The Open Court

A MONTHLY MAGAZINE

Devoted to the Science of Religion, the Religion of Science, and the Extension of the Religious Parliament Idea

Editor: DR. PAUL CARUS.

Assistant Editor: T. J. McCormack.

Associates: { E. C. HEGELER. MARY CARUS.

VOL. XVI. (no. 10)

OCTOBER, 1902.

NO. 557

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RICHARD WAGNER.

From a drawing by Franz Von Lenbach; owned by Frau Cosima Wagner.

Frontispiece to The Open Court.

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RICHARD WAGNER.

BY E. P. EVANS.

MORE than twenty years ago a German physician and psychiater, Dr. Puschmann, then residing in Munich, Bavaria, published a study of Richard Wagner, in which he endeavored to



View of Wagner's House Wahnfried in Bayreuth. From a photograph by Bruckman.

prove that the distinguished composer was suffering from a variety of mental disorders and especially from that peculiar form of insanity called *Grössenwahn* or megalomania. The publication of such a pamphlet during the life-time of the person subjected to so

ruthless dissection was denounced as impertinent and in very poor taste even by those who thought there might be some truth in it, and did not add to the reputation of its author, who, if he had treated Ludwig II. of Bavaria in the same manner, as he might have done with far better right, would have been convicted of lesemajesty and sent to prison, "There's such divinity doth hedge a king," even when his wits begin to turn.

The evolution of the musical drama and the growth of public appreciation of it since 1873 have also rendered many of Dr. Puschmann's statements not only wrong, but ludicrously wrong, and sapped the foundations of the reasoning by which he arrived at his startling conclusions. Thus we are told that a characteristic symptom of megalomania is a sort of psychical degeneration, which is often the forerunner of more deep-seated disturbances of the intellectual powers. The patient is in a state of exaltation, entertains extravagant notions of his own importance, and indulges in strange illusions concerning his own personality, believing himself to be a prince or prophet, a reformer and redeemer of the world, and cherishing impossible plans and projects, the execution of which seems to him perfectly easy. This hallucination becomes more intense and absorbing in direct proportion to the decay of the intellectual faculties, so that when the afflicted man imagines himself to be a god, he is really a hopeless idiot.

Dr. Puschmann quotes several authorities in confirmation of his general diagnosis and then proceeds to make a practical application of it to the case in question. Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg, Tristan und Isolde, Rheingold, and the rest of the tetralogy, so far as then completed, are adduced, not only as indicating sad aberrations in artistic taste, but also furnishing conclusive evidence of psychical deterioration and decrepitude. With the exception of occasional echoes of his earlier works, they are all said to bear the stamp of mental mediocrity, hastiness, incompleteness and "wild dilaceration," and are very far from reaching the height attained by Lohengrin and Tannhäuser, being "both in substance and form, in text and tone, ill-favored, shabby and slipshod." "If Wagner once unjustly pronounced Rienzi an 'artistic sin of his youth,' we should like to know what judgment he would pass upon his most recent productions; for the artist is evidently extinct in him and only the ambitious and imperious courtier remains." Dr. Puschmann even grows melancholy over the result of his researches and exclaims in a minor strain of sentimental regret-"Alas, the Wagner we loved is dead; he expired with the swan-song in Lohengrin; and the form which we now see before us is that of an unhappy and imbecile old man, to whom we listen with compassion as he painfully seeks to revive faint reminiscences of the departed master." The anxiety of our humane and tender-hearted psychiater is not confined to the illustrious lunatic himself, but generously extends to his deluded disciples, who have

"eaten of the insane root That takes the reason prisoner,"

and are rapidly becoming candidates for bedlam. He expresses the hope that his admonition may be heeded by those who are not already incurably infected and that they may thereby be freed from this amazing infatuation and through sobermindedness recover soul's health.

