blame. I only find fault with him for making mouths at me. (Loud applause.)

"You should not the ignorant negro despise,—
Just such your sires appeared in Caesar's eyes."

The Britons lost their nationality because amalgamated with the Romans, Saxons and Normans, and out of this conglomeration sprang the proud Anglo-Saxon of to-day. I once stood upon the walls of an English city, built by enslaved Britons when Julius Caesar was their master. The image of the ancestors of Montgomery Blair, as represented in Briton, was carved upon the monuments of Rome, where they may still be seen in their chains. Ancestry is something which the white American should not speak of, unless with his lips to the dust.

"Nothing," says Macaulay, "in the early existence of Britain, indicated the greatness which she was destined to attain." Britain has risen, while proud Rome, once the mistress of the world, has fallen; but the image of the early Englishman in his chains, as carved twenty centuries ago, is still to be seen upon her broken monuments. So has Egypt fallen; and her sable sons and daughters have been scattered into nearly every land where the white man has introduced slavery and disgraced the soil with his footprint. As I gazed upon the beautiful and classic obelisk of Luxor, removed from Thebes, where it had stood 4000 years, and transplanted to the Place de la Concorde, at Paris, and contemplated its hieroglyphic inscription of the noble daring of Sesostrius, the African general, who drew kings at his chariot-wheels, and left monumental inscriptions from Ethiopia to India, I felt proud of my antecedents,—proud of the glorious past, which no amount of hate and prejudice could wipe from history's page, while I had to mourn over the fall and the degradation of my race. But I do not despair; for the negro has that intellectual genius which God has planted in the mind of man, that distinguishes him from the rest of creation, and which needs only cultivation to make it bring forth fruit. No nation has ever been found, which, by its own unaided efforts, by some powerful inward impulse, has arisen from barbarism and degradation to civilization and respectability. There is nothing in race or blood, in color or features, that imparts susceptibility of improvement to one race over another. The mind left to itself from infancy, without culture, remains a blank. Knowledge is not innate. Development makes the man. As the Greeks and Romans and Jews drew knowledge from the Egyptians three thousand years ago, and the Europeans received it from the Romans, so must the blacks of this land rise in the same way. As one man learns from another, so nation learns from nation. Civilization is handed from one people to another, its great fountain and source being God our Father. No one, in the days of Cicero and Tacitus, could have predicted that the barbarism and savage wildness of the Germans would give place to the learning, refinement and culture which that people now exhibit. Already the blacks on this continent, though kept down under the heel of the white man, are fast rising in the scale of intellectual development, and proving their equality with the brotherhood of man.

In his address before the Colonization Society at Washington, on the 18th of Jan., 1853, Hon. Edward Everett said:—

"When I lived in Cambridge, a few years ago, I used to attend, as one of the Board of Visitors, the examinations of a classical school, in which was a colored boy, the son of a slave in Mississippi, I think. He appeared to me to be of pure African blood. There were at the same time two youths from Georgia,

and one of my own sons, attending the same school. I must say that this poor negro boy, Beverly Williams, was one of the best scholars at the school, and in the Latin language he was the best scholar in his class. There are others, I am told, which show still more conclusively the aptitude of the colored race for every kind of intellectual culture."

Mr. Everett cited several other instances which had fallen under his notice, and utterly scouted the idea that there was any general inferiority of the African race. He said, "They have done as well as persons of European or Anglo-American origin would have done; after three thousand years of similar depression and hardship. The question has been asked, 'Does not the negro labor under some incurable, natural inferiority?' In this, for myself, I have no belief."

I think, Mr. President, that is ample refutation of the charge of inferiority, as brought by Mr. Blair, against the blacks.

