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CONTRARY TO FACT

John R. Kirk

A LONDON CABBY was kind enough to show us Westminster Abbey, an edifice less vast but also less austere than St. Paul's. The woods in the tall, gaunt, English Gothic arches are dusty-dark. The gentle, undulating slopes of the stone floor, worn by centuries of feet, suggest softness. Tablets of cold marble seal the graves of many illustrious men. They are dignified, and the words engraved thereon are decorous enough, but there is none of the chilling sentimentality of common graveyards. If only the London power plants had contrived to send a few more watts our way, we would have felt ourselves in a position of intimate, almost cheery friendliness with England's past.

Burials have been made in the Abbey, constructed in the usual cruciform, according to rigid protocol: the king's ministers, diplomats, admirals, and generals on his right hand (when seated for coronation), the poets, writers, musicians, and lesser lights on the left. A few distinguished gentlemen died inopportunately or otherwise fell into disrepute and were interred, therefore, in odd places unsuited to the categories in which other men had placed them. There is, for example, Ben Johnson, spelled, irritatingly enough, with an *h*, buried near the main entrance to the nave, standing, and without benefit of casket, and Neville Chamberlain, the last to be interred, a long, long distance from Disraeli.

Nearer the altar but suffering somewhat from Britain's economy of electricity was a colony of scientists: Isaac Newton, Michael Faraday, Lord Kelvin, Herschel. These I found of particular interest; so while I struggled with Latin phrases and Roman numerals our guide and other members of our party continued their exploration of the

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transepts. When I rejoined them a few minutes later the cabby had just pointed out a bust of Charles Darwin and now murmured a word of apology, implying thereby that, at times, scoundrels did sneak into the sacred precincts of the Abbey.

There were less lugubrious aspects—the small boy begging for gum, the mildly-drunken verger who consented, for two shillings from each of us, to take us into the most forbidden inner-sanctum. It was crowded not with Carter's Little Liver Pills but with the kings and queens of England's long and celebrated history. We even got to examine Edward the Confessor's tomb—but there we are on tombs again!

There was a conversation between the cabby and ourselves that accompanied an inspection of a statue of General Wolfe (of the Wolfe and Montcalm tilt).

"We have a lot to thank that old boy for," said the cabby. "Even Americans should be grateful. Can you imagine why?" We could not.

"You recall that at the time of your Revolution (the war we fought because we wouldn't listen to those wise men William Pitt or Benjamin Franklin) the French were fighting with you against us?"

"Yes."

"Well," our guide continued, "if General Wolfe had not driven the French out of Canada it is probable, is it not, that the French would, even now, control the area you know as the United States?"

I have been told that one can not argue from hypotheses contrary to fact, although if one takes as his major premise that there is free will it follows that past, present, and future might be different; but, no, I did not feel that a French America would have been, necessarily, a major tragedy.

Had the French, contrary to fact, settled permanently in America, the environmental factors that made the United States a great nation would have been French analogs of Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson so far removed from Rousseau that democratic trends already at work in the minds of the French would have, under their supervision, evolved in cleaner fashion. Madame Defarge might have, indeed, come to America to knit sweaters for the army. The peasants that cluttered France in 1789 would have been gentlemen-farmers in the area known now as New England. And if the fortuitous chain of events that led to the birth of Maurice Ravel had remained intact through all this shuffling, he would, possibly, have spent his lazy childhood in Mississippi and retained his mental health by coming west

to organize flute, harp, and string ensembles among the Navajos of New Mexico.

In the years 1750 to 1850 there was a dearth of neither sensitivity nor impulse in France, and it is reasonable to suppose that such economic and social sickness as was current would have vanished in the vast and undeveloped continent to the west.

Should we sigh with smug relief that history as it is written is "best" simply because we, as individuals, would have stood small chance of being born had it been otherwise? Or shall we make the same mistake as the Nazis who would put the fate of the world, whether that fate be joyous or sad, into the hands of an anthropological group as such?

