

The Settling of America  
*The Illustrated London News*  
September 11, 1920  
By: G. K. Chesterton

At the time of writing, the newspapers are full of paragraphs and pictures about the great historical incident of the sailing of the *Mayflower*. It is celebrated in eloquent and enthusiastic terms as the foundation of the great American Republic, the first establishment of the English overseas, the seed of a small colony destined to grow into a great commonwealth. Assuredly anything would be good which established a sympathy between England and America; and the tradition of the *Mayflower* may at least establish a sympathy between England and some important parts of America. Nevertheless, I am moved to make some criticisms, which will none the less be counted heretical because they are undoubtedly historical. For, indeed, I think that this specialized exaggeration conceals a considerable danger, not only to historical truth, but actually to Anglo-American friendship. The affair of the *Mayflower* is not, in the larger sense, a link between England and America. It is a link between England and New England.

Whatever the great Puritan emigration was, it was emphatically not the foundation of America. It was not even the foundation of English America, as distinct from Spanish America. At least a whole generation before the Calvinist quarrels, one of the adventurous antagonists of Spanish America had established the first defiant frontiers of English America. Raleigh and the Elizabethans gave to their colony a magnificent Elizabethan name, however little it may have been merited by Elizabeth. But whether or no its origin was worthy of it, its history was wholly worthy of it. Nothing in the American story has been more truly heroic or humane, more truly fitted to last among men as a legend, than the story of what we may still be tempted to call the great nation of Virginia.

It is a commonplace to say that Virginia was the very throne of the authority of the Revolution. From Virginia came Washington, its hero, and Jefferson, its prophet. The State was known as the Mother of Presidents. It was felt as a sort of council chamber of the Fathers of the Republic. Not to follow its pivotal political history through as thousand other things, it is enough to say that, in the Civil War, the adherence of Virginia to the side of local patriotism, which happened to be the losing side, was certainly the fact which almost turned it into the winning side. In Virginia, in that dark hour, arose the greatest of American generals; who was, perhaps, the noblest of Americans. I really cannot imagine why a history that begins with Raleigh and ends with Lee, and incidentally includes Washington, should be utterly swept aside and forgotten in favor of a few sincere but limited, Nonconformists, who happened to quarrel with Charles the First.

But the case is really even stronger than this. I have said that it is a serious blunder, in any case, to think of America merely as an extension of England. It may do us very deadly harm if we do not understand in time the attitude of Irish or Italian elements, to say nothing of the Jewish or German elements. It is also fatal to forget that the whole national legend was founded on a revolt against England, and therefore on a mood that regarded England not only as an enemy

but as a foreign enemy. Most Americans, after the war of independence, were in about as much mood to regard America as an extension of England, as a Scot the day after Bannockburn was in a mood to regard Scotland as an extension of England. In a general sense, therefore, it would not be wise to compliment even the Puritan States merely as the most English States of the Union. Anybody will be much mistaken who translates New England merely as renovated England. Nobody certainly would describe New England as Merry England. The Polity which the Pilgrim founders founded was in some ways very un-English, even in its virtues. Its fixed theology, its fanatical faith, and, above all, its rigid and ruthless logic, were not native to the mass of Englishmen which these exiles left behind. They were more like a by-product of France, where Calvin arose; they were still more like a product of Scotland, where Calvinism could become a popular institution. A society over which the mania of witch-burning swept like a prairie fire was surely not especially stamped with the spirit of Chaucer or Dickens. That there was also a heroic side to the Puritans is perfectly true; but it is hardly in the manner of the most English heroes, such as Nelson, or the Elizabethan sailors. Now, there was one place where this English spirit did largely survive; and that was in the older State founded by the Elizabethan sailors. The squires, the sports, the manners and humors of Virginia were much more like those of an English country. Washington was much more like an ordinary English gentleman than Benjamin Franklin. It is easy to imagine Washington drinking wine at the English Inn in Sussex. I cannot so easily call up the picture of his making a night of it with Dr. Franklin there. Already, one feels, there might have begun to creep over Franklin's soul the appalling shadow of Prohibition.

Of course, these characteristics were not peculiar to Virginia. A great deal could be said about South Carolina and the genius of Calhoun; or about those wild Western States whence came the great soldier and demagogue, Andrew Jackson. But the reader need feel no alarm lest I should launch into a detailed history of all the States of the Union. The ignorance which so often expurgates and selects the subjects of journalism would alone restrain me. I have only a very superficial journalistic knowledge of the history of America. But I say that even a superficial journalistic knowledge ought to be enough to prevent anybody from saying that the *Mayflower* expedition was the sole foundation of America, or from talking as if the north-east corner of that mighty continent was alone to be considered. The *Mayflower* is doubtless a beautiful fragment blossom; but I do not think it should overshadow and hide from view all the flowers and fruits of the earth, from the vines of California to the orange-groves of Florida.

More remains to be said in the future both about the quarrel of Puritans and Cavaliers in England, and the quarrel of the Puritan and Cavalier colonies or States in America. In both cases the Cavaliers failed, and the Puritans succeeded. But in both cases it has now become rather a question whether the success is not itself a failure. In England, there is now at least as much grumbling against the politician as there ever was against the courtier. In other words, the abuse of the privilege of the Parliament has become at least as unpopular as was ever the abuse of the prerogative of the King. In America, as in all industrial countries, the exploitation of the industrial workers has called up all sorts of menacing suggestions of refusal to work or compulsion to work. In other words, America has lived to find the problem of white labor at least as difficult as the problem of black labor; and the Nemesis of sweating as terrible as the

Nemesis of slavery. This truth does not necessitate justification of the slave-owners, any more than a glorification of the Stuarts. But it does mean that there was more to be said for them than it has been fashionable to admit for the last fifty years; and that from the first the most intelligent men, like Wentworth and Falkland in the one case, or Lee and Lincoln in the other, felt that the alternative was something of a choice of evils. Some of them chose drastically, like Wentworth and Lincoln; some reluctantly and conscientiously, like Falkland and Lee. But all of them, in the thick of the conflict, saw the case for both sides; where one enlightened generation, in repose and respect, can only manage to see one side. Our philosophers are often narrower than their fanatics; and summaries simplify more fatally than war cries. But we are being forced to reconsider our onesidedness by the failures on our own side. We do not need to regard Charles the First as a perfect statesman in order to doubt nowadays whether Parliament is a perfect instrument. We do not wish to go back to slavery, because we are by no means clear about how we are to go on with proletarianism. It is enough to note here that the voyage of the *Mayflower* is by no means ended; that ship which sailed out of the north in the seventeenth century has not yet really come home to any final harbor.