

Brief Note

**From Thoreau to Confucius,
via Abingdon, Virginia**

Jim Glanville

© 2013

Introduction and Commentary

This brief note reprints an obscure article published 102 years ago by the Massachusetts historian Charles Francis Adams titled “From Thoreau to Confucius, via Abingdon, Virginia.”

In 1907, a Presbyterian minister, R. V. Lancaster, from Abingdon, Virginia, learned through reading the *Christian Observer* that the president of the Massachusetts Historical Society, Charles Francis Adams (during a lecture at Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Virginia, in 1907) had erroneously attributed to the essayist and poet Ralph Waldo Emerson an allusion by the philosopher Henry David Thoreau.

Lancaster, who had been for many years a missionary in China, read the writings of the philosopher Confucius in Chinese and knew them well. Lancaster recognized Thoreau’s allusion for what it was, a Confucian quote, and wrote to Adams explaining the origin of the allusion.

Charles Francis Adams was reelected president of the Massachusetts Historical Society at the society’s meeting on the afternoon of Thursday, April 14, 1910, when he also read his paper “From Thoreau to Confucius, via Abingdon, Virginia.”¹ In this paper, Adams explained how he had come to be corrected by Pastor Lancaster and later discovered where in the works of Thoreau the allusion originated. As told by Adams, it is a straightforward story that speaks for itself.²

The present author stumbled on the Adams article by pure accident. It is published in the same volume of *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* where Adams writes about a topic of interest to the author: Daniel Morgan and the Virginia riflemen he led during the Revolutionary War. Morgan commanded his riflemen at Boston, Massachusetts, in the summer of 1775. Naturally, a table-of-contents-listed article with “Abingdon, Virginia,” in its title demanded attention.

Today, we are in the middle of a hardly noticed but incredibly broad revolution in the manner in which we are able to study history. The buzz phrases that characterize this revolution are “digital history” and “digital humanities.” The revolution is conceptually simple: enormous amounts of existing literature are going online in digital, searchable formats. Databases for history include the public ones such as Google Scholar, Google Books, and Google itself. Scholarly history data bases accessible to library patrons are JSTOR, the Historical Newspaper data base, the ProQuest data base, Historical Abstracts from EBSCO, and many more. The revolution is accelerated and given impetus by historians who are active in the arena of “social media” such as blogs, and Twitter, and LinkedIn.

However, it is not just a matter of access, it is the manner in which access to digital materials makes possible the writing of works of historical overview and synthesis that simply could not have been undertaken just a few years ago. Properly conducted searches bring together themes and threads that non-digital historians would need lifetimes to uncover with paper and microfilm research. Digital materials can also resurrect long-lost articles relevant to “History West of the Blue Ridge,” such as the one transcribed below.³

I conclude, as Adams did long before me, “The thing, in my opinion, deserves a place among the Curiosities of Literature; and I take the present occasion for giving it one”

Charles Francis Adams’ 1910 Paper, Transcribed

Sixteen years ago I had occasion to refer to John Winthrop and his connection with early Massachusetts, in a paper I then read before the Society.¹ In doing so, I made use of this quotation: “The virtues of a superior man are like the wind; the virtues of a common man are like the grass; the grass, when the wind passes over it, bends.” I had come across it in reading one of Thoreau’s volumes; and, struck by its mystic, Eastern turn, I now applied it to Governor Winthrop. In thus making use of what impressed me as a novel as well as striking figure of speech, I merely put it in quotation marks, omitting any reference to the book in which I had seen it. The so doing afterwards cost me both time and trouble; for my only recollection was that I had found it somewhere in Thoreau. But Thoreau’s writings are, in every sense of the term, somewhat scattering; they also fill a considerable number of volumes.

This was in 1894. Thirteen years later I was asked to deliver an address before the Washington and Lee University, at Lexington, Virginia, on the observance by it of the Centennial of the birth of General Robert E. Lee. Incidentally, let me observe that the circumstances connected with my delivery of that address are referred to

in yet another paper, also to be found in the printed Proceedings² of the Society. When preparing the Lee centennial address, the quotation I had years before used in connection with Governor Winthrop recurred to me. In view of General Lee's great moral influence with his people, it seemed equally applicable to him; and its harmony with the spirit of the occasion in which I was to take part, was apparent. I therefore again made use of it; and on this occasion I made use of it not only once, but twice. It served as a key-note on the first page of my address; and I repeated it at the close, in way of a benediction.

