

The Great Exhibition—The American Department.

LETTER FROM HON W. C. RIVES.

From *The Charlottesville Advocate*, Oct. 25.

The following very interesting letter from Hon. Wm. C. Rives, our Minister to France, which has been kindly furnished us for publication, will be read with much pleasure:

PARIS, Tuesday, Sept. 30, 1851.

MY DEAR C—: Having a week or two at my disposal during the last days of the summer, I determined to go over the Channel and see for myself that of which the description had filled so many mouths and newspapers for the last four or five months—the Great Exhibition, or what the French more appropriately call it, the *Exposition Universelle*. I am not prepared to say with the Queen of Sheba, after her inspection of the riches of Solomon, "the half was not told me;" but, on the contrary, making some deduction from the Oriental extravagance with which this *wonder of the age* has been celebrated by both pen and tongue, I am yet free to say enough remained to make it an object of just and rational curiosity to all who were in circumstances to visit it.

A visit to the Crystal Palace is, in truth, a sort of figurative voyage of circumnavigation, by which, within the limits of a comparatively small space, and by a few days' industrious observation, you traverse successively the various quarters of the globe, and see before you the productions, the arts, the riches, and in some degree the respective national manners and customs of them all. And yet this is so contrived as to leave upon the mind of the beholder a strong impression of the material superiority; if not supremacy, of one of these nations over all the rest. England has the vast advantage in the Exhibition of being *at home*. One full half of the fairy building is allotted to the display of her riches and resources, her industry and power—in which her vast tributary possessions in the East and the West—(India, Canada, and the isles of the ocean)—all glittering with barbaric pomp, are made to revolve in their due order around the central orb, dazzling by the splendor of her own accumulated and gorgeous wealth. The mind is so acted upon by this studious display of boundless dominion and riches and power in the hands of a single nation, that it hardly recovers from the impression in passing through the successive departments allotted to other nations; for however well filled many of them are with the choicest productions of exquisite taste and superior skill, they all seem dwarfed in comparison with the gigantic development of *England at home*. In this state of exhibited inferiority, these nations may legitimately take to themselves the consolation of the lion prostrate beneath the man in the painting—that the man and not the lion was the painter.

If France, which originated the idea of an exhibition of the products of the arts and industry of all nations, had been permitted by her internal condition to carry it into execution, and Paris instead of London had been the scene of its presentation, a very great difference would, doubtless, have been made in the relative position and appearance of the competing nations. In that case the advantage of being *chez soi*, concurring with her unrivalled taste and artistic science, and the wonderful resources of her national genius and industry, would have assigned to her the rank of *primacy* which is now held by England in the London Exhibition. Nor would the other nations have had reason to complain of the change of *venue*. The bright climate of France and the cordial and genial temper of the people, so readily fraternizing with the other families of mankind, would have made of what has been a stern and somewhat jealous encounter of rival pretensions a real *jubilee* of the heart and senses, marking an era in the social intercourse and happiness of nations, as well as in their industrial progress. As it is, the Exhibition has mainly the character of a highly successful speculation, very sagaciously managed, on British account.

You will wish to know what sort of figure we of the United States have made in this great international congress of industry and the arts. The objects which occupy much the largest space in the Exhibition, and which have been the chief points, indeed, of popular attraction, are objects of luxury and ornament, exceedingly costly both in their material and workmanship, and intended to minister to the factitious wants of overgrown wealth. In the British department alone I counted not less than twenty large rooms, with the inscription in glaring capitals above them of the adored "*precious metals*." The same general character of costly magnificence, varying only in the details, predominated in all the rest of the European departments, from the exquisite mosaics of Italy, and the rich silks and porcelains and jewelry of France, to the beautiful and elaborate malachites of Russia, and was conspicuous even in the "barbaric pearl and gold" of the Asiatic and African contributions.