It would be hardly necessary to call attention to this queer little treatise, which, if ever read by its author in the light of subsequent events, must have an extremely depressing effect upon his mind, were it not for the completion and recent translation into English of Max Nordau's Entartung (Degeneration), in which Richard Wagner, Henrik Ibsen, Leo Tolstoy, and Friedrich Nietzsche are chosen as the most conspicuous illustrations of his theme and the most striking examples of modern degeneracy and mental decay. Nordau's allegations and analyses do not differ essentially from Puschmann's, but he makes a more sweeping application of them, stigmatising nearly the whole intellectual evolution of the present time, especially in its literary and artistic development, as "degenerate," and selecting the representative men just mentioned as the most painful exemplifications of this decadence. Wagner, however, stands in this respect supreme and is declared in not very elegant phraseology to be "full-laden with a greater mass of degeneration than all the others put together." He discovers in the famous composer distinct marks or "stigmata" of this morbid condition, that are astonishingly complete and quite "uncanny" in their rankness and rancidity. Of course, these abnormal manifestations are all pathognomonic symptoms of the central malady megalomania or what in common parlance would be called inordinate and chronic self-conceit. Springing from the taproot of egotism and ramifying in various directions are such secondary indications of mental disease as excessive subjectiveness. the fixed idea of being unappreciated by the public and persistently persecuted by unknown enemies (Verfolgungswahn), emotional eccentricity showing itself in confused and quixotic notions of philanthropy and impossible schemes of social and political reform,

anarchism, erotomania and semi-religious sentimentalism, intense contumaciousness and opinionativeness, "graphomania" vulgarly termed scribbler's itch, cacoethes scribendi in an aggravated form, resulting in the lack of logical continuity of thought, flightiness and the oracular utterance of bombast and balderdash.

Having thus formulated his accusations Nordau proceeds to substantiate them by a bitter and extremely invidious criticism of Wagner's works, denouncing them as obscene and debasing and denying that they give the slightest evidence of creative genius or of genuine musical talent. He deems it very creditable to the native simplicity and moral purity of the German nation that Wagner's operas can be represented on the stage without exciting a storm of indignation. "How innocent must be the matrons and maidens, who can witness these pieces without turning fire-red and sinking into the earth for very shame! How guileless are the husbands and fathers, who permit their wives and daughters to be present at the theatrical performance of such bawdy scenes! Evidently they find nothing offensive in the conduct of these persons, and have not the slightest conception of the feelings awakened in them, the meaning of their words and actions and the end they have in view. In a less naïve and childlike public no one would venture to lift his eyes to his neighbor or be able to endure his glance." The enjoyment of these musical dramas by the cultivated classes of other nations, including the French, would imply that they too are still living in a state of primitive innocence. Of course there are exceptions everywhere, like our author, persons of superior culture and intimate knowledge of the world and demi-world, whose scent of obscenity has grown overkeen and to whom the purest things savor of nastiness. The accusation that Wagner glorifies incestuous passion on account of the relations of Siegmund to Sieglinde in Die Walküre is a criticism as absurd as the assertion that his cannot be "the music of the future" because his themes are taken from a remote and legendary past. Deductions of this sort imply an amazing confusion of ideas and lack of logical discrimination. Indeed it may be justly questioned whether this tendency to discuss art and literature from a psycho-pathological point of view is not in itself symptomatic of "a mind diseased."

It is not the purpose of the present paper to vindicate the character of any of these men, whether mystics, or neocatholics, or preraphaelites, or symbolists, or other degenerate scions of German romanticism, as Nordau calls them. Whatever may be the essence and influence of "Tolstoy-ism" or the merits of Nietzsche

as a philosopher; whether Ibsen's dramatic creations are real men and women or mere homunculi conjured into semblance of life by a cunning magician, "theses on two legs" intended to illustrate certain extravagant theories of their author; whether Wagner is a born poet, musician, and dramatist, or merely a superior playwright endowed with the picturesque imagination of "a first-class historical painter" and a marvellous talent for the scenical grouping of costumed lay figures in imitation of life, are all of them subjects proper to critical investigation, but lying wholly outside of the province of the psychiater. Let us take the case of the composer, to which Nordau gives special prominence, and try to trace in outline the course and continuity of his intellectual and artistic evolution.

* *

Richard Wagner was a peculiarly interesting, if not altogether admirable, character. Unfortunately his real personality has been greatly obscured and distorted by the persistent efforts of his friends to conceal, and of his enemies to magnify, his faults. He was a Saxon by birth and possessed in a marked degree the physical and mental qualities which distinguish that branch of the German race and are due in part to an intermixture of Slavonic blood. He was eminently typical of the stock from which he sprung, just as Bismarck is the foremost representative of the Prussian or Brandenburg type with a possible tinge of Vandal blood in his veins.

