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WHEN PARIS WAS IN FLAMES
Gleanings from the Letters of Eugene Lee-Hamilton

By Harvey T. Lyon

Eugene Lee-Hamilton, elder half-brother of Violet Paget ("Vernon Lee"), left Oxford University in 1869 and entered the British Foreign Office. He received his orders on February 18, 1870—orders which have the informal charm of a diplomatic day now surely dead for ever: "Lord Clarendon thinks that you would suit His Majesty's Embassy at Paris very well and hopes that H. M. E. at Paris will equally well suit you." Accordingly, the twenty-five-year-old Lee-Hamilton proceeded to Paris, arriving just in time to be a spectator of the Franco-Prussian War.

His letters to his mother—autographs which are now in the Colby College Library—give a first-hand account of events in the French capital during and after the war.

When (after the death of Violet Paget in 1935) these letters came to the attention of her friend Maurice Baring, he exclaimed:

"They are sublime! I regard it as one of the most precious human documents I have ever read: the contrast between the events and the comments. When Paris is in flames and the Embassy moves to Bordeaux, ... Eugene Lec-Hamilton says, "We are dreadfully overworked; I had to work a whole forenoon! ..." There is nothing in Dickens to beat it. They must be published. It is like having Pecksniff's account of the Reign of Terror.

"Sublime" though they may be, the letters are far too long, often too trivial, and too sentimental, to justify publica-
tion; but it is possible to cull from them a journal-like account of the progress of the war and of its violent aftermath; and however Pecksniffian the comments may be, they enable us to feel ourselves present in the besieged and eventually ruined city.

The war was barely a month old when the Germans had defeated two French armies and had trapped a third, the largest of them all. Lee-Hamilton's account begins with his letter dated August 17, 1870:

Paris is still perfectly quiet. But we are utterly without news. It is quite incomprehensible. There must have been a great battle the day before yesterday, yet we hear nothing.

August 26, 1870.—There is no longer any doubt. The Prussian Army is advancing on Paris. The Parisians were told so this evening by the Government, and the fact is fully confirmed in every way. What will be the resistance made I know not—the event will show.... The Prussians would scarcely stake their cause on such an enterprise if it were a hopeless one.

August 31.—The Government seems to expect a siege, as one order after another respecting it, appears on the walls. Today it is an order for the demolition of all houses in a certain zone round the fortifications. It is melancholy to see the number of wagons coming into Paris laden with furniture..... I have been employed the whole morning at the Prefecture de Police in getting out a man... imprisoned by mistake.... The French see spies and Prussians in every one....

September 2, 1870.—Just as I was going to write.... I was sent off to the Prefecture de Police to get an Englishman out who had been arrested by mistake as a Prussian spy a second time within a week.

September 5.—We shall remain here as long as possible. And perhaps even in case of the Prussians storming we shall remain. The Embassy is out of reach of shells, being in the very center of Paris. I hear there has been some fighting in the neighbourhood. The Prussians are within a walk of the Fortifications, and we have distinctly heard the blowing up of the bridges round Paris.

Paris itself presents a curious appearance. Enormous numbers of Gardes Mobiles are being drilled in the Champs Elysées, many of the streets are turned into regular camps, and the Tuileries are used as a Cavalry camp. Every man is in uniform, and Paris seems to have really made up its mind to perish rather than be taken.
Three days later, Paris was completely cut off. The Government fled to Tours, and thither the British Embassy followed it. The citizens of Paris dug in for a winter siege, one that was to last 130 days. From Tours Lee-Hamilton wrote:

September 18, 1870.—Events have succeeded each other with such astonishing rapidity that one has become familiarized with the marvelous, and it loses its power on the mind. But when one places oneself in the position one was in before the war, just two months ago, it seems incredible. The French Army utterly annihilated, 140,000 French with fifty generals Prisoners in Germany, the Emperor a prisoner and dethroned, the Republic established, Paris besieged, and the British Embassy at Tours!

October 17, 1870.—The utter disorganization of this miserable country is evident in every department of public life; and yet, strange to say, never has the French tendency to organizing been more apparent. . . . The English are getting more and more hated, as the French say we are looking on while France is murdered.

October 31.—The news of the capitulation of Metz was only published here (Tours) yesterday though we had known it for four days. It was made known in the proclamation . . . which is only the last of a series of inflated and mendacious productions of the same sort. . . . I am sorry I have not kept . . . all the proclamations which have appeared from the beginning of the War; they would . . . have formed a very lucid history of it, as well as a record of impotence and humbug.

On January 28, 1871, Paris, starved out, capitulated. The Germans permitted an armistice in order that a French National Assembly might be elected to discuss peace terms. This assembly met at Bordeaux, and, since that became the seat of the French government temporarily, the British Embassy established itself in that city. Eugene Lee-Hamilton attended the turbulent meetings of the Assembly, and his letter describing a session of this extraordinary body is one of his best:

March 4, 1871.—I was present at the sitting of the assembly yesterday. Imagine a very large Opera House lit up with gas though it is the afternoon. The whole of the pit . . . consists of closely packed
Deputies, each apparently making a speech on his own account, and foaming slightly at the mouth. On the stage which is hung with red cloth a tribune has been erected, from which a member is addressing the Assembly which doesn’t listen to him. Above the Speaker in a sort of box over the tribune, is the President ringing a brass bell and crying “Faites silence, Messieurs!” But no one takes the least notice of him.... Near the stage.... you can distinguish Victor Hugo, with a silvery beard.... The President at length obtains a sort of silence, during which he reads out a letter from Rochefort and three other irreconcilable deputies... tendering their resignation, as they will no longer sit in an Assembly which has “sold France to the Prussians.” At this there is a tremendous tumult; the right shout “Bon voyage!” and the left shake their fists and gnash their teeth, while the President rings himself black in the face.... The most melancholy feature of the whole position is perhaps that M. Thiers, although commanding a large majority in the Assembly, is the only man of marked ability, patriotism and good sense in France; and he by his age belongs to a past generation.

