

GEORGE DOWNING

A PURITAN POLITICIAN

BY ALEXANDER MCADIE

NOTE—This paper had its inception in the eloquent address of Mr. Hampton L. Carson, President of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, on the Common Origin of the Middle Colonies, delivered here a year ago and published in the Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society, vol. 37, April 13, 1927, pp. 43-62. He gave much credit to Edward Hyde, Earl of Clarendon, as the far-seeing statesman who prevailed upon the Dutch to relinquish claim to their flourishing settlement at New Amsterdam; and thus secured an unbroken stretch of English-speaking colonies, along the Atlantic.

It occurred to me that one George Downing, acting of course under orders, must have had a good deal to do in his capacity as Ambassador at The Hague, in worrying the Dutch, so that John DeWitt may have, out of sheer weariness, the more readily consented to the agreement whereby the English retained New York and the Dutch kept Surinam. Be that as it may, the career of Downing is so remarkable that a few words about him may not come amiss.

I am indebted first of all to John Beresford's excellent biography "The Godfather of Downing Street." It is a model biography. Then I have read Sibley's "Harvard Graduates" and F. L. Gay's papers on the same. Finally I acknowledge with thanks the assistance of my fellow members, Mr. H. W. Cunningham, Mr. Albert Matthews, Mr. Julius H. Tuttle and Mr. William C. Lane.

The title "A Puritan Politician" no doubt does injustice to the Puritans; for their virtues were many and their actions even when wrong were in accord with their conscience. Prof. S. E. Morison has paid eloquent tribute to them; and a man like Downing cannot properly be classed as a Puritan. Also he repudiated in later life his early upbringing. Perhaps "Seventeenth Century Politician" would be more appropriate.

There is a portrait of Sir George Downing in the possession of Mr. Frederic Winthrop, a member of this Society.

THE Puritan practical politician whom we are about to mention, certainly knew how to prosper while holding official position. And he was not one who had been denied in early youth the benefit of a college education. He had learned his Latin in the classic shades across the Charles and what is more, he capitalized his knowledge. He wrote State papers in

sonorous terms, and on the other hand, knew without the aid of a dictionary what Their High Mightinesses, the Lords of the States-General (*Statum Confæderati Belgii*) meant when they addressed him as "Nobilissimo et Magnifico Domino Downing," with additional Latin words signifying that said Domino was a most excellent and most serene Ambassador from the Lord Protector of England, Scotland and Hibernia, otherwise known as Oliver Cromwell. Diplomatic assurances of distinguished consideration are to be taken *cum grano salis* and we shall get a truer estimate of our man if we peep into the Diary of one Samuel Pepys—a Dairy which the author thought no one would ever decipher. There we find it written: "Downing is a perfidious rogue" and Pepys had good grounds for this judgment.

This was the age of so-called great statesmen, although statesmanship then consisted essentially in trying to grab a neighbor's territory and if the effort did not succeed, making a treaty of peace, which was to be broken at the earliest possible moment. The Cardinal of France, Richelieu, was passing from the center of the political stage; and Mazarin, Cromwell, Thurloe, Milton, Charles X of Sweden, John and Cornelius DeWitt, the Earl of Clarendon, Monk, Albermarle, and John Shaftesbury were crowding to the front. With all of these our Puritan politician doubtless walked and talked; and while the names of the English statesmen are not altogether forgotten, it is the name of the Puritan from overseas that is perpetuated in the street, which we regard as the nerve center of the British Empire, 10 Downing Street, the official home of the First Lord of the Treasury.

At the first college commencement in our country, Harvard, 1642, nine young men were graduated. The Governor of the Colony addressed them as "young men of good hope"; and doubtless believed what he said. Benjamin Woodbridge was first man in his class, because of his social standing, and George

Downing, nephew of the Governor, was second. Woodbridge returned to England and became a preacher of note, holding forth so vigorously that at times the authorities had to silence him. But throughout that period of heated religious controversy, his record is free from taint of personal gain or greed. Harvard need not blush for its first graduate. But as for the second man, we find his escutcheon tarnished by base betrayals of trust and a besetting sin, greed. After graduation, Sir George, as he was academically known (the period after graduation and previous to taking the master's degree), read with the undergraduates at a stipend of £4 per annum. After one year of this he left Cambridge and went to sea, first to the West Indies, then north to Newfoundland and finally to England. Eight years earlier he had left the motherland for New England. He joined the Puritan army and being "an able scholar of a ready wit and fluent utterance" (the words of his uncle) became preacher in Colonel Okey's regiment of Sir Thomas Fairfax's army. Who among those zealous Roundheads, accustomed to swing into battle with a psalm on their lips, could have foreseen that fifteen years later this same preacher, turning his coat, would betray and hand over to death the Colonel who had befriended, fed and clothed him, a young preacher from overseas, then so full of zeal for the Republican cause and incidentally keen for a distribution of loaves and fishes?

