

AN
ORATION,

DELIVERED

JULY 4, 1819,

AT THE REQUEST OF THE SELECTMEN OF THE TOWN OF

BOSTON,

IN COMMEMORATION

OF THE

Anniversary of American Independence.

BY FRANKLIN DEXTER.

BOSTON:

PUBLISHED BY JOSEPH T. BUCKINGHAM,
NO. 17, CORNHILL.

VOTE OF THE TOWN.

AT a meeting of the freeholders and other inhabitants of the town of Boston, assembled at Faneuil-Hall, on Monday the 5th day of July, A. D. 1819, 9 o'clock, A. M. and then adjourned to the Old South Church—

VOTED,—That the Selectmen be, and hereby are appointed a committee to wait on **FRANKLIN DEXTER, Esq.** in the name of the town, and thank him for the elegant and spirited Oration this day delivered by him at the request of the town, upon the Anniversary of American Independence, in which were considered the feelings, manners and principles, which produced the great national event, and the important and happy effects, general and domestic, which have already, or will forever, flow from that auspicious epoch; and to request of him a copy for the press. Attest, **THOMAS CLARK, Town Clerk.**

ORATION.

If we meet this day from feeling and not from habit, and if we would devote it to better purposes than ostentation, we shall find more appropriate modes of celebrating it than merely triumphing in our Independence, or anticipating our future grandeur. Indeed it is time that we had done with much exultation: it suits neither our condition nor our character. We are not emancipated slaves, but the sons of freemen; and we should celebrate the establishment of our rights as we should enjoy them—with sobriety and dignity. Intemperate joy would seem like a reproach on our fathers. We may be allowed to feel proud of the spirit that produced the revolution; and we can hardly be extravagant in our admiration of it—it is the most glorious vindication of liberty on record. But our liberties were not won by it; for they had never been lost—it was but a struggle to preserve them

in which we were compelled to take on us the dignity and responsibility of an independent nation. And we may rejoice that we are so ; but if we realize the importance of the trust, it will be with a joy chastened at least by solicitude.

And even if our Independence had been the commencement of our liberty, still we have had it long enough to feel it calmly, as an inheritance and a natural right. Nor will exulting in it help us to preserve it : we may more safely trust for that to our common habits and every-day feelings, than to occasional bursts of national vanity. There is even danger that by the unrestrained indulgence of it, we shall rather lose than gain in our practical attachment to liberty : we may acquire a habit of calling ourselves free which shall at last stand for the reality of freedom ; and valuing ourselves too much on what our fathers won with so arduous a struggle, we may forget that our task of preserving it is hardly less difficult.

And if it be our destiny to go on increasing as we have done, we shall not hasten our march by gazing on its future glories. Powerful—irresistible, natural causes are at work to make us a great people, and we shall have done our part, and all we can do, if we take care to plant firmly our own footsteps—if we endeavour to understand rightly and value soberly our high and peculiar privileges,

to strengthen our old institutions and preserve our old principles. Our growth will be rapid enough; let it rather be our care to make it sound than sudden.

There is no plainer truth than that no system of society can be supported without a knowledge of the principles on which it is founded. And these principles are rarely abstract maxims of policy and government. Civil society is too complicated a machine, made up of too many independent springs to be governed and preserved by general laws. The wisest constitution that ever was framed would fail of its effect, if it were not adapted to the character of the people—if it had not grown out of their habits and followed rather than attempted to lead them. Good government never sprung but from good principles. And they who are in possession of it, if they would preserve it, must take care to conform to the character of its founders. If you would secure to yourselves, and transmit to your children, the free and happy institutions of your ancestors, you must study their history, and be familiar with their principles. Let this day never pass without a recurrence to them—let no event of the present or anticipation of the future wholly exclude them from your remembrance. It is true that nothing which touches your interest as a people is foreign from the celebration of the

anniversary of your Independence—a day when you are to examine the state of your liberties, as well as to rejoice in their establishment; and no consideration should turn you aside from doing this freely and boldly. But let it always be done with reference to the principles to which you owe them; let them be the standard by which you are to compare and correct your opinions and conduct; and then only may you safely congratulate yourselves, when you find they have not been deserted.