In entering into a competition of so much gorgeousness as this, it was hardly to be expected that so young and simple and republican a people as that of the United States would make a very brilliant *debut*. I always regretted, therefore, that we entered the lists as general competitors. If we had gone in simply and avowedly to show the nations of the old world some of the most valuable improvements we had made in those manly and useful arts adapted to our circumstances and vigorous youth, and had contented ourselves with an allotment of space proportioned to that object, we should have avoided some mortification, at first, to our national pride. A large space, however, was demanded in the outset for the display of American contributions, which, after successive retrenchments, remained imperfectly filled, and the effigy of the American eagle, in very exaggerated and colossal proportions, was conspicuously placed above the whole. *The Times*, the Coryphaeus of the English press, immediately seized upon these circumstances with its accustomed benevolence towards the United States, taunting us with "the solitude in the Crystal Palace over which the American eagle stretched its mighty wings," and representing "the space we had grasped in the Exhibition as being as imperfectly occupied as our vast continent."

In spite of these mistakes of our own, and the ill-natured use made of them to our disadvantage by the critics, the solid and intrinsic merit of the American part of the Exhibition finally made itself felt and appreciated by all, and it is now I think universally admitted, even in England, where so many jealousies and prejudices are to be overcome, that in an industrial and useful point of view, no nation contributed more to the Exhibition than the United States. I am most happy to be able to say to you that nothing has had so powerful an agency in working out this honorable result for our national reputation as a *Virginian* invention, of which you were one of the earliest patrons, and which has received the highest honors at the Exhibition, and is now making a sort of triumphal progress through England—I mean McCormick's Reaping Machine. It was the successful trial of this machine on the farm of Mr. Mechi, at Tip Tree, on the 29th of July last, eliciting as it did the wonder and admiration of all who witnessed it, that commenced the reaction in favor of American contributions to the Exhibition. The English people began then to think that some "good thing might come out of our transatlantic Nazareth," and from time to time they bestowed something more than a passing, supercilious glance at the American department of the Crystal Palace, and found in it other products of American genius and skill, which convinced them that, in this age of progress and invention, stimulated to extraordinary fecundity in the new world, there are not a few things they may learn with advantage of younger nations than themselves.

Of these other achievements of American ingenuity I have not the time to speak. You have seen them all noticed in the newspaper reports of the Exhibition. They have, the greater part of them undoubtedly, a very high order of merit; but I think I am not misled by a natural partiality for an invention of my own State when I say that the reaping machine has done most of all to redeem the honor of our country in the trying, and, to us for a time, apparently hopeless contests of the Exhibition. In proof of this, it is sufficient to mention the fact that it is invariably placed at the head of all the American triumphs in the various notices of the Exhibition which has been from time to time published by the European press. I have now before me the leading article of *The London Times* of the 2d instant—the first number of that journal which acknowledged the substantial success of the American part of the Exhibition—in which that success and the reaping machine, which so much contributed to it are thus noticed:

"On the other hand, it is beyond all denial that every practical success of the season belongs to the Americans. Their consignments showed poorly at first, but came out well upon trial. Their reaping machine has carried conviction to the heart. Their British agriculturist. Their revolvers threaten to revolutionize military tactics as completely as the original discovery of gunpowder. Their yacht takes a class to itself."

And again, in an article of the same journal of the 27th instant, reviewing the general result of the Exhibition, are the following remarks:

"One point that strikes us forcibly on a survey of the last few months, is the extraordinary contrast which the attractive and the useful features of the display present. It will be remembered that the American department was, at first, regarded as the poorest and least interesting of all foreign countries. Of late it has justly assumed a position of the first importance, as having brought to the aid of our distressed agriculturists a machine which, if it realizes the anticipations of competent judges, will amply remunerate England for all her outlay connected with the Great Exhibition. The reaping machine from the United States is the most valuable contribution from abroad to the stock of our previous knowledge that we have yet discovered, and several facts in connection with it are not a little remarkable."