Wagner was a man of low stature with a large and remarkably intellectual head, an abnormally long occiput, a lofty brow finely arched, a protuberant nose of the aquiline type, rather deep-set eyes, high cheek-bones, a firm but somewhat sensual mouth, and a strongly projecting and exceedingly stubborn chin, which seems to have been a family heirloom. His body, which was of the average length and breadth and evidently planned for a person of middle size, was supported by short and slender legs, quite elegant in themselves, but not suited to the superincumbent frame, so that the whole figure resulting from this union of incongruous parts produced an unpleasant impression of squattiness. When seated he looked like a gentleman of ordinary dimensions, but underwent a surprising transformation and dwindled into comparative dwarfishness as soon as he rose to his feet. He was uncommonly agile and far more athletic than many a giant; in his youth he was an accomplished gymnast and age did not destroy his muscular vigor and elasticity; in his sixtieth year he could turn somersaults and stand on his head with as much ease as when he was a schoolboy at the Kreuzschule in Dresden.

The photographs taken at different periods of his career naturally vary in expression, since they represent passing phases in his many-sided development. In this respect there is a marked contrast between "the counterfeit presentment" of the revolutionist in Dresden, the fugitive in London, the exile in Zurich, the royal favorite in Munich, and the world-renowned denizen of Bayreuth enjoying the realisation of his artistic ideals in a cosmopolitan circle of incense-burning worshippers. It is in the portrait of Hubert Herkomer that the permanent traits which form the essential character of the man are most completely and harmoniously combined and can be most satisfactorily studied.

Wagner was constitutionally good-natured and tender-hearted, as shown in his conspicuous kindness to animals and in his readiness to relieve the necessities of his fellow-men even at the sacrifice of his own material comfort, never failing to share his bread with the hungry, although he might not have a penny with which to buy another loaf. His capability of strong and enduring attachment is beautifully exemplified by his ardent and adoring affection for his mother. The shabby treatment of his first wife presents a less pleasant picture of this side of his nature; and it is one of the most pernicious and persistent effects of his wrong-doing that his biographers have systematically traduced the lady as the best means of extenuating his conduct towards her. It is doubtless true that Frau Minna did not fully appreciate the genius of her husband and failed perhaps to understand the immense significance of his musical and poetical achievements, but she was by no means the simpleton than many Wagnerites would fain make us believe her to have been, and in the complicated relations of private and public life showed herself in several important instances far superior to him in keenness and clearness of insight. It is also to Wagner's credit that he never sought to palliate his desertion by depreciation of her and resented any attempt of flatterers to disparage her in his presence. It would be well if his admirers would imitate him in this ex post facto loyalty, which is good so far as it goes.

Wagner's extreme sensitiveness rendered him easily excitable and somewhat touchy, and in later years, as he grew nervous from overwork, degenerated into a chronic irritability that made him at times anything but a cheerful and congenial associate. This morbid irascibility was aggravated by an equally morbid ingenuousness and utter lack of consideration for the conventional cour-

tesies and diplomatic arts and polite evasions, which lubricate the machinery of society and diminish the friction incidental to conversational intercourse between positive and pertinacious opposites. In this respect he was the very antithesis of the urbane and well-bred Liszt, whom he frequently embarrassed by his blunt behavior and painful plain-speaking and the unconscious perverseness with which he thwarted the cleverest attempts to turn the current of discourse into less perilous channels.

A prominent trait of Wagner's character was an utter contempt of money inconsistently combined with an intense love of the luxuries which money alone can procure. It was not the philosophical indifference of the sage nor the ascetic aversion of the saint that inspired him with so deep disdain of filthy lucre, but a constitutional want of common thrift and an eager desire to gratify extravagant tastes, which he was ever ready to indulge to the utmost limit of his own pecuniary means or of the generosity of his friends and patrons; in short he was in such matters a queer union of Skimpole and Sardanapalus. He hated the sight of the "pale metal" and hastened to get rid of it as soon as possible without the slightest thought of an economical provision for the future. He had a feminine fondness for rich attire and the lustre of silk and satin, adorned his rooms with costly furniture, gorgeous hangings and rare objects of virtù and declared that a sumptuous environment was essential to give an elevated tone to his thoughts and to put him into the proper frame of mind for the creation of his musical dramas. It was this passion for finery and ostentation of grandeur that led superficial observers to look upon him as a clever charlatan and to speak of him as a "musical Cagliostro"; but nothing could be more unjust than such a judgment.