As I have said, when I used the quotation first, in 1894, I made no note of the source whence I drew. When I next

¹ 2 Proc. VIII. 409. ² 2 Proc. xx. 551-556

used it, I simply took it from my own earlier production, giving it no further thought. I vaguely associated my borrowed figure of rhetoric with Thoreau; but had no idea where Thoreau found it, though I suspected Emerson. It is Emersonian. It moves with his rhythm, and his spirit pervades it.

My surprise was great, therefore, when, among a number of letters which came to me shortly after, in connection with the Lexington occasion, I one day received the following:

ABINGDON, VA., Feb. 1, 1907.

DEAR SIR, – Being a scholar, I feel sure, you will not be offended at my addressing you this note.

Prof. Hogue, of Washington and Lee University, gives an account of your address there in the current number of "The Christian Observer." He says, "He closed with this quotation 'from a disciple of Emerson'": then follows the quotation about the relation of the superior man to the inferior like the wind and the grass, when the wind blows the grass bends.

Now this idea in almost the exact form given is found in "The Analects of Confucius." Of course I do not know whether Prof. Hogue quoted you correctly; but I do know that if through inadvertence you have made a mistake you do not wish to continue it....

Hoping you will pardon me for my seeming impertinence in this letter, I am, Sir, with great respect, Faithfully yours,

R. V. LANCASTER.

More than a good deal taken aback by this disclosure of unconscious erudition, I at once wrote to Mr. Lancaster, frankly expressing my surprise at the information given me, and stating my own surmise that the quotation, if it had not actually originated with Thoreau, went back, at furthest, only to Emerson. I then expressed the curiosity I felt to know more of it. In due course of mail I received a second letter from the same source as the first, from which I extract the following:

Your cordial letter of the 4th inst. has just come to hand. I thank you for it, and for the copy of the Address, which will arrive later.

I am now pastor of the Presbyterian Church at this place; and, fifteen years ago, was a Missionary to China. I have read the “*Analects of Confucius*” in the original. The copy usually studied by all containing Dr. Legge’s translation and notes is a costly book, and I never owned one. The “*Analects*” do not treat of any subject consecutively, but in the method of arrangement would remind one of the “*Book of*

Page 474

Proverbs” or the “*Thoughts of Pascal*.” About the time of my retirement from work in China I used large pains in preparing a lecture on the teachings of Confucius as found in the *Analects*. In that lecture, which was never published but which is now before me, the quotation stands in the following connection: A certain ruler asks: “What do you say to killing the unprincipled for the good of the principled?” Confucius replied: “Sir, in carrying on your government why should you use killing at all? Let your evinced desires be for what is good, and the people will be good ... The relation between superiors and inferiors is like that between the wind and the grass, when the wind blows, the grass must bend.

And again the Master said: “He who exercises government by means of his virtue, may be compared to the North Polar star, which keeps its place and all the stars turn toward it.”

There are dozens and dozens of striking sentiments throughout, e. g. “Learning without thought is labor lost – thought without learning is perilous.” Of a certain one he said: “That man knew well how to maintain friendly intercourse – the acquaintance might be long but he showed the same respect as at the first.”

While this is not answering your request for a reference to chapter and verse, I hope it will show that I speak from the point of view of having learned.

I feel that students would be greatly interested in this mine of Oriental wisdom, but a parson in a small town is hardly the one to tell them so.

My curiosity was now thoroughly aroused, and I at once set to work to find out where, in Thoreau's writings, — for in my recollection the quotation was inseparably associated with Thoreau, — the extract from Confucius could be found. The search, it goes without saying, was somewhat in the nature of the proverbial looking for needle in hay-stack. I utterly failed to find any trace of what I looked for. At that time (1907) the firm of Houghton, Mifflin & Co. was bringing out a definitive edition of Thoreau's works, in twenty volumes; and I went so far as to go to its office, there meeting Mr. Garrison and Mr. F. H. Allen, the editor of the new edition. I asked them if they could aid me. Neither Mr. Garrison nor Mr. Allen had any recollection of such a quotation or figure of speech in Thoreau; nor, for that matter, anywhere else. Not a suggestion even was forthcoming from either.

