

Address by His Excellency Baron Scheyven,  
Ambassador of Belgium to the United States,  
on Belgians' Contribution to American Civilization  
at Suffolk University, Boston, Massachusetts,  
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BELGIANS' CONTRIBUTION TO AMERICAN CIVILIZATION.

The motives that inspired my countrymen to come to America in the past are no different from those which impelled millions of Europeans to abandon their native land for these shores. They were either the spirit of adventure, the lust for land or gold, the search for freedom or the urge of religious beliefs. Each of these incentives has brought Belgians to America. Although it would be impossible to state with a certain degree of accuracy, in which proportions these four categories are represented, it is however quite certain that the Belgian immigrants to America did not and do not belong to that part of European humanity that Emma Lazarus so eloquently described as " your tired, your poor, your huddle masses... the wretched refuse of your teeming shore, the homeless, tempest-tossed....." They were as a rule not members of a suffering proletariat but rather, representatives of the lower middle classes.

Another preliminary observation to be made is that America never exerted on the imagination of Belgians the fascination it had for people who lived in extreme and dramatic poverty or under insufferable political tyranny. It is therefore not amazing that, in the ethnic mosaic of this country, the contribution of Belgium is a modest one, in fact one of the very smallest. It is improbable, although exact statistical material is not available, that more than 200,000 Belgians immigrated to the United States since 1820.

The influx of Belgians into this country has essentially been spontaneous. The first ones to arrive were eight families of Walloon origin, brought over to Manhattan by the West Indies Company of Holland. It has been scientifically established that those eight Walloon households were the very first permanent inhabitants of what is now New York. They were Protestants and had immigrated to Holland on account of their faith. They founded New York and, though soon engulfed by Dutch settlers, they continued listening to sermons in their own native tongue, French, for quite a number of years. May I add that the Walloon church services, founded by these settlers, still exist in New York. At the Battery, the tip of Manhattan Island, a monument was erected by the province of Hainaut to testify to their presence there. Once they had been assimilated, Belgian interest in America waned and it was not until 1830 that a constant current of immigration to these shores developed. The statistical material in this field is either lacking or inconclusive but so much is certain : Belgians began to arrive in America from 1830 on and their numbers increased year by year, the highest figures per year being 7,000. What attracted them here was free land because they nearly all were sons of large Flemish families for whom the possession of land was the symbol of well-being and the first stepping stone to prosperity. They found free land in Illinois, in Michigan, in Wisconsin. They also found an atmosphere of economic and social liberalism to which they were not accustomed but which they welcomed with enthusiasm. In the mid-nineteenth century, they fled for a few number of years

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the terrifying poverty of Flanders, that, although a proverbial land of plenty, had suffered from the potato blight that had also pushed millions of Irishmen to America. When in 1924 the United States established the quota system, it appeared that only 1,350 Belgians a year could immigrate. It is remarkable that many times after the Second World War this quota was not even filled.

There was a period, however, at the beginning of this century, when efforts were made by individual Cities and States in this country to attract my countrymen to America. On the other hand, Belgian Authorities, confronted with the problems created by the rapid and rather ruthless industrialization of the country, tried to organize emigration to this country. Envoys of southern States travelled to Belgium to recruit workers for the cotton mills; Belgian officials organized the departure of settlers to the Middle West. It is regrettable to say that these official American and Belgian initiatives failed completely while the current of immigration organized by priests or by shipping lines generally met with success.

At present, the larger Belgian settlements in America are to be found in Detroit, Chicago, Moline, South Bend (Indiana), Mishawaka (Wisconsin) and in New England, but in fact there are Belgians everywhere in the United States. If they do not vividly stand out, the reason is that they blend in so well with the kaleidoscope of races that compose America and that they adapt themselves to the American way of life

with the greatest of ease.

The figures I mentioned are, I confess, negligible and it takes some audacity on my part to claim your attention for a group so minute. If I surmount that feeling of modesty, if I request your attention for Belgians' contributions to American civilization, it is on account of the fact that, in this country's past as in its present, my countrymen have played a role far out of proportion to their numbers and have succeeded in making their mark on America as it is now.

I am quite sure that the speakers who preceded me on this rostrum and those who will follow me, have all pointed out with pride or will do so, the fact that the United States is the result of the technical, economic and spiritual efforts of scores of foreign nations. Critical of America, as they may be at times, all Europeans take pride in America, for here they find their most ambitious dreams translated into reality : a Nation composed of the elements of forty Nations and made into a whole that works harmoniously, that prospers and that influences the world's destiny. To have contributed to this political and human miracle entitles a Nation to a certain pride.

