

AN
ORATION,

PRONOUNCED AT

CHARLTON, (MASS.)

ON THE

FORTY-THIRD ANNIVERSARY

OF

AMERICAN INDEPENDENCE.

—•—
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Published by Request.

WORCESTER :

PRINTED BY WILLIAM MANNING.....JULY, 1819.

ORATION.

THE custom of commemorating great national events, has long been observed, and has its foundation in the best feelings of the human heart. If self-love leads us to cherish a pleasing remembrance of events, to which we trace our personal happiness, love of country inclines us no less strongly to recollect, with emotions of delight, occurrences that have conduced to national prosperity.

Who is there in whose bosom the fire of patriotism burns, that does not hail with enthusiasm, with proud and grateful emotion, the return of the day, which has been consecrated by national feeling to the commemoration of those interesting events in the history of his country, to which he traces its present happiness and its brightening future prospects? What American is there, whose soul is not fired, the tone of whose feelings is not elevated by a glance at the page of history, which records the glorious deeds of revolutionary times?

We have again assembled, fellow-citizens, to celebrate the anniversary of our nation's nativity.— Again we have come around the altar of Indepen-

dence—not to light the torch of discord, or wake the slumbering spirit of party—not to strengthen prejudices, which it is disgraceful to cherish—not to excite those illiberal jealousies and angry animosities, which have too long been indulged, but which are now fast yielding to the force of reason and the influence of better feelings—not to kindle resentment towards one nation, by recounting, in a tone of indignation, her wrongs and usurpations in days that are past—nor to to revive a languishing affection for another, by descanting on the succour she afforded us in our struggle for independence.—No : we approach the altar to offer on it an oblation of pure patriotism—to indulge, for a fleeting moment, the lively emotions of joy which a recollection of past scenes, and a view of the present happiness of our country, inspire—to cultivate friendly sentiments and benevolent feelings towards each other, by mingling our rejoicings on this festive occasion, and to invigorate principles, on the existence and strength of which depend the perpetuity of those high privileges, by which, as a nation, we are distinguished above every other nation on earth. On the return of this joyous anniversary, a train of proud yet chilling recollections rush upon the mind. Imagination carries us back to the scenes of former days, and places us amid the perils and disasters of our revolutionary conflict. The clouds that then obscured our horizon, seem again to be gathering—the storm of war lowers and bursts—its lightning gleams across our darkened hemisphere—its appalling thunder peals on the “startled ear of fancy.”—We seem to see the heroes who achieved our independence rush to the conflict, bidding defiance to danger and the menaces of

arbitrary power—their bosoms glowing with love of country, and indignation at England's injustice—their eyes beaming with the bright and vivid hope of freedom, that nerved their arm in the day of battle, and sustained their spirits in peril's gloomy hour, and amid the darkest scenes of the revolution.

Some, probably, there are in this assembly, who beheld, and perhaps acted a part, in the scenes of which I have only heard. Such must retain a livelier idea of them than any cold and languid description of mine could give; and to none can it be necessary to repeat the often-told story of our revolution. But shall the glorious contest, which resulted in the emancipation of our country, be re-called to mind by the return of the day which has been set apart for its commemoration, without exciting emotions of gratitude to God, who, in the weakness of our infancy, gave us strength successfully to resist oppression? Shall we enter the temple of liberty, on this proud day of jubilee, without kindling into at least a momentary glow of grateful feeling, in remembrance of the patriotism and heroick virtues of those who sacrificed their lives in defence of our freedom? No: while memory points us to perilous scenes that are past, and while a view of the present happiness and prosperity of our country swells our hearts with emotions of delight, we will not forget that we are indebted to the protection of Heaven, and the heroism of our fathers, not only for our escape from the miseries of slavery, that would have been the consequence of a continuance of our subjection to England, but for the possession of that civil and religious liberty which we now enjoy, and hope to transmit to posterity.

To the magnanimity and disinterested patriotism of our immortal Washington, no less than to his valour and wisdom, are we in a great measure indebted for the blessings of freedom. Other men have been great, and have dazzled the world with the splendour of their exploits; have soared on as bold a wing against the blaze of glory, and gathered as unfading renown in the field of battle. Marlborough was great; but he tarnished the lustre of his military fame, by protracting a bloody war for the mercenary purpose of increasing his wealth and enlarging his power. Cromwell was great; but he dethroned a king for no other purpose than that he might wield the sceptre himself. If Washington had resembled the flaming meteors of ambition, who have “shed a disastrous light on the pages of history”—if he had possessed the aspiring spirit of Scylla, of Cromwell, or of Buonaparte, we might now have been writhing beneath the chains of a despot, instead of worshipping in the temple of liberty—instead of breathing the air of freedom, we might now have been pining in the damp and gloomy cells of a dungeon. In the first proud moments of victory, such was the enthusiasm that swelled every bosom—such the affection of the American soldiery for Washington, who had conducted them, through all the hardships and vicissitudes of war, to the renown of triumph and the repose of peace, that he might easily have led them from the field of glory to the coronation of its hero. They would have given him a crown, had he intimated that such a *bauble* would have gratified his wishes, or rewarded his services. But he, who was not tempted from the loved scenes of his seclusion by the glitter of a *diadem*, who

