

HOW DID CHARLES E. PERKINS ACQUIRE HIS CONSCIENCE?

The Cunningham—Overton Collection of the personal papers of Charles Elliot Perkins, (1864-1907), railroad leader and President of the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad from 1881 to 1901, provides the graduate student with a unique opportunity to work with primary documents which must rank high in credibility in any historian's estimation, composed as they are of intimate letters and lengthy memoranda intended for an audience of one or two, or for the personal satisfaction of the author himself. The only weakness in the collection is the laudatory nature of the published volumes of family letters edited by his daughter, Edith Perkins Cunningham, and the almost total lack of public or professional criticism one might expect to find in contemporary journals or newspapers, a situation that arises out of Perkins' success in disposing of opponents and assiduously avoiding publicity of any kind.

My problems in handling this material were manifold. To begin with, I have difficulty writing out a cheque correctly, never mind coming to grips with the intricacies of stocks, bonds, debentures, interest payments, and so on, connected with any large business enterprises. As for the details of running a railroad, I can barely recognize a train when I see one, and am by no means fascinated when I do. (Though I must confess that I did spot a C. B. & Q. freight car abandoned in the yard of my home-town, and a moving sight it was!) Like any good historian then, I was forced to select a topic consistent with my limitations and shortcomings. Cleverly abandoning any detailed aspect of the man's career that I could not understand, I was left with the man himself.

And a curious man he was! Though formally uneducated, (and deeply sensitive about it) he wrote with a force and clarity which few scholars achieve and read far more widely than one would imagine likely in the case of a pragmatic railroad executive on his way up. He was naturally ambitious and used his special relationship with John Murray Forbes, his influential mentor, to great advantage. Yet, he exhibited a genuine sense of right and wrong in everything he did, remained conscious of his moral shortcomings, and early developed his natural sense of responsibility into an abstract loyalty to the C. B. & Q.,

a fact which clearly separates him from the kind of irresponsible speculator or ruthless rising manager who was interested only in his personal aggrandisement. His business philosophy went no further than the robust laissez-faireism of Adam Smith, and in this he was typical of his time. However, he extolled Smith on moral as much as economic grounds, arguing that independence built character, and good character was the most important single thing in life. Government regulation, pension plans, all socialistic schemes, were evils, not because they interfered with freedoms guaranteed by the sacred Constitution, but because they robbed the individual of the drive necessary for self-improvement, and so corrupted him. Strikes he believed to be a sin born of ignorance, for the corporation was an abstract entity, not a person, and therefore it was quite impossible to replace personal charity with corporate kindness. But funnily enough, Perkins did his best to run the C. B. & Q. in exactly the opposite manner, insisting that his officers treat the men under them with dignity and, above all, justice, and at one point going so far as to suggest to the Boston Group that each man have his wages increased or lowered according to an individually agreed upon contract. He often used arguments that sound suspiciously Social Darwinist in form and tone. Yet, he never referred to Spencer or Sumner, who were in their hey-day during the latter part of his career, perhaps because his notion of survival of the fittest was based upon the Biblical injunction that man shall reap what he sows, a conception that owed nothing to a pseudo-scientific law of natural selection. Moreover, he did not regard man as being basically good and therefore, infinitely perfectible, but rather looked upon him as being a thoroughly bad creature who could become good, (if he could become good at all,) only if, by free individual effort, he attained the level of material success necessary to leisure, education, and enlightenment. Perkins emerges from this welter of convictions as an arch-conservative who rejected much of what the conservative thought of his time was using to justify its high position in life, and who somehow united Old Testament Christianity with modern materialism, sounding, in the process, not unlike an Old Testament prophet haranguing the misbegotten masses.

My researches soon revealed that his personal life was even more confusing than his professional life. He was a firm parent who stressed discipline and order in the smallest matters and thoroughly despised the irresponsible habits of excessively

rich families. Yet, he was not above purchasing a silver-studded hat for one son, and using his personal influence against a school principal who was trying to expel another. His own father was a complete enigma — a dreamer, a thinker, a misplaced intellectual in a money-making merchant family, who escaped to Cincinnati to engage in a full, though financially unrewarding, career, involving writing, preaching and charity work, who won great personal renown without ever seeking it, who enjoyed a rich and warm family life with a woman of unusual character and understanding, and who committed suicide in 1849, leaving a wife and five children close to destitution. Perkins' mother did her best to carry on, avoiding all mention of the tragedy, surrounding her brood with all the love and affection she could muster, and instilling into all of them (especially Charles, her oldest,) a strong sense of responsibility and a profound concern for sound character. Perkins claimed that he owed her everything, but revealed to his fiancée that he could not love her, had never loved her, or felt that she loved him.

By this time, things had gone from bad to worse as far as I was concerned. The more I knew about Perkins, the less I could say with certainty about him. Nothing seemed to fit. Confidentially, I was beginning to hate the man, and viewed my colleagues' earnest pursuit of the mysteries of Medieval History with considerable envy. And then, quite by accident, I stumbled upon Max Weber's "The Spirit of Capitalism and the Protestant Ethic," and, subsequently, Schneider's "The Puritan Mind," and I discovered, praise be to Allah, that these trustworthy gentlemen had written my paper for me. The Protestant Revolution's rejection of authority that stimulated independence, the Calvinist's conception of worldly success as a sign of grace, the early American Puritan's struggle with a harsh environment that convinced him real evil lay outside of, rather than within, himself, the Great Awakening's emphasis on direct communion with God that created new, self-defining kind of morality, all fit Perkins to the proverbial "T," for his grand-parents on both sides of the house had been imbued with the Merchant-Minister values of Puritan New England, his parents exemplified the preaching and teaching of the Puritan tradition minus its attendant commercialism, and it only remained for Perkins to add to it the practical principles of Benjamin Franklin. Using these

ideas, it was possible to explain his individualism, his independence, his constant worry about the state of his character, his belief in materialism, his objections to socialism, his profoundly paternalistic family life, his basic pessimism regarding man's nature, his sense of stewardship, his intense loyalty to the company he served and to the man he so admired, and his genuine allegiance to the virtues of hard work, discipline, justice, and generosity. It was brilliant! I only wish that *I* had thought of it. Even more gratifying, it was in no way at variance with the findings of my colleagues, Tom Tanner and Hugh Johnston, who tomorrow will provide you with some fascinating examples of the actual operation of this peculiar point of view.

The whole experience has been a fascinating intellectual exercise in peering into a personality's past, using the standard historical techniques of observation, analysis, arrangement, and other historians' ideas. But, some nagging questions remained, and still remain. Had I revealed Charles Elliot Perkins to the contemporary world in all his beauty and complexity, or had I, sharing a background somewhat similar to his, simply psycho-analysed myself? And did my revelations have the slightest significance for anyone else, with the single exception of my longsuffering instructor, Dr. Richard C. Overton, whose interest in this material is apparently limitless? And perhaps more important, what would Perkins himself, who never would have approved of such personal prying in the first place, have said about it all? Would he have even understood it? On a more personal level, was I, a confessed ignoramus in matters of business, at all competent to comprehend, and make judgements upon, a businessman? Was I justified in assessing the moral content of his ideas according to a non-business, not to say anti-business, point of view? And according to what set of values was I to assess them — according to my own, or to those I imagine to be contemporary to me, or to those of Perkin's time, even though they can be only imperfectly understood? And most vexing of all, the documents reveal what the man thought. But do they reveal clearly why he thought it? Can the thought *behind* the thought be pursued by anyone? And if it can, should the pursuer be an historian?

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