The British are inclined to think the French decadent. They point to Debussy, Poulenc, Milhaud, and Cezanne as symptoms of that nation's downfall. (They seldom mention Delius. Purcell, Sir Edward Elgar, Eric Coates, and, of all people, George Friedrich Handel are considered the most distinguished English composers.)

Military success is too often considered the criterion of real worth. The French situation appears to me in some ways analogous to the exploitation of Ancient Greece by the Romans, and those of us of the United States who realized the perilous position of our country in December, 1941, can hardly afford to feel snobbish or superior on the basis of our military perspicacity. And it may be that from the Italian culture, lamentably weak as it was in warfare and in true-to-fact philosophy, the world can rescue some sunlit values.

It is childish to believe that the military force which destroys more of the opposing force than the latter can retaliate in kind, automatically wins a war. The war effort has been mustered in the expectation of winning a lasting peace, and peace does not automatically proceed from destruction but rather from creation and increase in contentment. The greater part of the war must still be fought when the purely military phase is over. This part of the war, if it is won at all, will be won on the level of ideas. And for ideas we should be grateful for contributions from any culture, the British, the Russians, the Chinese, the French, and even the Italians and the Germans, for it has been on this level that they have traditionally created the most value. The fate of the world, if it is to be a happy one, waits a broader education and a better-integrated experience for *all* mankind.

But there is, too, the other alternative—the unhappy fate. Mathematicians are of increasing value to high military staffs. They make

the necessary "wave analysis" of the destruction-graph representing decisive enemy defeat so that our component energies and weapons can be canalized in maximum effectiveness. Certain cold, mathematical by-products of this investigation indicate that as bigger and better wars evolve: (1) increasingly larger percentages of the Earth's population are killed before a military effort reaches even its decisive stage, (2) military personnel include increasingly larger percentages of humanity's physical and intellectual cream, (3) death, distress, dislocation, and discomfort strike in increasingly *random* fashion people of all classes and categories. And thus it follows that if fifty years from now, nationalist psychology and flag-waving politics are still stubbornly of a structure pregnant with nothing but disvalue and destruction in its relations with science and technology, the war that results will sever the last thin thread of "time-binding," that functioning of collective intelligence and serial memory requisite for cultural continuity, and civilization on this planet, and the vast majority of its inhabitants, will linger as something less than a memory in the disordered minds of those of the human species who remain. It is within mankind's present power to achieve either of these alternative fates. One of them is contrary to fact.

Before our afternoon in Westminster Abbey came to an end we had attended divine service. There was enough deft drama in the chanting of the priest, enough pure harmony from the *a capella* male chorus, enough soul-quieting grandeur in the architecture to awe the most confirmed cynic. Here is a building, centuries old, every material particle of which was placed into position through blood, sweat, and, yes, tears, and from motives of some people, some time, somewhere, that one can classify in no other way than genuinely and sincerely worshipful. These Gothic arches reach upward into a gray-blue mist of distance and find their apex near a ceiling so tremendous in area and weight that the multiple stone pillars of the nave are several inches out of the perpendicular. At intervals, during the service, reed, flute, and string tones floated sourcelessly throughout the great nave of the Abbey and echoed resonantly from the far walls of the transepts—the pipe organ! The console itself is hidden within a vault of richly-sculptured wood, spanning the nave at some height above the altar. Only a small yellow light betrays its exact location.

The service came to an end. There was a moment, that three or four seconds, when we sat quite still from its strange impact. Then, the organ became full-throated with the opening, a perfectly-phrased

G-D-B flat, of the Little Fugue in G Minor by Johann Sebastian Bach, one of Germany's greatest, and of the world's greatest composers. By this time the other members of the party were in search of the tombs of twenty-six monks who had died of the plague. I remained behind. At the moment, I found a German composer more congenial than any number of bubonic monks.