The Conquest of Eden

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I

This tremendous tome weighs slightly less than six pounds, fills about 184 cubic inches of space, and is shorter by only 288 pages than the revised and augmented edition (1940) of the famous Liddell and Scott Greek-English Lexicon. Thus it is hardly a book for the bedside table or one with which to ease the tedium of a jet-plane journey or a long bus ride; yet for all its bulk and unwieldiness it is one of the most interesting and possibly most important publications to appear in many a season. Certainly, no future historian of mid-nineteenth century America can afford to ignore it; but for the persevering general reader with a taste for the tragic ethos it has, as Professor Myers says, something of the emotional impact of an epic novel on the pattern of War and Peace, or like the one it more nearly resembles in action and setting, though not in its characters—the late Margaret Mitchell’s Gone with the Wind.

The Children of Pride—the title alludes, somewhat ambiguously, to those under the reign of the biblical Leviathan—consists for the most part of letters exchanged during the years between 1854 and 1868 among members of various branches of a devout and distinguished Southern Calvinist family who were also slaveowners and ardent secessionists. The letters are presented without footnotes or other explanatory comment, but are sandwiched, as it were, between an instructive Prologue and Epilogue by the editor. Because of remarriages, very frequent in those times of epidemic diseases and puerperal infections, and of occasional intrafamilial marriages, the relationships of the correspondents are complex and difficult to follow; but for those who deem the effort necessary. Mr. Myers has devoted 289 pages to biographical sketches with genealogical details, not only of the correspondents themselves, but of almost everyone mentioned by them, however casually, thus including Lady Mary Wortley-Montagu, Dr. Samuel Johnson, Benjamin West, and W. M. Thackeray, as well as Abraham Lincoln, Jefferson Davis, William H. T. Walker, Robert Toombs, William T. Sherman, Hugh Judson Kilpatrick, and a certain Henry Clay Keener of Richmond County, Georgia. Mr. Keener’s solitary claim to attention is that after having been sentenced to hang for the murder of his rival for the favors of a prostitute named Jane Yarborough, he won a new trial and an acquittal through the eloquence of Alexander Hamilton Stephens, afterwards Vice-President of the Southern Confederacy.

It will be seen then that for Professor Myers the compilation of this work has been a kind of herculean performance, the result of years and years of loving and laborious research. In a preface he tells us that:

For months on end I have tangled in genealogical mazes. . . . I have scruti-
nized the Federal census and pored over compiled military service records at the National Archives. I have leafed through decades of newspaper files at the Library of Congress on the chance that a microscopic obituary notice might catch my eye. I have written hundreds of letters of inquiry; I have examined scores of marriage licenses and death certificates; I have ransacked telephone directories for names of elusive descendants. . . . I have worked for weeks with the public records of Atlanta, Augusta, Macon and Savannah; I have deciphered yellowing documents in remote country courthouses; I have sat on village porches sipping tea as I listened to reminiscences. . . . I have risked rattlesnakes . . . in the rank growths of forgotten graveyards; I have transcribed tombstones beneath a merciless August sun; I have even spent a darksome evening groping for markers in a private burial ground by the light of a flickering candle. . . . I have journeyed to Kentucky and Tennessee twice, to Georgia, Alabama and Florida ten times. . . .

And all this apparently was in addition to the labor of culling the main contents of this book from family collections deposited in three different university libraries and amounting altogether to more than sixteen thousand items!

II

What distinguishes these letters from the general run of documentary materials relating to the American Civil War—official records, orders and proclamations, contemporary newspapers, wartime diaries, military apologias and recriminations, and so on—is that they were written without any thought of publication, were never pointed up with emendatory afterthoughts and were never subjected to editorial revision, apart from a few small deletions and the correction of one or two dates. In this respect the nearest counterparts are the fifteenth century Paston Letters, well known to students of late mediaeval English history and of late Middle English literature. Indeed, the analogy is in some ways rather striking, for the Paston documents date from an age of great domestic disorder, of murderous civil strife, and the decay of a feudal organization not unlike that which existed under another name in the great plantations of our Southern States. One notable difference, however, is this: the letters and legal papers of the Paston family, their kindred, retainers, and friends cover more than half a century over the reigns of Henry VI, Edward IV and Richard III. Something less than eleven hundred of them are known to be extant, and these are spread through the six volumes of James Gairdner's edition (Edinburgh, 1906). The twelve hundred letters of The Children of Pride chosen by Professor Myers cover an historical epoch of only fourteen years and are compressed between a single set of strong buckram covers.