had renounced the ease of affluence and the warm charities of home, for the perils of war and the sufferings of the camp, in defence of his country, with alacrity sought the shades of retirement when its independence was established. Matchless virtue! Incomparable magnanimity! What hero is there of classic antiquity, of modern story, or even of fiction, that does not shrink from a comparison with Washington? Epaminondas, whom no bribery could corrupt, and no flattery seduce from his devotedness to Thebes, did not exhibit the character of a disinterested patriot in colours so brilliant and attractive, as did our immortal Washington, when, crowned with the laurels he had won in battle, and throned in the affections of a people he had led to victory, he renounced the power he might have retained, and retired to the humble scenes of his favourite Vernon. The greatness of his soul, the strength and purity of his character were not, in the most splendid achievements that marked the path of his glory, so strikingly exhibited as in the act by which he resigned the sword of the warrior for the less glittering badge of the private citizen.

Such was the magnanimity of Washington at that interesting moment, on which was suspended the destiny of the country his valour had emancipated. If we trace him through all the successive scenes of his life, our admiration of his talents and his virtues will increase at every step of the progress. He was no less great as a statesman than as a warrior. His character indeed combined, in one bright assemblage, every excellence that adorns and ennobles human nature. Unlike that of Cæsar or of Alexander, it united real greatness and genuine goodness—the stern virtues

of the hero, and the mild and amiable graces of the man. If it was sullied by any blemishes, they were scarcely perceptible even to the eye of envy, and, like the spots on the sun, they did not sensibly diminish its lustre.—

“Description cannot suit itself in words,
“To demonstrate the life of such a man.”

No wing of human eloquence can soar to his exalted worth.

In paying this exclusive tribute to the memory of Washington, I am not unmindful of the claims which the other revolutionary heroes have on our gratitude. Their names will never pass into oblivion—their virtues are imprinted, as with a diamond's point, on the heart of every American—their memory will be cherished with affectionate admiration while a love of virtue or of liberty glows in our bosoms. But why, it may be asked, attempt to delineate a character which has often been portrayed with a more glowing pencil, and in the colouring of a warmer imagination? Why, at this time, direct the eye of contemplation to men whose names are blazoned in history, and immortalized in song? Because, my countrymen, the character of Washington, and the other heroes of the revolution, cannot be too often contemplated.

When we reflect on the glorious events of the revolution, we hesitate which most to admire, that bold and chivalrick spirit of freedom, which, unappalled by danger, and unawed by the frown of despotism, met and vanquished the mercenary legions of Britain, broke the sceptre of a tyrant, and emancipated a nation; or that consummate wisdom which ruled the

storm of war, and at a happy moment “stayed the proud waves” of revolution.

To the enlightened pen of the statesman, no less than to the valiant sword of the warrior, are we indebted for the blessings of freedom. The heroism that achieved our independence, and the intelligence that framed our government, will ever be equally the objects of our admiration and our gratitude.

It will give us a more exalted, and therefore a more just idea of the character and blessings of our revolution, to contrast it with revolutions in other portions of the world. Contemplate then, for a moment, the character and effects of the late revolution in France. The French revolution originated in a wish to shake off the shackles of bigotry, and the chains of despotism—in the same love of civil and religious liberty that gave rise to ours. But its progress was marked with the most horrid crimes, and the most atrocious cruelties—with scenes, in contemplation of which, the heart is petrified. Its progress, however, was not more horrid and sanguinary, than its effects were disastrous. It not only covered the fair fields of France with desolation, and crumbled to dust her finest monuments of taste and genius, but it swept from the moral landscape almost every vestige of beauty—effaced from the heart all sense of moral obligation, and every sentiment of religion—annihilated in the bosom the hope of immortality ;—that hope which heightens the bliss of our brightest moments, and softens the gloom of sorrow’s darkest hour—which smooths the roughness of our path through the world—sheds a lustre on the darkness of the grave—and, hovering around us in the last

gloomy moment of our mortal existence, points the departing spirit to a fairer world, and brighter scenes of bliss.