Time passed, and I had despaired of ever locating my elusive quotation. Yet in the nature of a puzzle unsolved, it perpet-

Page 475

ually recurred to me; and, several times, I took down some volume of Thoreau, turning over its pages, in vain search for that I never found.

I had given the thing up as hopeless — a game not worth the candle — when, on the afternoon of the 21st January of this year, I took a local train on the Fitchburg road for Lincoln where I live. The car chanced to be somewhat crowded, — fortunately, as it turned out, for me; but I presently found our associate Mr. F. B. Sanborn occupying an entire seat, on his way also to his home in Concord, the town adjoining Lincoln; so I imposed my company on him. In the course of a somewhat animated conversation, drifting aimlessly from one topic to another, we got upon Emerson's early diary, now in course of publication, and from that naturally passed on to Thoreau; and, it then occurring to me, I mentioned my long sought for quotation. Mr. Sanborn is, as we all know, a sort of walking cyclopædia of odds-and-ends of miscellaneous information; and he now proceeded to justify his reputation in that respect, at once telling me that I would find what I sought at the close of a chapter in Thoreau's "Walden," and that Thoreau there stated that the quotation was from a Chinese philosopher, mentioning no name. On getting home, I at once turned to my copy of "Walden," and there, sure enough, at the

close of chapter VIII., I ran my quarry to earth. Still, Mr. Sanborn was in error!¹ Thoreau had not in any way indicated the source whence he drew, merely giving his quotation, duly marked as such, in the following shape:

You who govern public affairs, what need have you to employ punishments? Love virtue and the people will be virtuous. The virtues of a superior man are like the wind; the virtues of a common man are like the grass; the grass, when the wind passes over it, bends.

Meanwhile, it so chanced, that, shortly before, I had seen an English publication advertised, entitled "The Sayings of Confucius." A copy of this I had procured; and in it on examination I was now fortunate enough to find my quotation in two different places.¹ It there appears in the following form:

¹ Nation, May 12, 1910, 481.

² The Wisdom of the East Series, edited by L. Cranmer Byng and Dr. S. A. Kapadia. John Murray: London, 1907, 32, 42.

Page 476

Chi 'Kans Tzu questioned Confucius on a point of government, saying: Ought not I to cut off the lawless in order to establish law and order? What do you think? – Confucius replied: Sir, what need is there of the death penalty in your system of government? If you showed a sincere desire to be good, your people would likewise be good. The virtue of the prince is like unto wind; that of the people, like unto grass. For it is the nature of grass to bend when the wind blows upon it.

I presume I stand not alone among the members of the Society in having, on more than one occasion in life, lost sleep over the effort to locate some quotation which had stuck, so to speak, in memory's crop; and in the locating of which not Bartlett, nor Harbottle, nor Walsh, nor King, nor any other collector of such, afforded assistance or supplied a clue. These, my fellows, will sympathize in the relief I experienced when what had so long eluded search at last was found. My first gleam of light had none the less come from an unexpected quarter; for I hold it to have been a most curious coincidence that a poetical figure of speech, found in Thoreau's works and assumed to be taken from those of Emerson, should be correctly placed by a modest Presbyterian clergyman, living in an obscure village nestled in the Virginian Alleghanies,¹ as attributable to Confucius, of whose writings in their original tongue that clergyman had long years before been a

student in China. The thing, in my opinion, deserves a place among the Curiosities of Literature; and I take the present occasion for giving it one in the Proceedings of this Society.

¹ Abingdon, a place of some thirteen hundred Inhabitants, is the county seat of Washington County, on the Tennessee line, in extreme, southwestern Virginia.

Page 477

Endnotes

1. Anonymous, "President Adams is Re-Elected: Massachusetts Historical Society holds Annual Meeting," *Boston Evening Transcript*, Friday April 15, 1910, page 12.
2. Charles Francis Adams, "From Thoreau to Confucius, Via Abingdon, Virginia," *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 43 (October 1909-June 1910), 473-477.
3. The transcription here reproduces the original paper's punctuation, capitalization, etc. The original paper is readable at the short link <http://goo.gl/cQsYT>.
