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The Works Of Horatio Walpole, Earl of Orford

In Five Volumes

Walpole, Horace

London, 1798

Ditto

[urn:nbn:de:hbz:466:1-54372](https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:hbz:466:1-54372)

The W O R L D.

By A D A M F I T Z - A D A M.

I N my last paper I hinted at some of the inconveniences attending the present inundation of books, and I have the satisfaction of hearing from all hands that a reformation of this abuse would be universally acceptable. Some of the greatest devourers of books, from whom I expected most opposition, have exhorted me to proceed in the scheme I have conceived of lessening the number, assuring me that they have laid in a such a stock of science, as will enable them to furnish the world with complete bodies of all useful knowledge, in a far less compass than in what it lies at present. The illiterate part of my disciples protest that it is nothing but the prodigious number of books which deters them from setting about to study in earnest; and they offer me, if I will reduce all literature to a few plays, poems, and novels, to make themselves perfect masters of all the knowledge that is requisite for gentlemen. I have long been sensible how great a discouragement the very sight of a large library must be to a young beginner. The universities recommend to me to abolish what is called *polite learning*: they observe, that the jesuits, who, among many pernicious arts, have sometimes been serviceable to the world, have already, as far as in them lay, annihilated one Roman author, Lucan, by omitting him, when they illustrated all the other classics for the use of the dauphin; but I believe the objection lay not against his poetry, but his principles, the freedom of which I am sure must be very agreeable to each good lady *Alma Mater*. One of them, who formerly placed Mr. Locke's Essay on Human Understanding in her Index Expurgatorius, has very prudently recognized the merit of that treatise—and, I am persuaded, has such a veneration for the author, that she would highly condemn me if I was even to attempt destroying his Essay on Government, wherein he exposes the monkish doctrine of hereditary right.

Armed

Armed with all the above-mentioned authority, I declare myself invested with a new dignity, namely, *Inquisitor of the World of Books*; and in imitation of other great potentates, who, after establishing their dominion by force, have endeavoured to satisfy the world in the legality of their title by some, however far-fetched, descent, I declare myself issued in a right line from the two peculiar monarchs, who of all mankind could derive to me the best title to the province I have undertaken of pronouncing upon all books and sciences, and, in consequence of that, of proceeding to burn and destroy such as I shall disapprove. The first of these princes was the very patriarch of my genealogy, even Adam, who, as Pinedo, a very competent judge, assures us, understood all sciences, but politics—and his deficiency in this particular branch of human learning was not to be ascribed to any imperfection in the universality of his genius, but merely because in his time there were no princes, no ambassadors, no Ratisbon. The other prince from whom I have the honour of being descended, was Chi Hoang Ti, emperor of China, a much-injured name, of whom Pere du Halde in particular, forgetting the respect due to crowned heads, is so gross as to say, that a certain ordinance of his, which I am going to mention, *rendit son nom & sa memoire execrable à la posterité*. The venerable decree which this impertinent jesuit anathematizes, was—not, as one should think by his style, an order like Herod's for the murder of the innocents—no, it was only a decree for burning all the books in China. But before I enter upon the discussion of this decree, I shall in few words recapitulate the chief events of my ancestor's reign, which will vindicate his memory, and prove him to have been as well-qualified to sway a sceptre as any prince that ever sat on a throne. If unavoidable misfortunes have reduced us to a less shining, less exalted rank, we flatter ourselves that the prudence and justice of our administration in the universal monarchy which we have assumed over *follies* and *books*, will show that we have not degenerated from our great predecessor.

Chi Hoang Ti lived about two hundred and thirty-seven years before Christ, and according to the genius of that age *committed* great conquests, and rounded his dominions, at the expence of his neighbours, with as much prudence as if he had studied politics in a French school. The only slip he seems to have made, was in listening to the project of a sea-captain, the Columbus of his time, who advised his Chinese majesty to send out a colony

to some of the islands of Japan, not indeed to discover new worlds, but on a more important scent, a remedy for long life; a nostrum treasured up in one of those little islands. The emperor, my great grandfather, had, as it appears by other circumstances, a particular partiality for medicines, and readily gave ear to a scheme that was at once to prolong the blessings of his reign over his subjects, and to add so great a jewel to his dispensatory. He entrusted the captain with one or more ships, and three hundred persons of each sex, with whom the adventurer founded a little kingdom in one of the islands, and was so ungrateful as never to send his sovereign a single phial of the precious elixir. The emperor, whose mind was always filled with great projects, soon turned his thoughts to establish the duration, if not of his reign, at least of his empire; and with a spirit, which has seemed prophetic, apprehending incursions of the Tartars, he set about building that immense wall to divide the two nations, which was finished in five years, which exists to our days, and which did not however answer the purpose for which it was projected. The next great action of his reign was publishing the celebrated decree for burning all the books in China, excepting only such volumes as treated of architecture or physic, the two sciences, which the affair of the sea-captain and the erection of the great wall prove to have been the predominant passions of his imperial majesty.