When Cromwell marched into Scotland, 1648, Downing went along and through the good offices of the Governor of Newcastle, came under the Protector's notice. He was promoted to be Scout-master General of the Army of the Commonwealth.

A year later Downing was sent by Cromwell with a letter to Louis XIV. Thus he met a kindred spirit, Jules Mazarin, in early life a swashbuckler, then an impecunious priest and later protégé and successor to Richelieu. Birds of a feather flock together; and as

France, Spain, England, the Netherlands, Sweden, Denmark, Poland and Austria were one and all carrying chips on their shoulders, these two worthies had ample opportunity to provoke, then to pacify and participate in the profits. The game of practical politics was played for all it was worth; and it was worth a great deal, for the puritan preacher and the astute Cardinal each accumulated tremendous fortunes. Money and estates gravitated their way. Yet Downing was constantly putting up a poor mouth to his Chief at home, and Thurloe had to squeeze money by some means from the English exchequer. Downing wrote home that he was spending £500 a month. Possibly he did; but if so, a goodly portion of the amount went into his own pocket. Later Cromwell sent Downing to The Hague. His salary was now princely, yet soon came the piteous cry, "I am quite out of money; and am, Honorable Sir, your very humble faithful servant, G. Downing."

He was particularly instructed to watch Charles Stuart, son of the beheaded King. He did so, and harried the exiled royalists in Holland as of yore he had in England. He persuaded DeWitt to order them to leave. He bribed one wretchedly poor Royalist to give a list of those in England still secretly favoring the Stuart cause. At the height of his power, in 1658, he came to a sudden pause. Oliver Cromwell had died at the beginning of September; and the English nation was weary of Parliamentary Government in name only. Downing, as Ambassador, had of course to go into mourning out of respect to the late Lord Protector. And one realizes how deep his grief was and how this follower and professor of the Republican principles sorrowed when he wrote, "I endeavored to buy the mourning as cheap as possibly I could."

Richard Cromwell, son of the Lord Protector, was a man of peace. He knew the temper of the people and, in May 1659, stepped down and out, leaving Thurloe and friend Downing in perilous positions. Restora-

tion of King and Court was imminent. But Downing had cast an anchor to windward. By the simple process of double-dealing he had hounded some Royalists, yet given others (Charles included) an opportunity to escape. Going back to London, not knowing what would happen, he joined forces with Thurloe and went over to the Royalist cause. He secured an appointment in the Treasury. One of the clerks was Samuel Pepys. Downing returned to The Hague; and now confident that Monk with the Army and Montagu with the Fleet were going to uphold Charles, he fawned upon the near-King, and declared himself a victim of misplaced youthful confidence. "He had in his youth," so he said, "sucked in principles, that since, his reason had made him see were erroneous." This is the earliest estimate we have of the value of a four years' course at Harvard! He pleaded that he had never taken any oath against the King! Moreover if the King would pardon his past errors of judgment, he would work secretly with the Army where he had (so he said) considerable influence. Charles Stuart (now His Majesty Carolus Secundus) may or may not have applauded Downing's remarks on the value of Harvard culture. Probably for other reasons he overlooked the past and remitted the sins of the humble petitioner. Now comes the thrill in this drama of fickle fortune. Charles the Second conferred knighthood on our George, who is now Domino Downing indeed. The explanation is simple; both were practical politicians. £1000 changed hands. Rectitude was not of the essence of the contract.

Shortly after the coronation, Knight Downing was sent back to The Hague as Envoy Extraordinary, and was to be paid on a royal warrant £5 per day and travel expenses. This was not all, for such further sums as might seem necessary for spy work and private services were authorized. The Knight knew what he was expected to do and lost no time in entrapping and

abducting illegally by force and arms his old Colonel, who had trusted him. Okey and two other Parliamentarians or regicides, as they were now called, were betrayed, kidnapped and hurried aboard a ship in Delft harbor; then transported secretly to the Tower, tried, condemned, and executed. Pepys, who was somewhat of a Cromwellian himself when the Protector was alive, could not stomach this deed of Downing's. He rated Downing as "an arrant villain and ingrate."

Trouble had been brewing for years between the Dutch and English Trading Companies. A Navigation Act had been passed and treaties had been signed, but yet there was constant bickering; and Downing, as the business man at The Hague had many a tilt with DeWitt. New Amsterdam was a thorn in the side of the English and Charles gave his brother a patent, covering the land from the west side of the Connecticut River to the east side of Delaware Bay, including Long Island. The Duke of York, later James II, sent Colonel Richard Nicolls over to oust the peppery Stuyvesant. New Amsterdam becomes New York, September 8, 1664, and its phlegmatic burghers try to speak English. The Treaty of Breda, July 31, 1667, brings the war to an end; and the Dutch keep Surinam (Guiana), but let the English retain New York. Who persuaded the Dutch to do this, for they had the upper hand! Then another war, and in August 1673, the Dutch retake New York; and for a few months, the settlement is again Nieuwe Amsterdam; but the second treaty of Westminster, January 1674, gives it back to the English who take possession, November 1674.

