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Section

4

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1776 SEEN IN NEW PERSPECTIVE

Professor Van Tyne Thinks History Has Been Unjust to George III

THE WAR OF INDEPENDENCE: AMERICAN PHASE. Volume II of a history of the founding of the American Republic. By Claude H. Van Tyne. 501 pp. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company. \$5.

By ALLEN SINCLAIR WILL

PROFESSOR VAN TYNE has brought furrows of care to the brow of a Mayor of Chicago and scattered panic in the school board of that city, but he continues unperturbed at his task of reinterpreting the American Revolution. In his new volume, as in the former ones, he gives no aid and comfort to the thought that the War of Independence was a struggle between embattled cherubim and the demons of darkness.

Hitherto he has been chiefly concerned with an examination of the causes of the Revolution, making use of new sources of information in which the British side was set forth more fully than it had been before. Now he takes up the war itself, beginning with Lexington but going only as far as Saratoga and the French alliance, for he says in his preface that he finds the exposition too extensive to be covered in one volume. Since his concern is largely with the preliminary period of the Revolution, during which public opinion was gradually becoming settled on both sides of the Atlantic, he finds it necessary to continue his consideration of the question of morale, British and American, in which he has exercised so far his principal function as a historian.

Having at his disposal the rich resources of the William L. Clements collection of historical material at the University of Michigan, in which institution he is Professor of History, he has had full scope for the use of his undoubted powers as investigator, the fruits of which he presents. It was inevitable that his researches in the Sir Henry Clinton papers and the Lord George Germain papers, as well as his extensive use of the papers of General Greene, would develop some new viewpoints or at least would throw additional light on viewpoints previously held. Wise men change their minds often; historians seldom. But Professor Van Tyne is sufficiently elastic in historical temperament to make at least some shift of his ground when he finds the progress of investigation requires it.

Thus in the new volume one may receive a distinct impression that George III and Lord North were not as black as they have been painted, nor, indeed, as they appear to have been represented in earlier works by the same author. There is no doubt that

Professor Van Tyne was responsible in large part for the sudden popularity a few years ago of the thesis that the American Revolution was a combat in which the liberal elements of the English-speaking peoples were joined in deep sympathy, if no more, on both sides of the Atlantic, and that the King and his Prime Minister were responsible for a clash of arms in which they went down to defeat with their system of absolutism.

It is true that Van Tyne does not recant as to the widespread support in feeling and argument given to the cause of the revolting Colonies by the large but politically

impotent group whose voices were Burke, Pitt, Camden, Barré and the others associated with them. He quotes with approval Lord Camden's belief that the common people of Great Britain held the war in abhorrence, although the landed interests were almost altogether anti-American, while the merchants dreaded a conflict in which the rich emoluments of their former favoritism in American trade were being swept away. But distance was a great factor in the misunderstandings which developed into war. George III and Lord North were living up to the responsibilities supposed to be inherent in their respective

offices in the State. They could not consent to a total severing of the ties with the Colonies in the light of the duties of rulers and statesmen as interpreted in their time.

The correspondence of George III has not served to sustain the contention that he was altogether illiberal. As for Lord North, was he not ready to give the rebels everything short of independence if they would return to the family fold, as shown in his overtures, which were spurned? The colonists were impatient, recalcitrant, openly rebellious. They sought for a symbol upon which to vent their mounting wrath. Who would serve for that symbol

but the King, the head of the State? And if one had to speak circumspcctly in view of the imminence of the gibbet, he might conveniently shove the blame over to the Prime Minister as less treasonable in implication.

Professor Van Tyne writes:

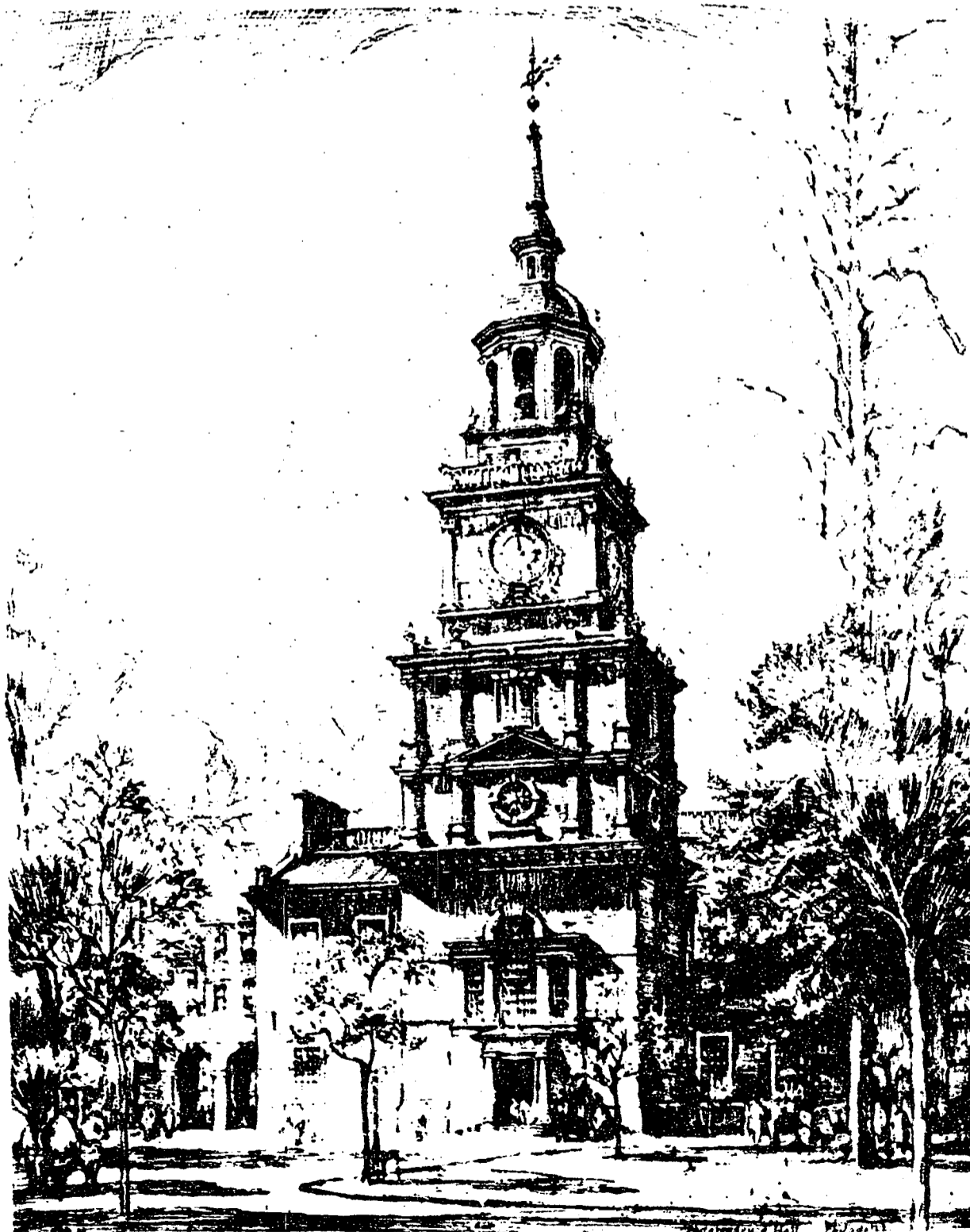
A calm investigation today of each charge against the King leaves that worthy man with a much whiter record than his American subjects granted him. Except as to the King's efforts to overthrow rebellion, the major charge in the Declaration might just as truthfully have been made against William and Mary or any English sovereign thereafter as against George III. Even the exercise of his "prerogatives" had not lain more heavily on them than in previous reigns.

The King had duties to perform, and he acted naturally, in the light of the past conduct of mankind; not according to moral and political standards of an age to come. Jefferson and his fellow revolutionists did not, on the other hand, regard it as part of their work to recite any mistaken steps of their own. They were trying to convince a candid world that all the blame rested on "the tyrant" George III. Since the "divine-right" theory made rebellion immoral, they tried to destroy the divinity.