Of the several planes of interest which these letters open to the reader that which concerns the political and military personages of the Confederacy is the slightest. Where these are noticed at all it is, so to speak, from a distance and surrounded by the aureae of their reputations. There is nothing here to compare with Mrs. Chesnut's intimate anecdotes of the harassed and fumbling statesmen and of the proud, temperamental and often jealous warriors, or with Captain Blackford's calm-eyed, no-more-than-life-size estimates of such heroes as Stonewall Jackson, that Roundhead among the Cavaliers, Warhorse Longstreet, and Beauty Stuart. Indeed until those last and terrible months of 1864 which saw the ravages of the savage Sherman and his bummers in their sweep across the almost undefended homeland, the war obtrudes but occasionally into the letters of the Children of Pride. Their concern is mainly and quite naturally with family matters, with births and deaths, betrothals and marriages, visitations and separations, the intensities of joy and sorrow.
There is much about the weather, about the problems of plantation management—which seem, even in the best of times, to have been many and difficult—about the sowing and harvesting, about the condition of the cotton crop, the prospect for its profitable sale, the possibility of getting some of it through the blockade. There is news about the health and behavior of the servants, messages or remembrances ("howdies") to some of them from absent members of the family. There are the fears aroused by the prevalence or proximity of various plagues—cholera, yellowjack, typhoid, tuberculosis and sometimes smallpox. The approach of childbirth is mentioned with apprehension and dread. The fact is underscored by Mrs. Mary Jones, writing to an unmarried young friend to announce the birth of a grandchild: "As you may (or rather I should say as your mother would) be assured, it has been a season of intense anxiety to us and we desire to bless the Lord for His goodness and mercy . . . to us." On the same occasion a cousin of Mrs. Jones writes to rejoice that "your dear daughter has been spared through her hour of peril." Two deaths from puerperal infection, described elsewhere in the correspondence, suffice to explain both the fears and the rejoicing.

Six years and eight months later when the daughter was brought another time to childbirth there was even greater reason for anxiety. She had then with her children taken refuge in her mother's house which was being repeatedly invaded and violated by Federal marauders. At the onset of labor Mrs. Jones sent by a servant a pitiful plea to a doctor three miles distant, who seems to have been the only practitioner remaining in the county.

. . . My child had an impression something was wrong with her unborn infant—the consequence of injuries received from a severe fall from a wagon, breaking her collarbone and bruising her severely as [she and her husband] were making their retreat from Atlanta on the approach of General Sherman. Dr. [Raymond] Harris, with a kindness and courage never to be forgotten, came without delay and in the face of danger; for the enemy was everywhere over the county. He looked very feeble, having been recently ill with pneumonia. Soon after being in her room he requested a private interview, informing me that my child was in a most critical condition, and I must be prepared for the worst. . . . During these hours of agony the yard was filled with Yankees. It is supposed one hundred visited the place during the day. They were all around the house; my poor child, calm and collected amid her agony of body, could hear their conversation and wild hallos and cursing beneath her windows. . . .

This Dr. Harris was evidently a man of skill as well as of bravery and compassion, for the baby, a girl, was delivered without accident and the mother saved. Indeed, the infant born under these unpromising circumstances was to show throughout life a remarkable capacity for survival: though described as weak, sickly, and timid, she managed in childhood to recover from a succession of grave illnesses, including whooping cough, cholera infantum, and yellow fever, and as a woman to outlive almost everyone else in the story, leaving four children of her own when she died at last in 1952 at the age of almost eighty-eight.