The subjects I am directed to consider are the *feelings, manners and principles* that led to our revolution; and I cannot characterise them better than by saying they were those of freemen. The Colonists became independent because they had always been free; for it is only by the long enjoyment of liberty that men could be formed for a contest so difficult and dangerous. The love of liberty was their ruling passion; and though they disclaimed any wish to be independent until they solemnly declared themselves so, they were always actuated by a spirit that could not leave them long dependent on a foreign power. It was a clear understanding of the principles of civil liberty, and an ardent attachment to it, that were the sole and consistent causes of the revolution. Not the mere impatience of oppression, that sometimes wakes even a degraded people to resistance, to avenge

their wrongs, rather than to assert their rights ; which groans and struggles in confinement, till there is no longer any thing to be lost—and then breaks out in violence and uproar, not to change the government, but to annihilate it ; not to redress the evils of society, but to sweep away society itself. We have seen such a revolution, and we may be proud that ours had nothing in common with it. We have seen a great nation shaken to its foundations, and bursting like a volcano only to shower down destruction on itself ; leaving its colossal form dark, bare and blasted, with no grandeur but its terrors. Such was not our revolution ; but like the fire in our own forests, not scattered by the hand of accident or fury, but deliberately applied to the root of the growth of ages, which tottered and fell before it, only that from its ashes might rise a new creation, where all was green and fair and flourishing. The world has learned by these experiments that civil liberty is not a mushroom, that grows up in a night from the fallen and rotten trunk of despotism, but a hardy plant that strikes deep, in a sound soil, and slowly gathers strength with years, till oppression withers in its shadow. Our present situation is a living proof of the difference of the two events. Liberty never yet was the work of an outraged and incensed populace ; as well might a whirlwind plant a paradise.

Our revolution was not the result of such desperate feelings ; its authors were not driven to it, but chose it voluntarily as the least of evils, where there was still a choice. They felt indeed, that they were deeply injured ; for they asked only the rights of Englishmen, and those were denied them ; but they were not yet wholly oppressed ; they had still much to lose. They did not turn under the actual pressure and smart of injustice, for they had borne much heavier evils than that which was the immediate cause of their resistance. But they saw that their liberties were formally and deliberately invaded ; that parliament was establishing principles of oppression, that would fall heavy in practice on their children ; and they felt they had no right to endure it. It was not a sudden popular discontent, for their course was gradual, calm and temperate. They were patient under suffering, while it was possible that the evil might be accidental and temporary ; but when they found they must resist, they did not wait to be trampled on.

Nor was it a wild, ambitious wish of Independence without regard to its necessity. We could not wonder if such a feeling had taken strong hold of a few adventurous exiles, thrown on a new world, whose rocky grandeur and forest wildness seemed the natural abode of liberty, and where

there were none to dispute their possession. If they had had a particle of the selfishness of ambition, what dreams of independence and aggrandizement might they not have indulged! "The world was all before them where to choose"—and they chose to sit down quietly under the shadow of their old country and constitution—dependent on that government which had driven them from their homes. Their whole character and history contradict the supposition that they ever aspired to independence, till they found they could not be free without it. And during the long struggle for liberty that preceded the declaration of independence, though perhaps a few leading spirits foresaw the necessity of the measure, and were willing to meet it, it never was the wish of the people. Their repeated declarations of loyalty were as sincere as the complaints with which they were mingled. They had had opportunities enough of throwing off their allegiance if they had wished it; but they were faithful to England through both her revolutions; they were equally loyal to Charles and the Commonwealth—to James and to William. Every thing shows that they separated from England, not because they were strong enough to resist her, but because she excluded them from the privileges of union. Undoubtedly there is a time when the strength of a

distant colony gives it a right to independence, because the purposes of society and government are best promoted by it; and if our revolution had not been precipitated by the violent measures of the English government, we should probably have separated before now; peaceably, if England understood her own interest, or forcibly in the exercise of the right to independence we had gained with our strength. But that natural period of separation had not arrived when the colonies were compelled to take their liberties into their own hands; for if their strength had been sufficient without the assistance of a foreign ally, they were still too little united to justify the experiment while they enjoyed the protection of the English constitution. But when that failed them, they would not deliberate whether they had strength and union enough to resist, or whether they should wait till they had acquired them; for a few years of oppression would have extinguished in the people the spirit that alone could carry them through a revolution; that enlightened spirit of liberty that pervaded their feelings, manners and institutions, and produced a character even more remarkable than their destiny.