Here is some of the correspondence between Downing and DeWitt.

In the Frederick Lewis Gay Collection in the Harvard College Library are several printed copies of the arguments between Downing and the States-General. Through the courtesy of that Library we produce some

specimen pages. In Downing's Discourse, dated April 7, 1665, we find this interesting paragraph. Perhaps he is right in saying that it was the custom of English settlers to buy the land of the natives; but to most of us, it is news. He upbraids the Dutch thus:

Moreover did not the last Governour of New-Amsterdam (so called) lately come with armed men to a certain English Town called West-Chester, within the bounds of the English Colonies, and where they had bought the land of the Natives (as is their Custome not to settle anywhere in those parts without first contracting with them) and by force compelled them to come under their obedience, and to pay them contributions, or else quit their dwellings in two months' time, and named the place Oostdorp.

The Dutch rejoinder seems rather personal:

It is hard to say whether the said Envoy do feign the ignorant or be so in effect . . . It would seem essential first of all for him [Downing] to specify these incursions and provocations, for it appears to the States-General of the Netherlands that they resemble those with which the sheep was charged when drinking of the stream it was supposed to have troubled the waters to such an extent that the wolf which came to drink felt so incensed that he deemed it sufficient reason to kill and devour the lamb. He ought to have stated in what these incursions, etc. consisted. Hence we conclude that the troubles mentioned are imaginery . . . This possession of Holland dates back forty or fifty years that being the earliest time at which possession was claimed namely the city and forts of Nieuw Amsterdam over forty years, and that of the forts of Orainge and Aesopus over fifty years ago all with their bordering lands and district and according to this same title England holds and possesses Nieuw Engelant as we on our side hold the New Netherlands; and further as the lands are wild and rough and uninhabited and belong to no one in particular they become the possession of those who might first occupy them.

On March 4, 1665, Charles declared war against the United Provinces. Both nations were at fault. "The

Dutch," as John Beresford says in his comprehensive biography, "The Godfather of Downing Street," "were at that time the most powerful nation in Europe for three simple reasons. They had sea-power, they had boundless wealth and they had a far higher level of intelligence and civilization than any other people."

There was bound to be a great sea fight between these two nations, each struggling for supremacy on the sea. On June 13, the fleets met off Southwold and the English, under the Duke of York, won a great victory. Downing left The Hague in August, although the Dutch had not molested him and Wicquefort says "he departed without paying his debts." He remained in London in 1671, practically Secretary of the Treasury. He had a better grasp of the problems of national finance than most men and might be called Godfather of the Bank of England. The Old Lady of Threadneedle Street is now 234 years old, being organized twenty years later. He advocated a National Bank. Clarendon opposed Downing's proposals, but the King favored them perhaps because the Bank would be under royal control. Downing was now one of the rich men of the Kingdom, drawing two princely salaries, getting large fees, and having a personal income of £20,000. About this time, he subscribed £5 English money to Harvard College. Perhaps another estimate of the value of a college education?

We come now to the third Dutch war, 1671, provoked by King Charles. He sent Downing to The Hague to pick a quarrel. Downing went and was soon suffering from megalomania. Both the King and Clarendon had to rebuke him for not carrying out their orders. He seems also to have played the coward and started home. Perhaps he was wise in preferring to keep his skin in London, rather than leave it in Amsterdam, for the Dutch mob did not spare even their own, tearing Jan DeWitt to pieces. On reaching London, Downing was committed to the Tower and had time to reflect for six weeks. Released from the Tower,

he served the remaining eight years of his life as a member of Parliament and as Commissioner of Taxes, still drawing salary.

He died July 1684. His will, a detailed document, carried little for charity and nothing for education. He forgot the struggling college overseas where he had in his youth "sucked in" erroneous principles. Ultimately the bulk of the money went for educational purposes in establishing Downing College, Cambridge University; but no thanks to Downing. Making full allowance for the times, and judging leniently, we must agree with Adams that he was a scoundrel. John Adams¹, always plain-spoken, refers to him as "this dog Downing." He never valued honor more than life. He was never valiant for truth. He was great only in a limited sense because he wrought much better than he knew, an unconscious instrument of fate in bringing about results which were for the good of many. But of true greatness there is little or no evidence. "For a man's greatness," says George Long in his translation of the *Thoughts of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius*, "lies not in wealth and station, as the vulgar believe, nor yet in his intellectual capacity, which is often associated with the meanest moral character, the most abject servility to those in high places, and arrogance to the poor and lowly; but a man's true greatness lies in the consciousness of an honest purpose in life, founded on a just estimate of himself and everything else, a frequent self-examination and a steady obedience to the rule which he knows to be right, without troubling himself, as the Emperor says he should not, about what others may think or say."

¹"Publications Colonial Soc. of Mass.," vol. 17, p. 128.

Copyright of Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society is the property of American Antiquarian Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.