III

There is a great deal, particularly in the earlier letters, about the affairs of the Southern Presbyterian Church, about its synods and assemblies, which involved some of the correspondents in a good bit of travel, even in wartime, and about the activities of the ministers and their congregations, for the family was prolific of divines in almost every generation. Most prominent among them was the Reverend
Charles Colcock Jones, of Liberty County, Georgia, grandfather of the child whose birth has just been described. He was the owner of three plantations and a great many slaves who in later life had dedicated himself to writing *A History of the Church of God* and to the evangelization of Negroes. Neither he nor his Southern coreligionists saw any incongruity between this self-chosen mission and the status of slaveholder, for as the late Richard Weaver observed, “Southerners had been in the habit of justifying slavery on the score that it gave Negroes opportunity to become Christians. There can be no question,” he went on, “of the sincerity of this argument, though an age which regards all religion with mild disdain may imagine it to be hypocritical.” Certainly these letters give abundant evidence of Dr. Jones’ solicitude for the spiritual as well as the bodily well-being of his “property,” as he sometimes referred to the humble souls in his cure, especially when their salvation and security seemed threatened by the abolitionists. The life on Dr. Jones’ plantations could have had little likeness to the life of the lowly as imagined by Mrs. Stowe or to that described by Frederick L. Olmsted, nor did the good dominie himself in the least resemble the type of Southern magnate who, according to Mrs. Chesnut, could maintain “a hideous black harem with its consequences under the same roof with his lovely white wife and his beautiful and accomplished daughters.” Dr. Jones in fact was enraged on learning that a former guest in his household, who had made a great parade of piety, had fathered a mulatto child on one of the house servants. “And, now, sir,” he demanded of the lecherous offender, what are your former Christian friends to think of you? You have sinned under the most forbidding and aggravating circumstances, and it is difficult to conceive of a more degrading and hypocritical course of wickedness and folly, or one which argues a greater destitution of principle or more callousness of conscience. I have never been more deceived in a man in all my life. How have you wounded the Savior, and brought disgrace upon religion, and given occasion for the ungodly to triumph! What an injury have you done to the soul of the poor Negro! . . . You have betrayed my confidence and injured me grievously. . . .

In Mrs. Chestnut’s aristocratic circle, no doubt, such an accusation couched in such language would have led immediately to a challenge and a duel. In this case the accused was satisfied to make a sworn denial of the charge, which was accepted without further investigation by the pastor and session clerk of the Presbyterian Church at Columbus, Georgia.

As a youth Dr. Jones had gone north for his education at Phillips Andover and at the famous theological college at Princeton, still pervaded apparently by the grim old genius of Jonathan Edwards. He returned to Georgia to marry a first cousin, to serve briefly as a pastor in Savannah, to teach church history and polity at a seminary at Columbia, South Carolina, and later, but before the schism over slavery, to become secretary of the Presbyterian board of domestic missions. This last required a period of exile in Philadelphia, so that his children too received their educations in northern schools. He was brother-in-law to his cousin, the Reverend John Jones, another Presbyterian cleric; his daughter married still another in the person of the Reverend Robert Q. Mallard of Walthourville, and a niece became the wife of the Reverend David Buttolph, the northern-born pastor of the eighteenth-century church at Midway, Georgia, and ironically enough a kinsman of Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe. Dr. Jones’ elder son and namesake, a lawyer, became while still in his twenties Mayor of Savannah, and afterwards in the war, an artillery officer, rising to the rank of colonel. The second son, Dr. Joseph Jones, became one of the most eminent medical men of his day, held chairs at successive universities, won world-wide rec-
ognition as an authority on tropical diseases; he also saw service as a surgeon in the Confederate army, and in the summer of 1864 spent some weeks at Andersonville, investigating, as his mother wrote, "the most dreadful diseases amongst those infamous Yankees—smallpox, gangrene, etc. I do trust," she added fervently, "it will result in good to our own poor soldiers."

His cousin, James Dunwody Jones, a veteran of First Manassas and the Peninsula, was also at Andersonville, helping to drill Major Wirz's prison guards. Sherman's army was then already outside Atlanta and General J. E. Johnston, that master of the strategic withdrawal, had been relieved of his command.