Such is a faint picture of *some* of the disastrous effects of the French revolution. To trace the frantick career of that splendid tyrant, whom it placed upon the throne of France, would require a pencil dipped in blood. A recital of his brilliant yet cruel triumphs would damp the joy that now swells our bosoms. His path, though splendid, was a baleful comet's flight—its orb was bright, but it portended “fearful change” to nations, and “from its golden tresses shook pestilence on empire.” Nations trembled at his approach—terror and consternation preceded him—death and desolation followed his steps. For a while the world was awed by the terrors of his frown, and dazzled by the blaze of glory that played about him. But his glory has faded like the leaf of autumn—in a moment his empire has departed from him—the genius of Liberty has broken his sceptre—torn him from his throne, and banished him from the country he had enslaved; I had almost said, from the world he had oppressed. But no: he who but lately was so terrific and so dazzling, is now a miserable outcast and an exile. Stripped of the delusive glare his brilliant achievements had thrown around him, it is less difficult than it once was to form a correct opinion of his character. Uninfluenced by the admiration his brilliant exploits awakened, or the chilling horror his execrable cruelties excited, all now acknowledge that his talents, as a warrior and a statesman, were splendid and gigantick, and that his ambition was ruthless and insatiable.

From the appalling scenes and sad catastrophe of the French revolution, it is grateful to turn to the contemplation of the happier result of ours.

The American revolution terminated in our emancipation from England, who, jealous of our growing greatness, sought to cripple us in our infancy, by imposing on us burdens which she hoped would crush our vigorous spirits, and wither our expanding energies, in the attainment of civil and religious liberty, and in the formation of a pure republican government; which is admirably calculated to secure to us those inestimable blessings, against the encroachments of power on the one hand, and the palsy influence of anarchy on the other.

Since the establishment of independence, rapid beyond a parallel has been the growth of our country.— In a few years, cultivation has made the wilderness bud and blossom. The dark and gloomy forest, under the plastic hand of industry, has become a fruitful garden. Where grew the thorn and the thistle, now smiles the blooming rose. Where wild beasts lately howled, now waves the golden harvest. Where once stood the rude hut of the Indian, the splendid palace now rises in beauty and grandeur. Rapid has been the increase of our population. From a few pilgrims, who, less than two centuries ago, fled from persecution to this then “waste howling wilderness,” we have become a great and a numerous people.

Here the oppressed of every country seek an asylum. The ingenious artisan of Europe, captivated by the fairer prospect of employment which this country affords him, leaves the land of his nativity, to fix his home on this side the Atlantick. So full of popula-

tion have the eastern states already become, that the tide of emigration is constantly flowing toward the west, driving back the savages into deeper and darker recesses of the wilderness.

Rapid too has been the progress of knowledge.— There are now but few places in our country where the diffusive ray of science has not spread—where its genial influence has not been felt, in meliorating the condition of man—where it has not dissipated the shadows of bigotry and superstition, and softened the deep gloom of mental night in which some portions of the world are yet involved.

In respect to the general diffusion of knowledge, how vastly superiour is our country to any of the European nations. Even in England, the boasted land of science, where philosophy and literature have reached a higher pitch of perfection than they have attained in perhaps any other country, the light of knowledge is not so universally disseminated as in America. England has “soared against the blaze of every science, with an eye that never winked, and a wing that never tired.” But in England the delights and advantages of science are confined almost exclusively to the opulent, and those whom the partial eye of patronage selects as her favourites. Here it irradiates the dark retreats of indigence, and sheds its vivifick beam as well on the humble cottage of the poor, as on the gilded palace of the rich. There a favoured few bask in its brightest rays, and enjoy its purest pleasures, while many are left to grope in intellectual darkness, with no light to guide them but the pale and feeble glimmering of uncultivated reason, and no joys to cheer their earthly pilgrimage but the low gratifications

of sense. Here, by means of free schools, every individual—be he poor, be he rich—may acquire the knowledge necessary to direct him in the common concerns of life ; and a cultivation of mind, that will in some measure develop the social and moral principles of his nature, and render him, in some degree, susceptible of intellectual enjoyment.

