

1838

Hallam's Middle Ages

Lucian Minor

Repository Citation

Minor, Lucian, "Hallam's Middle Ages" (1838). *Faculty Publications*. 1410.
<https://scholarship.law.wm.edu/facpubs/1410>

have we seen the best characteristics of the illustrious Roman half so well displayed, as in the "Middle Ages." *The same burning yet well tempered love of liberty; the same hatred of tyranny and injustice; the same vein of sage remark, developing in a single sentence, momentous political truth; the same power of sarcasm, conveyed usually in the very words which carry forward the narrative; the same condensed and forcible brevity of recital.* Oftener than in Tacitus, or in Hume, there occur in Hallam passages of eminent rhetorical beauty; much resembling those occasional observations, at once elegant and profound, in which Burke abounds. But they are neither frequent nor long enough, to violate the becoming chastity of historical composition. Far from being excrescent ornaments, which lead off the reader's mind from the facts detailed, or suggest a doubt concerning the truth of a story so embellished, they enliven and rivet his attention, by illustrating the subject; and interrupt not, for a moment, the course of the narration. The work takes a wide range. It gives the History of France—Italy—Spain—Germany—the Greek Empire and the Saracens—Ecclesiastical Power—the Feudal System—the *English Constitution—and the State of Society in Europe—during the Middle Ages; that is, for about eight or nine centuries.* The manner in which it groups and details the multitude of facts comprised in this great outline, is lucid and happy. With equal judgment are the instructive or important selected, and the trivial or useless passed in silence.

But it is above all as the enlightened friend of liberty, that Mr. Hallam deserves the esteem of American readers. Some extracts we propose making, will evince this, and also the Tacitus-like pith and pungency we have ascribed to him. The italics and small capitals are ours.

EXTRACTS.

'A generous disdain of one man's will, is to republican governments what chastity is to women; a conservative principle, never to be reasoned upon, or subjected to calculations of utility.'

Rienzi's 'character was not unusual among literary politicians; a combination of knowledge, eloquence, and enthusiasm for ideal excellence, with vanity, inexperience of mankind, unsteadiness, and physical timidity.'

'The most deadly hatred, is that which men exasperated by proscription and forfeiture bear to their country.'

On the triumphant return of Cosmo de' Medici, in 1434, from the exile into which the opposite faction of Albizi had driven him, Hallam remarks,—'It is in vain to expect that a victorious faction will scruple to retaliate upon its enemies a still greater measure of injustice than it experienced at their hands. The vanquished have no rights in the eye of their conquerors. The sword of returning exiles, flushed by victory and incensed by suffering, falls successively upon their enemies, upon those whom they suspect of being their enemies, and upon those who may hereafter become such.'

(*Policy of employing Foreign Mercenaries.*) 'Considered with reference to economy, almost any taxes must be a cheap commutation for personal service. But economy may be regarded too exclusively; and can

HALLAM'S MIDDLE AGES.*

It is surprising, that this work is not more admired, and more read, than it seems to be. It is surpassed, nay, equalled by no historical production in the English language, since the times of the great British three, of the last century. Indeed, several merits tempt us strongly, to place it above even *their* works. It is more candid than Hume; more simply and pointedly sententious than Robertson; more clear, and infinitely less pompous, than Gibbon. Nothing can be more striking, than the contrast between Hallam's distinct, straightforward statements, and shrewd, concise, often pungent remarks,—and Gibbon's elaborately swollen and balanced periods, that after thrice reading, leave it still doubtful what fact he tells, or what opinion he expresses. If it had not become vulgar to compare historians to Tacitus (Dr. Ramsay has been called "The Tacitus of America"), we should say, that no where

* View of the State of Europe during the Middle Ages. By Henry Hallam, Esq. 2 vols. 8vo.

never counterbalance that degradation of national character, which proceeds from intrusting the public defence to foreigners.'

'Historians have in general more indulgence for splendid crimes, than for the weaknesses of virtue.'

'None of Charlemagne's wars can be compared with the Saracenic history of Charles Martel: but this was a contest for freedom; those for conquest; and fame is more partial to successful aggression than to patriotic resistance.'

In the unswerving probity, strictness of conscience, and benevolence, of Louis IX. (St. Louis), he found all the effects of far-sighted policy. 'But it is the privilege only of virtuous minds, to perceive what wisdom dwells in moderate counsels. No sagacity ever taught a selfish and ambitious sovereign to forego the sweetness of immediate power.'

