

AN ECCENTRIC KNOW- NOTHING: LETTER TO ORESTES A. BROWNSON, LL.D.

By John Mitchel.

From *The Citizen*, July 15, 1854.

DR. BROWNSON:—In your Quarterly Review, and in the current number thereof, you think fit to nickname me a ‘Radical,’ (*page* 346). Hereupon I shall have some remarks to make presently: but, in the meantime, I apply myself to the extraordinary Article in which that nickname is applied, entitled ‘Native Americanism.’

When you, Doctor, take up Native Americanism, or anything else, you ‘run it into the ground.’ When you were a ‘Radical,’ you preached, as yourself with contrition admit, ‘preached, in the name of the gospel, the most damnable radicalism.’ (See your *Review*, Jan. 1849, p. 103.) At the time when you were a Quaker, you must have been the most exaggerated of Broadbrims. When you were a Baptist, you thought Man must be saved hydropathically by plunging the whole world into cold water;—you undoubtedly seceded from the Mormons, (if I err in enumerating your antecedent religions, you can set me right,) because Joseph Smith did not go far enough; and, now that you are a Catholic, you are a better Catholic than your own Bishop, and out-pontiff the Pope of Rome.

Native Americanism, also, now you have fairly embarked in that cause, you drive to romantic lengths, after a very peculiar fashion; and it is certain, in your hands to grow into a philosophy, almost into a religion, and to wear such strange aspects, and affect so deep a significance, that the knowingest Know Nothing in the land will not know it when he sees it.

At the first glance, indeed, it will seem to every Know-Nothing reader that you are expounding precisely his principle, and that so broad and clear as to leave no shade of doubt on your genuine Nativism. You say—

‘For foreigners to claim, as a natural right, to be placed on an equal footing with natural-born citizens, is entirely to misinterpret American republicanism, and to assert that abominable doctrine of the solidarity of peoples, maintained by the infamous revolutionists of Europe.’

Again—

‘So it is with a nation, when, from hospitality it opens its doors to foreigners. It will never be pleased to find them forgetting that they are its guests, assuming *the airs of natural-born citizens*, and proceeding at once to take the management of its affairs upon themselves, *or even volunteering their advice*.’... ‘We do not, and cannot easily bring ourselves to feel that they have the same right to interfere in our national or political affairs that is possessed by *natural-born citizens*.’

I do not know, indeed, that any foreigner ever claimed naturalisation ‘as a natural right’—not even an ‘infamous revolutionist.’ Neither have I been informed what are those ‘airs’ becoming in a native citizen, which another citizen may not assume. When have ‘foreigners’ (by which term you mean adopted citizens) taken the management of your affairs? Or wherein is the advice of one citizen admissible, and the advice of another, not?—unless, indeed, the one citizen have more sense or knowledge than the other—a distinction which is not, perhaps, *universally* in favour of the native.

You do not, however, stop with general and vague Know-Nothing observations of this sort. You undertake to define (what, unfortunately, the laws of your country have left a *casus omissus*), the precise powers and privileges which a naturalised citizen is to exercise:

‘They may vote at elections freely, according to their own honest convictions; but they may not make themselves *violent* partizans, and enter *with ardour* into the heated action and envenomed contests of political parties. *They may be voters, but not canvassers*.’

A calm, sweet, and philosophic serenity, it seems, you prescribe to mere adopted citizens:—they are to wait in their own houses to be canvassed:—if they have an opinion on any public question, they are not to presume to whisper it; but having selected their ‘ticket,’ they are to exercise their franchise ‘with a certain moderation and prudent reserve,’ holding themselves aloof from heated action, keeping themselves cool, leaving all the cheering, all the groaning, all the foul

names and 'envenomed contests,' to you, Doctor, and your brother-natives.

Moreover, if any public servant misbehave himself in his office, the privilege of censuring him is for natives only, according to your doctrine. It is true, the interests of adopted citizens are equally concerned in the case:—it is true, they have, by their votes (given with extreme reserve and a charming modesty) helped to place him in the office he has misused:—it is true, their money helps to pay him his salary:—still they are not to 'censure' or 'interfere.' You say—

'A man may scold his own wife, for she is his, and it is all in the family; but let a stranger attempt the same thing, and the husband, if half-a-man will knock him down.'

By 'a stranger' you mean one who after a residence of five years, after duly renouncing allegiance to all kings and queens, and after taking upon him all the responsibilities of his new condition, has become by the operation of the laws an American citizen, as fully and absolutely as you, Doctor Orestes Brownson. This is the 'stranger' whom you recommend to be knocked down if he offer an opinion about the affairs of the nation, which are his own affairs.