There is another point connected with the cause of negro emancipation in this country that I must speak of, and that is the asserted incapability of the slave to take care of himself in a state of freedom. This charge is entirely and forever refuted by the history of the West Indies, since the abolition of slavery in those islands. We have heard a great deal about the "ruin of Jamaica"; and such journals as the Boston Courier, the Boston Post, and the New York Journal of Commerce, lose no opportunity to parade this falsehood in their columns, to prove that the same fate awaits the Southern States, if emancipation shall take place. As to the British Colonies, the fact is well established that slavery had impoverished the soil, demoralized the people, bond and free, brought the planters to a state of bankruptcy, and all the islands to ruin, long before Parliament had passed the Act of Emancipation. All the Colonies, including Jamaica, had petitioned the home government for assistance, ten years prior to the liberation of their slaves. It is a noticeable fact that the free blacks were the least embarrassed, in a pecuniary point of view, and that they appeared in more comfortable circumstances than the whites. There was a large proportion of free blacks in each of the Colonies,—Jamaica alone having 55,000 before the day of emancipation. A large majority of the West India estates were owned by persons residing in Europe, and who had never seen the Colonies. These plantations were carried on by agents, overseers and clerks, whose mismanagement, together with the blighting influence which chattel slavery takes with it wherever it goes, brought the islands under impending ruin, and many of the estates were mortgaged in Europe for more than their value. One man alone, Neil Malcolm, of London, had forty plantations to fall upon his hands for money advanced on them before the abolition of slavery. These European proprietors, despairing of getting any returns from the West Indies, gladly pocketed their share of the twenty millions pounds sterling, which the home government gave them, and abandoned their estates to their ruin. Other proprietors residing in the Colonies, formed combinations to make the emancipated people labor for scarcely enough to purchase food for them. If found idle, the tread-wheel, the chain-gang, the dungeon, with black bread, and water from the moat, and other modes of legalized torture, were inflicted upon the negroes. Through the determined and combined efforts of the land-owners, the condition of the freed people was as bad, if not worse, for the first three years after their liberation, than it was before. Never was an experiment more severely tested than that of emancipation in the West Indies. Nevertheless, the principles of freedom triumphed, not a drop of blood was shed by the enfranchised blacks; the Colonies have arisen from the blight which they labored under in the time of slavery, the land has increased in value, and, above all, that which is more valuable than cotton, sugar, or rice, the moral and intellectual condition of both blacks and whites is in a better state now, than ever before. (Applause.) Sir William Colebrook, Governor of Antigua, said, six years after the islands were freed, "At the lowest computation, the land, without a single slave upon it, is fully as valuable now, as it was, including all the slaves, before emancipation." In a report made to the British Parliament, in 1859, it was stated that three-fifths of the cultivated land of Jamaica was the bona fide property of the blacks. The land is in a better state of cultivation now, than it was while slavery existed, and both imports and exports show a great increase. Everything demonstrates that emancipation in the West India Islands has resulted in the most satisfactory manner, and fulfilled the expectation of the friends of freedom throughout the world. (Applause.)

I now turn from the islands of the sea to our own land. If any proof were wanted of the capacity of the blacks to take care of themselves, it could be found without leaving these shores. The majority of the colored people in the Northern States, descended from slaves: many of them were slaves themselves. In education, in morals, and in the development of mechanical genius, the free blacks of the United States will compare favorably with any laboring class in the world. And considering the fact that we have been shut out, by a cruel prejudice, from nearly all the mechanical branches, and all the professions, it is marvellous that we have attained the position we now occupy. Notwithstanding these bars, our young men have learned trades, become artists, gone into the professions, although bitter prejudice may prevent their having a great deal of practice. When it is considered that they have mostly come out of bondage, and that their calling has been the lowest kind in every community, it is still more strange that the colored people have amassed so much wealth in every State in the Union. If this is not an exhibition of capacity, I don't understand the meaning of the term.

The Boston Post says, "Free the slaves, and your poor-houses will be filled with them." A refutation of that slander may be found in the prosperous condition of the two hundred thousand free blacks in the slave States, who have not been induced to leave the congenial climate of the South for no advantage which they could have derived by the change. Though taxed for the support of schools to which they were never allowed to send their children, and though shut out from all school privileges, the free colored people of the South have educated themselves, and by their industry, sobriety, and good behavior, have gained the respect, esteem and good wishes of all impartial friends of humanity who have travelled through that section of the country. The editor of the New Orleans True Delta says—"The free colored people here are honorable in their intercourse with society, and in good deportment cannot be surpassed by any equal number of persons in any place, North or South." The abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia has developed the fact, that the largest number of property-holders in the Federal Capital are colored, and that they own church property amounting to more than \$100,000. I commend these facts to the editor of the Boston Post, and would suggest that he take a few lessons from Dr. South-Side Adams, who says, that while in South Carolina, a prosecuting officer stated to him, that out of two thousand indictments made out in six years, only twelve were against colored persons; and yet the majority of the inhabitants of that State are colored. The Boston Courier thinks that the natural inferiority of the negro makes it impossible for the two races to live together, without the inferior race being slaves. Now, as I have elsewhere shown the low origin of the Anglo-Saxon, and as the whites of the South have not exhibited any superiority over the blacks, I would suggest, that if we must have an enslaved race, that the slaveholders try it awhile. If patriotism and devotion to the cause of freedom be tests of loyalty, and should establish one's claim to all the privileges that the government can confer, then surely the black man can demand his rights with a good grace. From the fall of Attucks, the first martyr of the American Revolution in 1770, down to the present day, the colored people have shown themselves worthy of any confidence that the nation can place in its citizens in the time that tries men's souls. At the battle of Bunker Hill, on the heights of Groton, at the ever-memorable battle of