IV

A LITTLE MORE than ten years earlier—that is to say in the spring of 1854—Charles Colcock Jones, the younger, was studying law at the Dane school at Harvard. That was the year when William Lloyd Garrison publicly burned the Constitution of the United States and announced that "the Union must be dissolved." It was also the year in which an abolitionist mob attempted to storm the Federal courthouse in Boston where hearings were in progress in the case of Anthony Burns, a Virginia Negro arrested under the fugitive slave law. Young Jones attended some sessions of the court and described the scene in a letter to his father.

The [court]room is filled with armed men; even the counsel at bar have their revolvers and bowie knives. The passages are strictly guarded night and day by the military, of whom over one hundred marines from the navy yard are garrisoned in the courthouse proper, besides two other companies, while the city hall contains four volunteer companies ordered out by the mayor. All the military of Boston are under arms, ready at a moment's notice to appear at any point. Hourly are the streets opened around the courthouse and cleared of the mob by companies marching in solid columns for that purpose. The drum and fife, the challenge of the guards, the commands of the officers, the shouts of the mob, all mingling in such confusion, often prevent you, although even within a few feet of the counsel arguing at the bar, from hearing them. The halls of justice are literally thronged with armed men. Singular, and I may say awful sight!

It seems to have been while at Harvard that he decided that the separation of the Southern States from the Union would sooner or later become necessary, if they were to preserve their freedom. Two and a half years afterward, when he had settled in Savannah and had entered into practice, he rejoiced in the victory of Buchanan over the Republican Frémont and the Know-Nothing candidate, Millard Fillmore, but considered it a respite rather than a deliverance from the danger that the seats of national power would soon be taken over by the "cohorts of fanaticism." His father more hopefully viewed the election and its outcome as a possible intervention of Providence, destined to end "the political and religious heresies which have been disorganizing and destroying the country." After that there are but few political allusions, and these of merely local interest, in the letters until the fateful November of 1860 and the news that Lincoln and the Black Republicans would soon be in control of the national administration. "A meeting of citizens here is called for tomorrow," wrote Charles Jones, Junior, from Savannah. "We are on the verge of heaven knows what." The elder Mr. Jones, anticipating the event, had expressed his confidence that, if it came to secession, the conservative influence in the North would be strong enough to permit the South to depart in peace; for

. . . if the attempt is made to subjugate the South, what prospect will there be of success? And what benefit will accrue to all the substantial interests of the free
states? The business world will think very little benefit. Under all the circumstances attending a withdrawal there would be no casus belli. . . . Have not fifteen states a right to govern themselves and withdraw from a compact or constitution disregarded by the other states to their injury and (it may be) their ruin?

But it was his wife who better expressed the dominant mood of the moment—in the cotton states at least. “I cannot see,” she told their son,

a shadow of a reason for civil war in the event of a Southern confederacy; but even that, if it must come, would be preferable to Black Republicanism, involving as it would all that is horrible, degrading and ruinous. “Forbearance has ceased to be a virtue”; and I believe we would meet with no evils out of the Union that would compare to those we will finally suffer if we continue in it; for we can no longer doubt that the settled policy of the North is to crush the South. . . .

V

IN THE OLD SOUTH, wrote Richard Weaver, religion was “one of the unquestioned and unquestionable supports of the general sentiment under which men live.”4 For Professor Myers’ Children of Pride it was, as their letters witness, the main support, and in those terrible months of 1864 the only support. “I try,” wrote Mary Jones to a sister-in-law, “to be calm and hopeful, to trust in God and do the best I can; but sometimes my heart almost dies within me.” Three days later, writing to the same relative, she underscores her anguish: “God be merciful to us sinners! For my poor child here [her pregnant daughter], and my son in Savannah [a prisoner], my heart aches—and my bleeding country!” There is the disposition among the Joneses to see the hand of God and the working of His providence in all events, great and small. Ill-tidings are accepted as deserved and salutary chastisements, good news as evidence of abiding mercy. The peculiar Calvinist conception of grace is everywhere pervasive. Though apparently satisfied of their second son’s place among the elect, Dr. Jones and his wife express fears about the spiritual situation and eternal destiny of their elder son whose own letters are filled with religious sentiments and filial pieties. It seems to have been not so much that he was wicked or depraved as that he was a bit worldly. In seeking to console Mayor Jones after the death of his young bride in childbirth the father tells him that