Numerous attempts have been made by Wagner's countrymen to trace the successive stages of his evolution as a man and an artist and to discover what the Germans call his *Weltanschauung*, a concise and convenient term for the philosophical lenses through which he was wont to view the universe at different periods of his life and from which his conceptions of it took form and color. The most elaborate and comprehensive effort of this kind is Dr. Hugo Dinger's biographico-philosophical work to be completed in two volumes, of which only the first has as yet appeared.¹

Herr Dinger divides Wagner's career into two principal periods: that of his bondage to operatic traditions and conventionalities and his struggle out of them, extending to 1849, and that of

¹ Richard Wagners geistige Entwickelung. Von Hugo Dinger. Leipzig: Fritzsch. 1892.

his artistic independence, extending from 1849 to his death in 1883. It is hardly necessary to state that such a chronological periodification cannot be strictly correct and must be accepted and applied only in general terms. It is impossible to measure spiritual growth in this way or to define the limits of intellectual development by hard-and-fast lines of demarcation. Besides the evolution of the mental faculties determining the individual's advancement in different directions is seldom coetaneous and symmetrical; progress in one department of thought does not imply a corresponding progress in another department of thought, just as Strauss was a radical in religion and a conservative in politics.

In early life Wagner's religious creed was a sort of musical mysticism, which he himself characteristically summed up as follows: "I believe in God, Mozart, and Beethoven." This comprehensive confession of his faith was not a mere jeu d'esprit, but a serious declaration of the inestimable value and the extreme importance which he attached to music as a divine revelation. Elsewhere he exclaims: "Three cheers (Dreimal hoch!) for music and its high-priests! Eternally revered and adored be the God of joy and happiness, the God who created music! Amen!" His conception of the Deity seems to have been that of an infinite Beethoven, who composed and now conducts that sublime and ethereal cosmic symphony, the music of the spheres, and has sent great creative musicians into the world as his inspired apostles and truest interpreters. Gradually he came to regard himself as the predestined prophet of this exalted Being especially commissioned to proclaim the glad evangel of the music of the future and to exhort men everywhere to turn from the trivialities of French and Italian operas and to receive the new gospel of the musical drama.

Like all mystics, Wagner was inclined at this time to follow the leadings of the spirit and had strong faith in the efficacy of prayer, not only as an edifying and elevating influence, but also as an actually wonder-working power. Thus Rienzi fervently entreats the "Almighty Father" to endue him with strength for the accomplishment of his mission and not to permit the work which he has undertaken to perish from the earth; Elsa's pure orisons are answered in the form of an immaculate and invincible knight of the Holy Grail hastening to her rescue; Lohengrin bends his knee in mute suppliance on the shore before his departure, thereby calling down the miraculous dove from heaven and breaking the evil en-

¹ A Pilgrimage to Beethoven. With Portrait of Beethoven. By Richard Wagner. English translation. The Open Court Pub. Co.

chantments of the sorceress Ortrud; the prayer of Elizabeth at the Virgin's shrine saves the polluted soul of Tannhäuser, overruling the hard decision of the pope, who had declared his sin to be unforgivable. In Wagner's journal and other records of his early life, as well as in his poetic and musical compositions, the mystical virtue of prayer is everywhere assumed and constantly acted upon. He describes the pilgrim to Beethoven's home as fasting and praying two days before venturing to enter the house of the revered master; and here, as in the earnest and sublime prayer of the Roman Tribune, he gives utterance to his own devout thoughts and feelings. During his first stay in Paris he suffered all sorts of privations, and was once reduced to such destitution as to be compelled to subsist upon roots, which his wife dug in a suburban forest; but love presided over his "dinner of herbs" and consoled him for the absence of the "stalled ox."