Red Bank, the sable sons of our country stood side by side with their white brethren. On lakes Erie and Champlain, on the Hudson, and down in the valley of the Mississippi, they established their valor and their invincibility. Whenever the rights of the nation have been assailed, the negro has always responded to his country's call, at once, and with every pulsation of his heart beating for freedom. And yet the editors of the Boston Post and the Boston Courier would have us driven from the land of our birth. If these two gentlemen wish to show their patriotism, and are really desirous of doing their country a lasting service, and at the same time to immortalize their names, let them take themselves off to Lapland, or some other land, and give bonds not to disgrace America by their presence again. (Laughter and applause.)

There is a class who have done our country more injury, both in the United States and in Europe, than we can possibly imagine. I refer to those Union-savers, speakers and writers, who say one word in favor of the Constitution and the Union, and ten against the negro and his friends. We have lately been disgraced abroad by one of this class, a Mr. Geo. Francis Train, who, on arriving in London, made several flaming speeches against the rebels and in favor of the Federal Government, by which he secured the ear and sympathy of the British people, and then showed his cloven foot by attacking and libelling the colored people of America, and the Abolitionists generally. These speeches have been extensively circulated here in pamphlet form among the laboring classes, for the express purpose of prejudicing their minds against the slaves' liberation, asserting his inferiority and incapability of taking care of himself if freed. A harlequin without genius, a railroad builder without originality, an upstart with only the merit of audacity and love of falsehood, Mr. Train's speeches are of the lowest possible order, and calculated to suit the ignorant and the unsuspecting. His assertion that the slaves cling to their masters on account of their attachment, called forth laughter and derision from the audience, while his claim that slavery Christianized, educated and refined the negro, brought down a volley of hisses from all parts of the hall. Finding, from the state of feeling of the audience, that he had missed his aim, he changed his tune before the conclusion of his first speech, and promised that he would give them his plan of emancipation on the following evening; and here it is, as taken from his second address:—

"Let the States pass a law, under the guidance of the Constitution, compelling the planter, as a slight tax upon his treason, to give the slave his own labor one day in the week to work out his own freedom—his price fixed at a fair value, and arranged under guarantees that the slave shall have that day as well as over hours to purchase his liberty. This knowledge stimulates ambition, gives him self-reliance, so that when he has earned his freedom, he is also educated to appreciate it. The world will have before them a plan. Public opinion will so act upon the planter that many will emancipate such slaves as can take care of themselves at once; the strong and active negroes should be made to work out the freedom of their parents and children where they are unable to do it themselves."

The deception which he tried to practise upon the English people in this plan turned the whole tide of public opinion against Mr. Train, and he complains bitterly at what he calls the "prejudices in England against Americans." At the conclusion of his last speech, Mr. Train received a severe and well-merited castigation from J. Passmore Edwards, Esq., who said in his remarks—"While holding your country's banner high against Secession, I applauded you, but I feel that it is a disgrace to America to hear her Union champion advocating negro slavery." The idea of freeing the country from slavery, by allowing the slave one day in each week by which to earn the means of purchasing his freedom, and that the able-bodied should be compelled to buy the liberty of the old, the halt and the blind, is ridiculous in the extreme. Upon such a plan, no man could work out his freedom in a life-time. Mr. Train exhibited his mendacity still more in his attempt to prove the inferiority of the blacks. His dealing with the different races of men created considerable merriment for the Londoners, who set him down as a mountebank.

Such men as this Train, the editors of the New York Herald, the Boston Post, and the Boston Courier, have done great injury to the cause of liberty and the Union. (Applause.) If hatred to justice, humanity and the negro race should entitle one to the highest seat in the lowest kingdom, I am sure that the editors of the Post and the Courier will be amply provided for in the warmest corner of the lowest pit, in the world to come. (Loud and prolonged applause.)