Let me first point to the fact that my countrymen have been the most outstanding publicity

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agents for America there ever were. Forty years before the Pilgrims landed on Plymouth Rock, a Belgian engraver and publisher, Theodore De Bry, of Liège, published the very first pictures revealing the American scene and aborigines of Virginia and Florida; in London, he brought to light the pictorial description Jacques Le Moyne had made of the Huguenot Settlement in Florida, that dates from 1562, and of that by John White, who represented the Virginia Colony in 1585. It is remarkable how De Bry in his foreword to the second book judges the native population of these parts :

" Although these savages have no knowledge of the true God and of His holy word, and are without learning, yet they surprise us in many things. Their way of eating is far more wise and moderate than ours, and they show the greatest ingenuity in making, without the aid of any metal tool, such fine and delicate articles as can hardly be believed." This utterance indeed does not show much of a colonialist's spirit. It is through De Bry's publications and the very accurate engravings he made of John White's and Jacques Le Moyne's water-colors, that Virginia and Florida became centers of attraction in the Western World.

Publicity-wise, to use a repulsive but practical neologism, Father Louis Hennepin, a

Franciscan from the small Belgian town of Ath, who lived from 1640 to approximately 1701, did even a better job. He was the first to reveal to the world how one of America's main tourist attractions looked : in one of his books on America, he published an engraving showing the grandeur of Niagara Falls for the first time. Although his second book, Nouvelle Découverte d'un très grand Pays situé dans l'Amérique- he means Florida- must be taken with more than a grain of salt,- some say even with an entire bushel- there is no doubt that he discovered and faithfully described a considerable part of the Mississippi, that he was the first white man to reach the site of Minneapolis, a city that has recognized his merits by erecting a statue in his honor and by giving his name to a county.

His prose is somewhat of the pure Madison Avenue type :

" I have discovered new countries, which may be justly called the Delights of the New World. They are larger than Europe, watered with an infinite number of fine rivers, the course of one of which is over 800 leagues long, stocked with all sorts of harmless beasts and other things necessary for the convenience of life and blessed with so mild a temperature of the air, that nothing is wanting there to lay the Foundation of one of the greatest empires in the world."

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If Hennepin has not discovered the mouth of the Mississippi, as he claimed, it may be said that at least he advertised America in a fantastic way, for in a short time his books went through sixty editions in different languages.

The knowledge of the Northwest and the Rockies has also been considerably increased by another Belgian priest, Father De Smet, a Jesuit missionary who lived forty years in the Mid and Far West and who was a prodigious and indefatigable writer.

Between 1821 and 1870, Father De Smet never travelled less than a few thousand miles each year through largely unknown country. The conditions in which he travelled were appalling; he described them as follows in one of his letters in which he told how he finally made peace with Sitting Bull :

" I was in the mountains two years without tasting bread, salt, coffee, tea or sugar. I was for years without a bed, without a roof. I have been without a shirt on my back for six months and spent whole days and nights without a morsel of anything to eat, not even a drop of water to quench my parching thirst. "

His merits in the pacification of the West are historically recognized. He pacified the Indians of upper Missouri; in 1868, it was alone through his influence that the Sioux were induced to meet the commissioners of the American government and to enter into



a treaty of peace. His statue stands in St. Louis.

We may well conclude that Belgians have made a valuable contribution to the knowledge of the geographical aspects of large sectors of America and that a man of iron character and considerable diplomatic endowment like Father De Smet had his share in opening the West to civilization.

To what extent have my countrymen influenced American culture ? Have they brought their beliefs, their habits, their feasts, their cuisine to this land? As far as their religious convictions are concerned, it may be safely said that they were in the absolute majority of the Catholic faith and that they strengthened Catholic influence wherever they settled- mainly in Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin and in parts of New England. Their influence in this realm let it- self be felt through literally thousands of clerics of different orders who founded parishes, organized monasteries and convents practically all over the States. If Catholicism is one of the components of the American heritage, it certainly is indebted to my countrymen, clerics and laymen alike.

Are there typical Belgian habits that have been transplanted in America? The number of Belgian colonies in this country do not hide their appreciation of good beer, but, although my compatriots in the homeland are the champion beer drinkers in the world, the consumption of that brew can scarcely be claimed to be a unique distinction. The adjective " Belgian " in conjunction with a noun is not very common in American parlance. However, let us take note of Belgian

bricks, which are not bricks but quarry stones, Belgian hares, rather weighty animals whose meat is highly appreciated by Belgians, Belgian horses, whose usefulness is constantly being diminished by mechanical devices, Belgian linen, which is known everywhere as well as Belgian endives, which have found their way to the American kitchen and dinner table.

If we cannot claim to have profoundly influenced the ideas of America, we can nevertheless point to the fact that our countrymen who migrated to this country never had any trouble integrating themselves in the democratic system and habits of this land because democracy was their old-age heritage.