As for Lord North, when he found his best concessions tossed aside contemptuously by the Continental Congress and its Generals, he nerved himself for action with the slogan that "manly force is the only cure for avowed rebellion." Professor Van Tyne comments:

And, after all, a cynic might ask, was Lord North's purpose different from that of Abraham Lincoln several generations later?

The author, with the courage that has marked him out as a sincere historian, tries his best to hold the scales evenly in bringing out from authentic sources evidences of the strength and weakness, the wisdom and folly, the loftiness and the pettiness in the leaders of the war and their followers in



Independence Hall, Philadelphia.

From "American Etchers: Ernest D. Roth, N. A." (T. Spencer Hubon.)

(Continued on Page 32)

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1776 in New Perspective

(Continued from Page 1)

Great Britain and America. To an unusual degree he has sought to go deeply into the spirit of the colonists in all its manifestations that related to the war, as well as the spirit of the loose body politic which functioned in the England of the time—often clumsily, but always functioned.

This is not to say that the author has neglected the military operations of the war in his range up to Saratoga, but, after a manner growing in favor with historians, he has subordinated details of operations in the field to deeper things. He brings out much more clearly than most authors have done the immensity of the effort which Great Britain made to crush the recreant Continentals with military and naval force and a display of material resources.

Judged by the law and precedents of the science of war, the Americans were beaten when Sir William Howe landed 34,000 men, March 17, 1776, at New York, from a fleet commanded by his brother in which 500 vessels were massed. Upon the city there converged the greater part of the greatest fleet and army which Great Britain had ever sent across the seas; greater than Wellington commanded nearly forty years later. Balanced against the starveling resources of Washington, Lord North had sent Howe 4840,776, "such a military chest as no commander in the history of the world had ever carried beyond the seas." It was, indeed, an audacious decision which Washington made to defend New York, with 21,000 men who were chiefly recruits and raw militia, but he attempted the impossible because the moral effect of abandoning the city might have spelled the ruin of the American cause.

The author is severe in his strictures upon General Howe, who might have ended the war when the stars in their courses were in his favor. "Women, wine and the card table," he writes, "seemed to have unnerved this pleasure-loving Antony" when he might have captured 9,000 men on Long Island. Though Cornwallis testified later before the House of Commons that he knew of no instance when Howe failed to attack at a propitious moment, Van Tyne believes that Howe, had he shown more vigor of chieftainship, might have crushed the American Army in its retreat across New Jersey and again in the Battle of Brandywine.

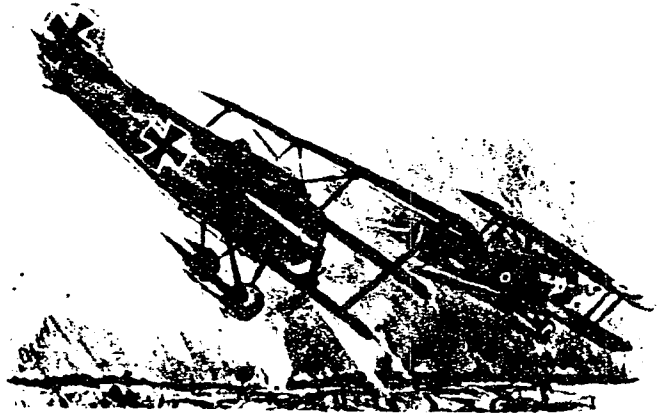
The emphasis in the treatment of the Burgoyne campaign is upon the failure of Howe to cooperate. On these points no historian who had searched the Clinton papers in the Clements collection could be disregarded of supporting material for which the author gives his references in footnotes.

It is doubtful if any work has presented such a startling picture, sustained by ample citations, of the disorganization of the American Army of which Washington complained bitterly to the dull ears of Congress. The wonder, as Henry Cabot Lodge pointed out in his biography of Washington, is that any war could be won by such elements, and Lodge was clear in his opinion that only the personal force of the leader brought their poor efforts to a great conclusion.

Professor Van Tyne's thorough narrative, vivid in many pages, whets the appetite for further treatment from the same source of the events after the Battle of Saratoga. The international phase of the war which followed offers a particularly inviting field for his wide researches and the correlation of them. Not enough careful attention has been paid to the sweeping manner in which the meddling diplomats of infant America went about embroiling a large part of Europe in their own quarrel.



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