It has been a source of patriotic, and I trust legitimate pride, to me as a Virginian that an invention emanating from my own State, and I may say from my own neighborhood indeed, has done so much to procure honor to the American name abroad, and to vindicate the claims of American genius and enterprise to the respect and gratitude of other nations. In these feelings you and your friends around you, who know so well both the invention and the inventor, will, I am sure, largely share. I cannot describe to you the feelings of home delight, not unminged with triumph, with which, on one of the days that I attended the Exhibition, I saw the "*Virginia Grain Reaper*" (for by that name McCormick himself entered his machine on the official catalogue of the Exhibition) as much surrounded by curious and interested spectators as the priceless Indian diamond—the Koh-i-noor or Mountain of Light—which usually attracts the largest and most eager crowds. It is in the country, however, when it is at work, sweeping with ease over its fifteen or twenty acres of thick-standing wheat a day, that it excites the strongest enthusiasm, as it achieves its greatest triumphs. On some of these occasions as many as fifteen hundred or two thousand persons have been assembled to witness its performance, and they have *cheered* it with loud and hearty plaudits, when it has finished a row or turned a corner of the field, as if it were some great living hero or conquerer. McCormick himself has been *feted*; and when in acknowledging a toast, with true Washingtonian modesty and Spartan brevity, he said he was "more accustomed to working than speaking, and preferred always that his machine should *speak* for itself," he brought down as thundering applause as ever greeted an orator in the House of Commons.

Everybody in England now wonders that a machine at once so simple and so effective, and so precisely adapted to the wants of British agriculture, should never have been invented and brought to perfection by some of their own people, and that it should have been reserved for a modest inhabitant of the mountains of Virginia, more than three thousand miles distant, to conceive and execute and bring to them what so exactly suited them, without their having been able previously to form a distinct conception either of its nature or its practicability. What renders this the more extraordinary (and it is a circumstance which greatly enhances both the merit and

the glory of the American invention) is that the minds of the most ingenious mechanicians in Great Britain had been earnestly directed to the same object, for the catalogue of the Exhibition registers no less than eight different but very imperfect essays towards its accomplishment. My own observation last year at the annual meeting of the Royal Agricultural Society of England convinced me that a good reaping machine was the great desideratum in British agriculture. In the immense and almost infinitely diversified collection of agricultural implements displayed there, no instrument of that kind was seen, and yet it was evident that in a climate so humid and uncertain some accelerated and at the same time economical process of getting in their harvest was a matter of the highest importance. I immediately wrote to our friend C. J. Meriwether, as he will doubtless recollect, that if the Virginia Reaper were sent out to the Great Exhibition of the next year, for which the arrangements were then commencing, it would make the fortune of its inventor. It has not only done this, but it has *reaped a harvest* of honor and renown for himself, his native State, and the reputation of American genius in general, which is a result far more to be prized.

With this encouraging example before us, are we not strongly invited to some change in the direction which has been heretofore so exclusively given to the youthful talent of our State? As soon as our young men leave College, they crowd by hundreds into what are called the learned professions, which are already filled to repletion; or they devote themselves to a still more sterile and unprofitable employment of their faculties, both for themselves and the country, in mere party politics. If the same amount of mind and energy were applied to those useful practical pursuits in which science is the auxiliary of art in indefinitely multiplying the results of labor and unfolding the latent capabilities of nature, what a magical change would soon be manifested in the prosperity and power of our ancient Commonwealth—rich, as all admit her to be, in every element of moral, intellectual and material wealth.

In reflecting upon this subject, as I often do with a solicitude ever alive to the honor and destinies of my native State, I have thought that some modification of the systems of education pursued in most of our public schools would greatly contribute, and is perhaps indispensable, to introduce the change which appears so desirable in the active direction of our mental resources. Could not that education be made more *practical*, without abating anything from the high standard of science and learning which should characterize it, simply by giving more development to the *applications of science* to the various branches of industry and art, as is done in the admirable institutions of this country, the *Ecole Polytechnique*, the *Ecole des Ponts et Chaussées*, the *Ecole des Mines* and the *Ecole Centrale des Arts et Manufactures*, from which England with her usual sagacity, has taken a hint in the establishment of her "Government school of mines and science applied to the arts," not being able to engraft these new studies upon the ancient and chartered systems of her Universities. Whether the object is to be accomplished with us by some modification in existing institutions, or by the establishment of new and special institutions, is a question on which I am not prepared to pronounce an opinion. Those who are more competent than myself, recognising the utility of the end, will I trust, devise the proper means, and my prayers will be for the success of whatever they shall adopt, as they ever are for the happiness and prosperity in all things, of my native land.

Most truly and faithfully yours,

W. C. RIVES.