Our influence in the artistic field, however, made itself felt in a marvelous way, for not only did our people migrate, but the products of our immortal painters came over in great numbers as well. There is no museum, great or small throughout the States, that does not show, with genuine and justifiable pride, a number of paintings by Flemish primitives or by painters of the school of Rubens, Van Dyck, Jordaens and others, and it would be worthwhile to make a study of the impact of our famous surrealist painters René Magritte and Paul Delvaux on American art. This is not so much besides the point as it may seem because there was a time, slightly half a century ago, when the criterion of noble painting in this country, was a resemblance to the art of Rubens. You will excuse me, I hope, for referring entirely out of context to the triumphant impact made on American juke box music by

that charming Dominican nun, Soeur Sourire, whose songs have enchanted millions of listeners.

In the field of science, the traces of Belgian influence are much more visible; they are even evident. We may mention the fact that Detroit's transportation system originated with Karel Vandepoele, the inventor of the first trolley-car, and who inspired Thomas Edison in the invention of electric light.

There is no need, I think, to dwell at length on the great technical achievements of Louis Baekeland, from a village near Ghent, the undisputed father of the plastics industry and the inventor of bakelite. He was, like Socrates, "a mid-wife of ideas", because, thirty-seven years after his original invention, his basic principle had given rise to about two thousand combinations.

It will forever be a reason for Belgian gratitude that America permitted one of Belgium's greatest scientists to unfold his talents to the full. I refer to the brilliant achievements of George Sarton, another native of Ghent, who for forty years devoted himself to the history of science at Harvard University and whose publications in that field fill several shelves in any scientific library. With "An Introduction to the History of Science", Sarton became the historian of science here. Originally, he was a linguist versed in ancient languages, but his interest directed him to the study of science in antiquity. Therefore, he absorbed the knowledge of mathematics, geometry, medicine, astronomy and

many other disciplines in order to master his favorite subject. This unique combination of the linguist and the scientist unequivocally qualified him for what he became : the historian of science. There was seldom a more universal man in the world of science. His contribution was not made to America alone; it was world-wide, but let us never forget that it was this country which put at his disposal the leisure and the material means to accomplish his exceptional destiny.

In fact, Sarton loved your country and let me quote from one of his later books " The New Humanism " the following :

" Humanities are inseparable from human creations, whether these be philosophic, scientific, technical, or artistic and literary. They exist in everything to which men have imparted their virtues or vices, their joys or sufferings. There are blood and tears in geometry as well as in art, blood and tears but also innumerable joys, the purest that men can experience themselves or share with others. "

In recent years, we may point to the important contribution made in the field of missiles by Antwerp-born Karel Bossart, who is considered the father of the Atlas Intercontinental Ballistic Missile.

Let me mention the name of Captain Gaston De Groote highly skilled seaman, who was selected in 1960 to command the N/S SAVANNAH which is - as all of you well know - the world's first nuclear-powered cargo-passenger ship.

I could not refrain from also mentioning the name of Edgar Sengier, former Managing Director of the Union

Minière du Haut-Katanga, who died a few months ago.

With remarkable foresight, Sengier shipped to New York, shortly before the German invasion of Belgium, the uranium ore which was in Belgium at that time. Later on, Sengier gave orders for all the uranium ore at hand at the Union Minière mines in the Congo to be sent to New York, and this represented about one thousand metric tons.

In his fascinating book "Men and Decisions", Admiral Lewis L. Strauss, former Chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission, narrates how on the very day that Japan surrendered, General Groves who was in charge of the Atomic Weapons Project, took Sengier to the White House and introduced him to President Truman as the man "without whose assistance the Manhattan Project would not have been possible."

Last but not least, I want to mention the name of Mr. Albert Navez, Honorary Consul of Belgium in Boston, who was hailed, a few years ago, as the best science teacher in the United States. Why? Because, in a competition in which 25,000 American highschool boys took part, the first two prize winners were Albert Navez' pupils.

It would be rather amazing if such a small community as that of the Belgians, would have made its influence felt in the realm of American politics. There are indeed a few political figures on the municipal and state level who played a role, especially in the Middle West, but it was only in the pre-Civil War years that one of my countrymen took an active part in that phase of American politics which

concerned the problems dividing the States. I refer to the scientist Houzeau de Lehaie, from Mons, who lived in this country for nineteen years and who at one time was so deeply engaged in politics that he nearly paid for his passionate interest in the affairs of the Union with his life. He was opposed to slavery, before the War between the States, and took part in the organization of the so-called underground railway that helped southern slaves escape to the North. In Philadelphia, he published a newspaper that defended the rights of Negro slaves and he was also active in New Orleans. The role he played during the Civil War has not yet been carefully studied but it is certain that his life was endangered several times on account of his liberal and humanitarian ideas. Let us hope that history will some day do him justice.

Please allow me, before closing my remarks, to summarize as follows the thoughts I tried to convey to you: I would utterly lack in modesty if I pretended that America's shape and contents have been definitely influenced by the activities of my countrymen. I hope though that I have not been boastful and that the relative pride that I have shown was commensurate to the merits of those men and women who have come from Belgium to this New World in the hope of making it a better world, an enterprise in which, with the help of others, they have succeeded.