It is said that Frau Minna was driven by stress of poverty to ask alms on the Boulevards; a grocer to whom she applied for aid and who did not know that she was married, tried to take advantage of the necessities of the handsome young woman, but on learning the true state of the case was inspired with a nobler and more generous admiration and supplied her gratuitously with food for her household as a reward for conjugal devotion and fidelity. It was this faithful woman whom Wagner had the heartlessness to repudiate as soon as he began to be celebrated, because he thought she failed to comprehend the greatness of his genius and the grandeur of his artistic creations, and whom his overzealous followers have been busy in slandering ever since. Meanwhile Wagner felt deeply humiliated in being compelled to earn such sour and scanty bread as he could by composing gallopades, quadrilles, and pieces for the cornet-a-piston and selling them for what he could in a market already glutted with wares of this sort.

These distressful circumstances naturally served to stimulate and strengthen his religious emotions, which, more or less blended with his passion for music, often rose to enthusiasm, taking a visionary and ecstatic character and pouring itself forth in a medley of pious and poetic rhapsody. In his Pariser Fatalitäten für Deutsche, first published in the periodical Europa (1841, III., p. 433 sqq.) under the pseudonym W. Freudenfeuer and reprinted in the Bayreuther Taschenkalender for 1892, he says: "It is a glorious thing to be a German sitting cosily at home with Jean Paul and discussing Hegel's philosophy and Strauss's waltzes over a mug of Bayarian beer;" but the life of a struggling artist in the

French metropolis proved to be a very different matter. Such a pitiful career is portrayed in Ein Ende in Paris, purporting to be the autobiography of a striving and starving German musician, in which Wagner describes in the form of a novel his own aspirations and adversities and what threatened at one time to be his own unhappy fate. He sums up his own firm though fantastic faith in the words uttered by the dying hero of his story, who exclaims: "I believe that I shall be rendered supremely happy by death. I believe that I was on earth a dissonance, which after my bodily dissolution will be resolved into a glorious and pure accord. . . . I believe that the true disciples of our sublime art will be transfigured into a heavenly unison of bright and balmy tones and be eternally united with the divine source of all harmonies."

Nothing was more common than for Wagner to give utterance to these transports of joy and hope in a prospective life of perfect bliss beyond the grave free from all the discords and deficiencies incident to the present state of existence. It was not until he read Ludwig Feuerbach's little volume entitled "Thoughts on Death and Immortality" that he underwent a sudden revolution of thought and violent revulsion of feeling on this subject, completely losing the faith which had comforted and consoled him under the severest trials and which as the pervading motive of Tannhäuser finds its purest and most poetical expression in Elizabeth's prayer and Wolfram's song to the evening star.

As early as 1834, when Wagner was only twenty-one years of age, he strongly sympathised with the radically democratic and socialistic aims of the secret association known as "Young Europe." As the fermentative period in German literature known as "Storm and Stress" took its name from Maximilian Klinger's drama Sturm und Drang, so Heinrich Laube's novel Das junge Europa was greeted as the gospel in which the spirit of this international and cosmopolitan movement was most fully embodied and most freely and fearlessly expressed. The German branch of this revolutionary organisation, of which Mazzini was the founder and director, was called "Young Germany" and numbered among its members Wienbarg, Gutzkow, Mundt, Stifter, Laube, Heine, Börne, and Auerbach. The aim of the secret league, which was controlled by a central committee at Paris, was to establish an international republic or United States of Europe on a democraticsocialistic basis. In Germany the movement took not only its

¹ Gedanken über Tod und Unsterblichkeit. First published anonymously at Nuremberg in 1830.

name, but also its moral tone, from Laube's novel, which taught as the true philosophy of life a cynical, frivolous and lascivious hedonism, the gratification and glorification of what was called "genial and healthy sensuality," and sought in this sort of "freedom" the individual and political regeneration and salvation of the race.

Wagner was a warm personal friend of the author of this fantastic and licentious fiction and became an ardent apostle of the new scheme of human redemption, to the proclamation of which in the domain of music he now devoted himself with passionate enthusiasm. He had already written The Fairies, a shallow and utterly conventional production in the romantic style of Weber and Marschner, which since his death has become the exclusive property of the Munich stage, where its success has been due solely to the splendor of the scenic decorations and must be regarded as a tribute to the theatrical genius of Lautenschläger rather than to the musical genius of Wagner. It was under the powerful influence of the ideas and aspirations of "Young Europe" that he composed his second opera, "The Interdiction of Love" (Das Liebesverbot), which he himself afterwards justly characterised as "a wild, revolutionary, recklessly sensuous transformation of Shakespear's serious 'Measure for Measure.'" This work, which in its decidedly indelicate treatment of an extremely delicate subject is scarcely more than a coarse caricature of the English play, has never been printed or represented on the stage and is known to the public chiefly through references made to it by Wagner in the first volume of his "Collected Writings" (pp. 20-31). A brief critical analysis of the plot is also given by Dinger, who had an opportunity of studying the entire opera in a manuscript copy revised by the composer himself and now the property of Professor Kietz of Dresden.