Thus far, you write genuine Nativism, pure and simple: it fits the Know-Nothings precisely. In a fit of moderation, to be sure, you say a few words in behalf of the 'foreign population'—meaning all the time naturalised citizens—

'They are too numerous to be massacred, too numerous to be driven from the country; and native 'Americans' we hope, have *too much self-respect*, if nothing else, to seek to make them bond-slaves.'

There is some comfort in this: but at the same time you warn them very fairly what is likely to become of them unless exceedingly well-behaved—

'The Anglo-Americans are abundantly able to take care of themselves, and if provoked to extreme measures, the population of foreign birth would find themselves wholly at their mercy. We speak to warn our foreign population.'

Thank you, Doctor. The case then seems to stand thus—unless the naturalised citizens of America shall henceforth exercise their franchises with modesty, decorum, silence, and reserve—if they

persist not only in voting but in canvassing—if they presume to censure any public officer, member of the government, or policeman—in short, if they ‘take airs’—then the time will have come for ‘extreme measures.’ They will lie wholly at the mercy of their fellow-citizens born in America, and will thereafter be massacred, driven from the country, or reduced to bondage, as shall seem to such fellow-citizens most expedient.

In this whole article of yours, you utterly ignore the Law. It is nothing to you that the naturalised citizen holds his citizenship by the same tenure, and under the same sanction as yourself—namely, the Law of the land. If it be so, that the Law makes none of those distinctions which you have enacted above, about voting but not canvassing, discussing public questions but not discussing them with ardour, and so forth; you care not; you know nothing. You require something more than obedience to law—namely, a submissive demeanour in the presence of one’s native American superiors, and a conformity ‘to the character of the Anglo-American race.’ You say—

‘They should understand in the outset if they would avoid unpleasant collision, that they must ultimately lose their own nationality, and become assimilated in general character to the Anglo-American race.’

And who are the Anglo-American race? I know who the Americans are; and I know that a naturalised citizen must become a good and true American;—but as to becoming an Anglo-American, or being assimilated in character to Englishmen, the thing can’t be done; and I find no law for it. On the whole I advise you, before you lecture again upon the duties of adopted citizens, to look a little into the law and the Constitution: and if you find anything Anglican there, anything against taking airs, or canvassing, be good enough to let us know.

But now comes the singular part of your Nativism. It happens that the strongest element in the present actual Native-American party, is its hostility to Catholicism; and that some of the most active Know-Nothings are English and Irish Protestants.

You hasten to correct this gross mistake. You say to your allies, the Know-Nothings—Don’t you see that *we*, the Catholics, are your

friends, and the friends of American institutions. It is against those other wretches, those Protestant Germans, that Protestant radical, John Mitchel, and such as he, you ought to aim your blows. You cry out—

‘Not from Catholic, but from non-Catholic foreigners comes the principal danger to our institutions.’

It is strange and sad; but not one of your allies believes you—not one of them (after all your outrageous nativist talk) believes that you care one jot about our institutions in comparison with the institution of the Propaganda. In short it is mainly against you, Doctor Orestes, and your doctrines and disciples, that this Native-Americanism has organised itself. In vain you point out their mistake, and tell them they are knocking down the wrong men. You tell us that—

‘The party not only discriminates between foreigners, but it discriminates badly.’—Nay, what is worse, ‘It is itself animated by a radical spirit, and is hand and glove with foreign radicals.’

It is a mad world, Doctor: and the time is out of joint. A native American party you highly approve; but *the* native American party is all wrong. In respect it hates foreigners, you like it very well; but in respect it especially hates Catholic foreigners, it goes much against your stomach. In respect it knocks men down, look you, it fits your humour well; but in respect it knocks down the wrong man, it is tedious. Why will it set fire to the churches of its best friends? Why will it be hand and glove with German and Hungarian Revolutionists? Why hoot Bedini, and cheer Gavazzi, and hearken to the trump of the Angel Gabriel? Why will it not come to *you*, and clothe itself in a soutane, and get a small tonsure on the top of its head, and comport itself like an Anglo-American penitent before its confessor!