For when we speak with admiration of our revolution, we do not mean that it is wonderful that a few scattered colonies, determined to be independ-

ent—though with no bond of union but their common wrongs, and no resources but the perseverance and patriotism of individuals, inhabiting a country of vast extent, with a wilderness of refuge behind them, assisted too by a foreign force—should have succeeded in resisting any attempt of a distant power to subdue them. The physical force of their enemy must have been vastly superior to overcome the advantages of their situation. Under such circumstances, if the colonists persevered in the struggle, there could be little doubt of the event; and they did persevere with a heroism worthy of their cause. But what we admire in their history is the character of a people who deliberately hazarded their fortunes, families and lives in opposition to an oppression, which the policy of the government had reduced to a mere speculative principle, hardly felt in practice; who after an arduous contest of seven years, in which the principles for which it was commenced were never forgotten; which had enlisted almost every inhabitant as a soldier, and turned every exertion from its accustomed channel to the practice of arms, and left them independent states and almost independent individuals—returned immediately to peaceful industry, and calmly framed a new government of which we may say at least, that the world has seen none wiser or more successful.

This is what could not have arisen from a series of fortunate accidents ; it was the consistent operation of one cause ; the necessary result of their *feelings, manners and principles.*

To display these feelings, manners and principles as I could wish, I would go back two hundred years, and follow our forefathers through all their history, from their first emigration to the time of our independence. You should see them in England, in Holland, and in America—I would first shew you that little band of zealous, persecuted puritans, oppressed by civil and ecclesiastical power at home—flying from place to place, giving up every thing but their principles, and persevering through all till they were compelled to leave their country in search of the liberty she would no longer afford them. I would show you this germ of a future nation assembling for emigration, not under an adventurer or a chieftain, but under the guidance of a humble minister of the gospel ; pilgrims in a strange land ; seeking among a foreign but friendly people the peace they could not find at home. You should see them animated by no spirit of fanaticism or proselytizing, settle down in order and industry, gaining the love and esteem of their new countrymen, and happy in the exercise of their duties and the freedom of their consciences. And here, having obtained the liberty they sought,

their history would seem to end. But for their wonderful perseverance and principle we could follow them no further—they would in a few years have mingled with those who gave them a refuge, and left no traces of their existence but in the virtues they had given in exchange. But such a spirit was not permitted to be so extinguished! it was reserved for higher purposes than merely ameliorating the character of a people who could but faintly partake of it. It was reserved to spread undiluted over a new world, and to be transmitted pure to millions of posterity.

I would show you this same people after twelve years of peace and freedom ; when they had gained a new home and new friends—when they had taken deep root in the soil to which they had been transplanted—alarmed now for those who were to come after them, as they had been before for themselves ; finding that what seemed at first like the promised land was rife with evil and peril—that they could not trust those who had sheltered them with the morals of their children, and again giving up all for conscience' sake, flying from contamination as they had fled before from oppression. Theirs was no enthusiasm stirred up by persecution ; their principles did not depend on opposition for their strength and slumber in security : they were as active and vigilant in prosperity as they had been

in adversity. The rest that would have enervated common spirits, only prepared them for a new and more heroic sacrifice. They were now called to prove that they valued their principles more than all else—for by them they were to be driven from civilized society—they had before left their homes and all that had been dear to them from childhood, but then they were flying from oppression to peace; now they were to quit those who had kindly received and protected them; they were to be thrown abroad on the world without a place of rest; seeking only for some spot, no matter how wild, or distant, where they could live in freedom, and transmit their principles and example to their children.

I would show you these fugitives—and I am sure it was a proud moment, not to be paralleled in history—returning after so long an absence to their own country; not weary of exile, to go again to their homes and friends, but to prepare for another and a final departure. I would show you them standing on their native shore, with their backs to all they had loved—neither won from their purpose by the returning tenderness of early associations and the renewal of old friendships, nor deterred by the dangers of the path before them—looking with an anxious but steady eye, over the dark waters that were to bear them to a world, of

which they knew nothing even by report but that it was savage and inhospitable. You should see them on the ocean, turning to give a last look to their homes, a last farewell to their country ; already lessening in distance, and disappearing. And is this all ? was nothing left of such heroic virtues but their example ? did they spring up in trouble ; resist corruption ; endure persecution, poverty and exile only to be lost in the wilderness ? As well might you fear the sun that was hastening with them to the west would be quenched in its waters, as that such feelings and principles could perish.