Hint to Historical Students. Intestine tumults, &c. 'are among the eternal lessons of History: for the unjust encroachments of courts, the intemperate passions of the multitude, the ambition of demagogues, the cruelty of victorious factions, will never cease to have their parallels and their analogies; while the military achievements of distant times afford, in general, no instruction; and can hardly occupy too little of our time in historical studies.' *Note.*

Hint to Statesmen. 'It is difficult to name a limit beyond which taxes will not be borne without impatience, when they appear to be called for by necessity, and faithfully applied: nor is it impracticable for a skilful minister to deceive the people in both these respects. *But the sting of taxation is wastefulness.* What high spirited man could see without indignation the earnings of his labor, yielded ungrudgingly to the public defence, become the spoil of speculators and parasites? It is this, that mortifies the liberal hand of public spirit; and those statesmen, who deem the security of government to depend not on laws and armies, but on the moral sympathies and prejudices of the people, will vigilantly guard against even the suspicion of prodigality.'

'The very virtues which a state of hostility excites, are not proof against its long continuance; and sink at last into brutal fierceness.'

A vindication of Republics. 'In a superficial review of history, we are sometimes apt to exaggerate the vices of free states, and to lose sight of those inherent in tyrannical power. The bold censoriousness of Republican historians, and the cautious servility of writers under a despotism, conspire to mislead us as to the relative prosperity of nations. Acts of courage and tumultuous excesses in a free state, are blazoned in minute detail, and descend to posterity: the deeds of tyranny are studiously and perpetually suppressed. Even those historians who have no particular motives for concealment, turn away from the monotonous and disgusting crimes of tyrants.'

The way dangerous Precedents arise. [The Pope at first claimed no right to appoint to church benefices. Adrian IV. began, by requesting some bishops to confer the first vacancy on a particular clerk. Recommendations like this (called *Mandats*) became more and more frequent, and were usually followed, through respect for the holy See: even Innocent III. the most ambitious of pontiffs, regarded it only as a courtesy.] 'But,

says Hallam, 'as we find in the history of all usurping governments, *time changes anomaly into system, and injury into right: examples beget custom, and custom ripens into law; and the doubtful precedent of one generation becomes the fundamental maxim of another.*' So far had this natural progress taken place, that in England, under Henry III., the 'Church seems to have been so richly endowed only as the free pasture of Italian priests; who were placed, by the mandatory letters of Gregory IX. and Innocent IV., in all the best benefices.'

Utility of Party Names. About A. D. 1200, 'the two leading parties which had divided the cities of Lombardy, and whose mutual animosity, having no general subject of contention, required the association of a name to direct as well as invigorate its prejudices, became distinguished by the celebrated appellations of GUELFs and GIBELINS.' * * * 'Terms of this description * * * are always acceptable to mankind; and have the peculiar advantage of precluding altogether that spirit of compromise and accommodation, by which it is sometimes endeavored to obstruct their tendency to hate and injure each other.'

'There is in general room enough for skepticism as to the characters of men, who are only known to us through their enemies. History is full of calumnies that can never be effaced. But I really see no ground for thinking charitably of Peter the Cruel.' *Note.*

'The Arabian monarchs of Cordova found in their success and imagined security, a pretext for indolence: while, according to the nature of despotism, the fruits of wisdom or bravery in one generation were lost in the follies and effeminacy of the next.'

'Alvaro de Luna, the favorite of John II. [king of Castile], retained for 35 years an absolute control over his feeble master. The adverse faction naturally ascribed to this powerful minister every criminal intention and all public mischiefs. He was certainly not more scrupulous than the generality of statesmen; and appears to have been rapacious in accumulating wealth. But there was energy and courage about Alvaro de Luna, which distinguished him from the cowardly sycophants who usually rise by the favor of weak princes: and Castile probably would not have been happier, under the administration of his enemies.'

'John II. did not long survive his minister; dying in 1454, after a reign that may be considered as inglorious, compared with any except that of his successor. If the father was not respected, the son fell completely into contempt.'

Of JOHN HUNNADES, the Hungarian patriot, who 'frequently defeated, but unconquered in defeat, stood in the breach for twelve years against the Turkish power,' and to whom the regency was confided during the king's minority,—Hallam says, 'He surrendered to young Ladislaus a trust that he had exercised with perfect fidelity: but his merit was too great to be forgiven; and the court never treated him with cordiality. [Does not this irony rival that of Tacitus, where he says, the father of Agricola was 'studio eloquentiæ sapientiæque notus, iisque virtutibus iram Cæsaribus [Caligulæ] meritus?']

We have marked many more specimens, of equal truth, pointedness, and force: but to extract them all, would extend unduly what was designed to be a very short article. From scarcely any other historian, nor

(except Burke) from any other writer of any other class, could a larger number of sentences be culled, harmonious in structure, graceful and impressive in phraseology, and rich in sound political philosophy.