Some malevolent historians ascribe this sentence to his jealousy of the glory of his predecessors; a motive unworthy of the heroic virtue of a prince, who had out-conquered, out-built, and taken more physic than any of his ancestors. Such petty envy may rage in *little* souls: we read that Justin burnt all the authors from whom he compiled his history; and that Trebonian, the lawyer, commissioned by Justinian to reduce the civil law to a practicability, that is, to a size capable of being studied by the professors, and understood by the sufferers, laid waste and demolished the volumes, tracts, charters, decrees, pleadings, reports, &c. from whence he extracted the body of civil law as it now stands. But the reasons which our great ancestor himself vouchsafed to give, are, I do not doubt, the truest, as they certainly are the noblest precedent to justify a parallel proceeding. He reduces them to these (for it must be observed that the Chinese are as laconic as the Lacedæmonians themselves): *Books, said Chi Hoang Ti, encourage idleness, cause neglect of agriculture, lay foundations of factions.* These golden rules I shall keep in my eye to regulate my future conduct. I shall not allow
people

people to think they are busy because they are reading; I shall not allow that there is any merit in having read a vast number of books; it is indifferent to me whether a man's feet have travelled over so many miles of ground, or his eyes over so many acres of paper: I shall recommend it to several grave dignitaries to lay aside all such reading as was never read, and to buy a plough and a team, and cultivate a piece of land, instead of labouring such barren soil as their own brains, or the works of obsolete authors; and I shall be for entirely abolishing all books whatever that treat of any kind of government; as to be sure no nation ought to know that there is any form preferable to what is established among themselves: a Russian that was to read Algernon Sidney, might grow to fancy that there are milder systems than living under the jurisdiction of the Knut!

The last instance I shall produce of the Chinese monarch's wisdom, was his refusing to quarter out his dominions among his sons. He died in peace, and master of immense treasures, having lived to see large crops of *rice*, from vast tracts of land, which before his time had borne nothing but *libraries*.

In the havoc I meditate, I shall confine myself to whole bodies of science, not piddle with single authors or separate treatises. As I have perused very few books myself, it would be an endless task were I to set about the examination of what tracts do or do not deserve to be condemned to the flames; and I have too little of the modern critic in me, to condemn any private work because I happen to dislike the name, person, or country of the author. However, not to proceed too rashly, I shall accept the assistance of a friend of mine, who is a prodigy of erudition, not only from the quantity he has read, but from his frankness in owning that he has read an infinite deal of trash. He is a near relation by the mother of the celebrated librarian Magliabechi, who being asked to lend a certain book (that must be nameless) out of the great duke's library, replied, "*That book!* there is no such book in our library; indeed I know but of one copy of it, and that is in the grand seignor's collection; *it* stands the sixth book on the fourth shelf on the left hand near the window."

My friend's name is CHRISTOPHER POLYGLOT; a man of extreme benevolence, and very useful to all that consult him, though, to say the truth, his

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knowledge

knowledge is of little service to himself; for, when he attempts to compose any work, the ideas of what he has read, transmitted through a very faithful memory, flow in so fast upon him, that he blends every science and every language, and does not even distinguish in what tongue he designs to write. He but two or three years ago, intending to compose a pamphlet against the jew bill, began in these words, "JOSEPHUS says, that *Οι Ιουδαίοι everſā urbe περιφραστοίεντ leurs צרמטא*," and I saw him one morning extremely puzzled with not being able to understand a Greek author, whom he did not perceive that he was reading backwards. He is very sensible of his misfortune, and says, he believes he might have made some figure in the republic of letters, if he had never read above twenty thousand books, and understood but six or seven languages. One great merit of my friend is, that he has a thorough contempt for conjectural antiquities; nobody honours more than he does, the elegance of the Greek arts, the sumptuousness of Roman buildings, the valour and wisdom of our Gothic ancestors, and consequently nobody admires more any remnant of each nation, which is entire enough to disclose their taste, their magnificence, the strength of their fortifications, or the solemnity of their devotion. But Mr. Polyglot despises a platform, nay a Stonehenge, if it is uncertain whether its pedigree be Roman, Druid, or Saxon; whether in its state of existence it was an intrenchment, a temple, or a tomb. In his youth he was a tormentor of Tom Hearne, and, before his own mind was bewildered in science, had a pretty turn for poetry, as appeared by his adding two lines to the known distich on that antiquary, and which really gave the whole the essence of an epigram. I shall conclude the present paper with them, as I do not know that they were ever printed.

"Pox on't, quoth Time to THOMAS HEARNE,
"Whatever I forget, You learn."

Answer by Mr. POLYGLOT.

"* Damn it, quoth HEARNE, in furious fret,
"Whate'er I learn, You soon forget."

* It was written at Christ-church, Oxford, six. He was son of Mr. West, lord chancellor by Richard West, esq. a young gentleman of of Ireland, by Elizabeth, daughter of bishop great genius, who died at the age of twenty- Burnet.

A LETTER