In Laube's novel one of the principal characters expresses his firm conviction that all nationalities will gradually disappear and give place to a universal cosmopolitan republic, one and indivisible, —a visionary prospect, the realisation of which is about as probable as that all languages will die out and be superseded by Volapük. As this ideal was to be attained by the diffusion of political liberty through the establishment of liberal constitutions, and as France had already advanced farthest in this direction, it was thitherward that the faces of "Young Europe" were turned radiant with hope. Wagner confesses that Germany seemed to him at that time "a very small part of the world," "the schoolroom of Europe," as he called it, a nursery of theories, for the practical application of

which they looked to Paris. It was therefore quite natural and almost inevitable that Wagner should renounce his early enthusiasm for Beethoven as narrow and provincial, and that his second opera should be musically a mere echo of the favorite French and Italian masters, Auber, Bellini, Rossini, etc. It was under the same strong impulse that he soon afterwards wrote "Rienzi," which he intended to be represented at the Grand Opera at Paris, and which both in conception and execution marks the culminating point in this transition period of his artistic development. With this rash and quixotic purpose in view he sailed from Riga in 1839 and after a long and tempestuous voyage, during which, as the ship was driven by the storm along the Scandinavian coast, he heard for the first time from the sailors the weird legend of "The Flying Dutchman," he reached the French capital, the goal of his eager desires and destined to be the scene of bitter disappointments.

In Paris the illusions which he had so fondly cherished were as quickly and completely dispelled as were those of Luther on his pilgrimage to Rome. His artistic instincts revolted against the unartistic and conventional dilettanteism and degrading commercial spirit, which surrounded him on every side and looked down with disdain on his loftiest ideals. His letters written at this time reveal his profound disgust at the prevailing state of things. Art, he says, is the mere handmaid of politics, and the director of the Grand Opera holds his place as a sinecure for services rendered to the ministry. The holy of holies in this temple of the Muses is the ticket office; all persons connected with the theatre, manager, singers, musicians, souffleurs, scene-shifters, and claque are alike animated by the sole and absorbing purpose of making money. The only composer whom he did not find kneeling in abject worship before the shrine of mammon, was Berlioz, who paid the penalty of his independence by almost utter neglect. The vocal gymnastics of Italian tenors, the chief of whom, Rubini, then the favorite of the Parisian public, excited the wildest enthusiasm by his famous trill on B, provoked Wagner's intense disgust and convinced him that there could be no true development of dramatic music so long as it was overladen with fioriture and specious flitter of this sort. "If I should compose an opera answering my idea, people would run away from it, for they would find there no arias, duets, and trios, and none of the stuff with which operas nowadays are patched together, and what I should put in the place of them no singer would sing and no public would listen to." Here we have perhaps the first clear and concise statement of his conception of the musical drama, together with a certain fearful looking forward to the manner in which it would probably be received.

Meanwhile he wrote "The Flying Dutchman," the ghostly mariner, whose fruitless search for his long-lost home symbolised Wagner's own revived longing for his native land. This work marks an epoch in his career and is the forerunner of a new era in the history of German music, not on account of any striking peculiarity or originality of composition, for in this respect it is essentially a romantic opera in the style of "Der Freischütz," but be-



THE FLYING DUTCHMAN.

After a painting by Hermann Hendrich.

cause of the nature of the theme, which powerfully impressed his imagination and turned his thoughts towards that wonderful world of German legend, whose treasures it was henceforth to be his artistic mission to rediscover and reveal. His cosmopolitanism, which was in reality only a thinly disguised Gallomania and usually found expression in some high-flown galimatias, now gave place to an ardent and emotional patriotism, which he frankly confesses he had never before felt or even dreamed of and which he declares to have been free from every political tinge.