. . . if this affliction leads you to see how for yourself you have lived and not for God, to whom you belong and who is entitled to and commands your supreme affection and service; if it leads you to do what you have never done before truly and faithfully, to break off all your sins by righteousness, and without the fear of favor of man acknowledge God as your Redeemer, and take Him for your Lord and portion forever; then will the affliction attain the end which I trust and believe God designs in it. . . .

To which the emotionally distraught son replied, not quite coherently:

. . . There is scarcely an hour of the day that my heart does not melt in sincerest gratitude to you both, my dear parents, and rejoice that our precious little motherless infant in the absence of her who gave her birth has been entrusted to the guardian care of those whose hearts will melt in sympathy with the darling little orphan. Should her life be spared she will be a standing monument to God’s great goodness and mercy. . . .

This was written on July 24, 1861, just when the people of Savannah had learned “with mingled exultation and sorrow” of the first great but costly victory at Manassas. “Surely,” Mayor Jones ex-
claimed, "the God of Battles is with us!"

In this—though lamenting in other matters of religion what he deemed the son’s disposition to “substitute imaginations for realities”—Dr. Jones seems to have concurred. On the day before his death early in March, 1863, he assured his wife that “the God of Jacob is with us—God, our Father, Jehovah, God the Holy Ghost, and God our divine Redeemer; and we can never be overthrown!” Perhaps this bordered on the sin of presumption, for two years and six months afterward the Reverend John Jones, meditating on the defeat and disaster, wrote to his widowed and despoiled sister:

However we may be able to prove the wickedness of our enemies, we must acknowledge that the providence of God has decided against us in the tremendous struggle we have just made for property rights and country. The hand of the Lord is upon us. Oh, for the grace to be humble and behave aright before Him until these calamities be passed. I confess that I often feel brokenhearted and tempted sometimes to rebel and then to give up in hopeless despair. Either extreme is wicked, and the antidote for each is a refuge in the sovereignty and righteousness of God.

VI

It is the widow of the Reverend Charles Colcock Jones who as a kind of Confederate Hecuba dominates the latter pages of Professor Myers’ compilation. She had become, as she wrote in her journal, “a captive in the home I love, and soon must wander from it—an exile in my native land.”

All things are altered. “Abroad the sword bereaveth; at home there is as death.” The adversary hath spread out his hand upon all our pleasant things. The enemy has destroyed every living thing; even the plainest food is made scanty. His robberies and oppressions force me from by beloved home where it is no longer safe or prudent to remain. And I must leave it in my advancing years, knowing not where the gray hairs which sorrow and time have thickly gathered will find a shelter or the fainting heart and weary body a resting place.

Her exile ended with the end of the war and she was able to return to the place whither thirty years before her husband had led her as a young and happy bride—“happy oh, no mortal tongue can tell how happy in his love and confidence.” It was now a place of poverty and ruin, but rich to her in memories. Every stone, every tree, every flower had its association with the happy times. For three years she strove to restore enough of the plantation to provide a subsistence for herself and such of her former slaves as had chosen to remain. But the struggle was too much for her strength and resources and she was obliged to take refuge with her son-in-law and daughter who had moved to New Orleans. The others of the family had died or had dispersed; with her departure none remained in Liberty County. She was welcomed, Mr. Myers tells us, with great warmth and affection by the Mallards, but her homesickness continued; and in less than another year and a half she had left this world.

And yet—had God not bowed us down, not laid us low in dust none would have sung of us or told our wrongs in stories men will listen to forever.6

1Mary Boykin Chesnut: A Diary from Dixie; edited by Ben Ames Williams, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, 1949.
4Weaver, op. cit.