It will cost you much pains, I apprehend, to set all this right; especially as you, Doctor Orestes, *you* more than any one living man, have aroused and kindled this strong anti-Catholic, and therefore anti-Irish spirit in America, by your ultra-Catholic and anti-republican teaching and writings. Innumerable and disgusting *Shepherds of the Valley* and *Freeman's Journals* have been a brood of your begetting; and

on the part of my Irish fellow-countrymen, I accuse you of so misrepresenting them and their church before the American people, that any republican nation could not but look on them and all their ways with suspicion and abhorrence.

How easy it would be to turn you inside out now—and to point out in the pages of your own *Review* the very doctrines which have alarmed the genuine republican spirit of this country, and have given to the Native party whatever genuine vigour it possesses? Since '48, you have regularly enlisted yourself on the side of all the tyrants of Europe, regularly exerted yourself to cry down all attempts of the down-trodden people everywhere to throw off royal and imperial yokes, and become as American republicans. Who could believe, after this, that you really value republican institutions on either side of the Atlantic?

In an article of your *Review*, against the cause of Hungary, in Jan., 1851, you say:

'European democracy is mere wild anarchy. An American republican can be a good citizen—a European democrat, if consistent, must be a vile demagogue. The former can save his soul [that is to say, an American republican, if he be a Catholic, *can* save his soul]—if the latter get into heaven, Satan need not despair.'

But this is not the worst. In an article on 'Civil and Religious Toleration,' in July, 1849, you distinctly assert the right of the State, under certain circumstances, to punish Infidelity, Heresy, and Schism. You say plainly:

'When infidelity, heresy, and schism, are clearly and directly crimes against society, they are justly punishable by the civil authorities.'

How that case is to arise, or who is to judge whether they are crimes against society or not, you do not inform us; but the case having arisen, you assert that it is right to imprison, or otherwise punish, even (of course) to flaying alive, or burning, any heretic, say a Protestant. Throughout that article you take care to place toleration for heresy on the ground of expediency; and you never renounce the right, nay, the duty of punishing for that crime.

And all your miserable echoes at the Press, from the Mississippi to Boston Bay, vied with you in adulation of Austria, and in heaping infamous names on the gallant republicans of Italy and France:—nay, they improved upon your doctrines of Intolerance (for you could not restrain the fools within the bounds of your prudent example) until the land reverberated with anathemas on liberty; and men might almost fancy they heard the thunders of the Vatican bursting on the Alleghanies, and saw the tide of the Mississippi reddened by the fires of an Inquisition.

This, I say, has been your work, Doctor Orestes; *hence* has come whatever of bitterness and ferocity is to be found in the Native American party; this outrageous caricature of Catholicity, held up to America by *you*, (after you had tired of all the other religions,) has been the principal spring, and is the only excuse for the furious Anti-Irish spirit which is now raging.

One leading idea of the Native American party is alone sufficient to prove this. They say, there must be drawn a distinction between ‘Citizens of America,’ and ‘Subjects of the Pope.’ They have got the idea—it was from you and your echoes they caught it—that a Catholic must be a bad citizen. And if you and your echoes were true exponents of Catholicity, they would be right. In that case I would make no scruple to avow that no Catholic is fit to be a citizen of any country; and, not content with disenfranchising, I would exterminate them.

It is only by distinctly separating themselves from you, by emphatically denying you and all your works, that Irishmen in America can ever become at one with their fellow native-citizens. In the meantime, I do protest and declare, on the part of my Catholic fellow-countrymen—*first*, that they do not want to burn heretics—*secondly*, that they do not regard Republicans on either side of the Atlantic, as ‘infamous wretches,’—and *third*, that there is no part of the American Constitution valued by them more highly than the part which makes it impossible for you, Doctor, with all the Propaganda at your back, ever to ‘punish’ a single human creature in America for ‘infidelity, heresy, or schism.’

For the name ‘Radical’ which you are pleased to give to me; I was certainly in Ireland a Radical. In America (so soon as I have the

honour to be a citizen), I mean to be a steady Conservative. In Ireland the whole governmental and social system needed to be cut up by the roots, in order that some justice might begin to be done there. Therefore I was a radical. Here, where there are institutions worth conserving, I am a conservative. Men do not usually preserve worn-out garments, or decayed offal, or rotten eggs, or dead men's bones (except occasionally for reliquaries)—but they try to preserve what is good and fresh and fair—that it may long be a blessing and a glory to mankind.

Yes, in America, you must call me conservative; and be assured that there is nothing I shall be more solicitous to conserve than the absolute civil right of every man to be heretic, infidel, Catholic, Jew, or Mormon at his good pleasure.

I remain, Dr. Brownson,
Your obedient servant,
JOHN MITCHEL.