Thiers eventually had the difficult, heart-breaking job of negotiating with the triumphant Bismarck. The final treaty was signed at Frankfort on May 10, 1871.

Meanwhile, another problem arose to beset the defeated nation. The government refused to move back into Paris. In March it set up its offices in Versailles. Thousands of Parisian workingmen were quickly roused to a burning rage against what seemed to them to be a cowardly and inhuman affront. An insurgent “Commune of Paris” was formed, and, when troops of the Versailles government attempted to enter the city, they were thrown back by a mob. A civil war ensued, marked by brutal activities on both sides. Eugene Lee-Hamilton, at Versailles, thus describes the conflict:

May 22, 1871.—I have arrived just in time for the great denouement, it seems.... The Army forced its way into Paris yesterday, and a great battle is raging there today.... The Insurgents are apparently bombarding Paris from Montmartre, and we are very anxious for the safety of the Embassy and its inmates.

A great fire can also distinctly be seen to be raging in the neighbour-
hood of the Tuilleries. Here at Versailles there is of course tremendous excitement ... great crowds in the street.

May 23.—I drove up to Mendon yesterday afternoon, a place whence one has a view of Paris very similar to the view of Rome from the Villa Mellini. The distance is about the same, and you see Paris extended below you just as we saw Rome so lately. All the houses immediately within the ramparts are reduced to a state of ruin impossible to describe. ... The whole quarter looked as if it had been ground in some gigantic coffee-mill. No roofs, no walls, no insides, no outsides, nothing but streets of the most absolute detritus. At my feet the Seine wound placidly through the city ..., and I could see all the bridges by which we walked so happily last summer. ...

May 24.—I fear there will be very little of Paris remaining by tomorrow, judging by the devastation of yesterday. The Louvre and the Tuilleries are burning, the insurgents having set them afire. ... The Madeleine is being battered to pieces. ... The Embassy has been much injured. ... Montmartre was carried yesterday at the point of the bayonet. The fighting was tremendous in the Champs Elysées. ... The Insurgents have set all the public buildings on fire.

May 25.—The Tuilleries, the Hotel de Ville, all the Rue de Rivoli between the Rue de Luxembourg and the Rue d'Alger ... are all burnt down. ... There is a tremendous smoke hanging over Paris.

A week later Lee-Hamilton entered Paris. Less than a year had passed since he had left it, but in that time, especially in the last few weeks, more damage had been done to the city than has since been done by two World Wars.

June 6, 1871.—I spent two or three hours in Paris yesterday. ... When I arrived at the Madeleine ... I understood the terrible catastrophe that has happened to Paris. The greater part of the Rue Royale was gone. I could not believe my eyes. I looked in vain for the entrance into the Faubourg St. Honoré. ... I looked up the Rue Castiglione and saw the wretched pedestal of the Colonne Vendome, but no column. Of the Tuilleries there remains a sort of outer shell, but you can look through it like the coliseum, and the fine central dome has disappeared. Altogether the walk was inconceivably dismal.

A year later, Eugene Lee-Hamilton received orders to accompany Lord Tenterden to Geneva, to assist in the arbitration proceedings over the “Alabama” dispute be-
tween Great Britain and the United States, and was then able for a while to turn his back upon the sad spectacle of Paris in ruins.

Until his collapse into paralysis in 1873, Eugene Lee-Hamilton was no poet. His letters, although they are usually intelligent, often incisive, sometimes vivid, almost nowhere show sympathy, the sense of involvement, the color and sparkle of detail, of a budding poet. Eventually, as a poet, he penetrated far beneath the surface of his prose personality, but the conflict in him—Pecksniff versus poet—was never resolved. These letters, then, are the calm before the storm.

THE NUREMBERG CHRONICLE

By James Humphry, III

In December of 1491, a group of influential citizens of the free city of Nuremberg, Germany, entered into an agreement to produce a book that would surpass any other published since printing with movable type was invented. In the summer of 1955, some four hundred and sixty-four years later, a trio of generous Americans made it possible for the Colby College Library to own a copy of this book. The distinguished Americans to whom I refer are Mr. Harris A. Dunn, Mr. Gano Dunn and Mr. James A. Healy, all of New York. Through the generosity and thoughtfulness of Mr. Harris Dunn and Mr. Healy, the book I am talking about has been presented to the college in memory of Mr. Dunn's late brother, Mr. Gano Dunn, an internationally famous New York engineer, whose grandfather, Nathaniel Dunn, graduated from Bowdoin College in 1825 in the same class with Henry W. Longfellow and Nathaniel Hawthorne. In 1947 Mr. Gano Dunn received the honorary degree of LL.D. from Bowdoin.