Their history does not end here ; I would follow them—but that the time would fail me—through all their difficulties, dangers, sufferings, contests and triumphs, till they became a great and independent people. And it is thus you must learn their character. If you would be faithful to the trust they have reposed in you, you must gather their principles from their whole history ; and you will find them displaying throughout a firmness, integrity, perseverance and courage that have never marked the progress of any other people.

But these things are not to be learned merely as subjects of curiosity, or panegyric. We should indeed be ungrateful to those to whom we owe our independence if we could forget their virtues ; but

we owe them a much higher duty than remembrance or admiration. They have transmitted to us the most precious of all possessions—liberty and good government, and an example for the preservation of both; and if we woult' honour the dead, and be grateful to the living—the few who are yet looking to us with anxiety for the success of their toils and sufferings—we must be mindful of the trust. Never was so much committed to any people. From the nature of our government, and the situation of the country, every act of ours is deeply important. Our institutions are young and flexible, and we must watch and mould them with peculiar care, till they are hardened by age. We have yet no venerable prejudices to encounter; we are not fettered by a system of laws whose antiquity has given them an authority over reason: We have the vigour and ductility of youth with the experience of ages; and we shall fail miserably in our duties if we do not improve on all that has gone before us. All was not accomplished when our Independence was acknowledged and our government established. What was sufficient for us then will not be sufficient always; our country is undergoing great and rapid changes, and its institutions must change to meet them; to preserve what your ancestors left you, their example is guide enough; but when you must add or diminish, you

will need all their wisdom and virtue to direct you.

Nor is it from the nature of the trust alone that you are deeply responsible : you are still more so from the number of those who are to profit or suffer by your care of it. You are to provide not for those only who are to fill your places, but for a continually increasing multitude, whose progress imagination can hardly bound.

You must imitate then the manners of your ancestors. You cannot, and indeed ought not to be as simple, frugal and severe as they were ; they had much to accomplish with little means, and could spare nothing from strength for ornament. They were laying the foundation of a great system and their only care was to make it broad, deep and strong ; but it was a foundation for all the elegancies as well as the uses of society, and it is now your part to add them. Luxury will come with wealth, but it is for you to choose whether it shall be that private luxury, which is the peculiar bane of a popular government, or that public magnificence that was the strength and glory of the old republics. Among the ruins of the greatest of fallen nations, nothing strikes the imagination so forcibly as the immense disparity of her public and private establishments. All that belonged to individuals was swept away in the storm that passed

over her, or preserved only where it was buried for the instruction of posterity ; while her temples, her courts of justice and halls of legislation towering over nameless heaps of decay, still seem built for eternity. If such desolation should come over our cities, would the ruins that would attract the eye of the traveller tell of the greatness of the country, or the wealth of individuals ? What would remain when our habitations were crumbled into dust to display our public spirit and national grandeur ? I fear there would be little history in our ruins. Are we doing as much in proportion for the public as for ourselves ? While our artificial wants and expenses have been increasing ten fold, have our public institutions been equally promoted ? While we are building palaces, have Justice, Legislation and Religion their temples of proportionate splendor—are our libraries, schools and colleges what they ought to be ? Have we provided means of education for a posterity vastly more numerous and refined than we are ? You need not fear being extravagant in these things—there are enough coming after you who will need them all.

This providential care of posterity was one of the distinguishing *feelings* of your ancestors, and you must cherish it, with their love of country and ardent attachment to liberty.

But above all, you must cling to their *principles*—their justice, moderation and unconquerable perseverance in the right—their disregard of present evil and anxious provision for the future. Like them you must resist encroachments on your rights in their principles, not in their consequences—and remember that your liberty has received one blow when a citizen, however powerful or popular, has violated the constitution with impunity—and your honor imbibed a deep stain when the rights of humanity are forgotten in your strength. But make the principles of your ancestors your guides, and your freedom is unspotted and eternal; it cannot perish while there is an arm to defend it or a wilderness to shelter it.