In view of the general prevalence of virtue and happiness, which arises from the diffusion of knowledge, we have reason to be proud of our country, and grateful to Heaven for our propitious lot.—Notwithstanding, however, this general diffusion of knowledge, there are probably many in Europe who really believe that this favoured portion of the world is yet enveloped in the darkness of Gothick ignorance. Comparatively in our infancy, we have not yet reached so proud an eminence in literature and science as some of the older nations of Europe. Our literary character, however, is not so contemptible as the envy or prejudice of foreigners has represented it : it has been vilely traduced by hireling scribblers for the British press. These conceited literary coxcombs have laboured to propagate an idea that we were a people destitute of talents, and wholly incapable of ever excelling in science, or of producing a literary work of more than ordinary merit. Even with writers who wield the sceptre of criticism in England, the intellectual powers of Americans have often been the theme of abuse and bitter sarcasm. Americans, however, (the opinions of these jealous criticks notwithstanding) are not inferiour in native talents to Europeans. If we have not so many distinguished writers as England, it is because we have not yet so many scholars

by profession, who, like those of England, have devoted their lives exclusively to the cultivation of letters and the pursuit of literary fame. But our country has given birth to men, who have evinced strength and vigour of intellect, and all the fire and enthusiasm of genius; and who, without leisure, and unaided by patronage, have soared to some degree of eminence in philosophy and literature. If England produced a Herschel, who “gave the lyre of heaven another string,” America can boast a Franklin, who “grasped the lightning’s fiery wing.” Our country has also given birth to poets of bright and flattering promise, whose early productions, though fugitive and ephemeral, have exhibited some of the brightest flashes of genius, and some of the boldest, happiest flights of poetick imagination—who, if they had enjoyed literary leisure, and had retired from the dull cares of business, and the tumult of active life, to the quiet seclusion of the poet, would have produced works which, in true merit, would have emulated the best productions of the British muse.

It has sometimes been asserted by foreigners, that poetry would never flourish on this side of the Atlantic; not only because Americans are destitute of genius, but because our country is barren of poetick imagery, and of objects that awaken poetick feelings. The latter idea, as well as the former, can be entertained only through ignorance or prejudice. Our groves, it is true, are not vocal with the song of the nightingale. Imagination has not filled our streams with naiads, or our woods with satyrs: but who, that has the soul of a poet, can contemplate, without enthusiasm, the captivating rural beauty of our fields,

the towering grandeur of our mountains, or the sublimity of our cataracts? If, in wandering amid the shady groves, and along the banks of our murmuring streams, we do not feel all that poetick enthusiasm which these objects awaken in classick countries, it is not because they possess less native beauty, but because they are not invested with that irresistible, factitious charm which the genius of poetry imparts.

Our streams and our mountains, as yet, remain unsung; and therefore, to the mind of cultivated, classick taste, they possess less bewitching interest than even the humble hill and insignificant stream, which have been hallowed by the visitations of the muse. But the time, we fondly hope, is not remote, when the fire of poetick genius, which now slumbers in the American bosom, will be elicited—when the sun-beam of patronage will warm into life and vigorous expansion talents which, now in the gloom of poverty, are often chilled by neglect, and depressed by discouragement. Our poets will then emulate the bards of England—our streams and our mountains will then be immortalized in song—will then awaken those poetick associations which will give them an attraction they do not now possess—an attraction, which will impart to our country an adventitious beauty and a sort of poetick loveliness—a beauty and a loveliness which will not fail to expand our patriotism, and elevate our national pride.

Under the operation of our mild republican government, unparalleled has been our happiness—almost uninterrupted our prosperity. While other nations have been groaning under oppression, we have enjoyed the blessings of liberty. While the tempest of war

has desolated other portions of the world, this fair and favoured spot of earth has been, in a great measure, exempt from its ravages. Clouds, it is true, lately darkened our horizon—the storm of war howled along our shores. In the collisions of European nations, the neutral rights of America were invaded; and when the patience of negotiation was exhausted, valour drew the sword in their defence. For a while, the “ecstasies of peace” were exchanged for the din of war—the sweet tones of the lute for the hoarse clangour of the trumpet.

To trace the causes, or portray the character of the last war, is a task I shall not attempt. The tempest is past, and, thank Heaven, its fury has not laid waste our country. The song of praise again resounds in our vallies, and echoes along our mountains.

Whatever else we may have gained or lost by that war, it has tested the stability of our government, proved the strength of our “naval arm,” and elevated our national character, by evincing to the world that we had spirit to resent insult, and power to repel injury.

Our country has been divided into opposite political parties, who have indulged towards each other a bitterness that has even poisoned domestick happiness, and interrupted the harmony of social intercourse. But, thank Heaven, the reign of folly and frenzy is past—reason has resumed her empire—the dark and sullen spirit has assumed a less ferocious aspect—the liberal and the honest of all parties have forgotten their animosities, and discarded their illiberal party prejudices. They can now mingle in the social circle without indulging the hostility of foes—they

can now, in unison of feeling and of sentiment, mingle around the festive board on the natal day of their country. In calmly reviewing the past, both parties perceive their errors, and both have candour enough to acknowledge them. There are indeed a few restless spirits—a few aspiring demagogues, who are to nothing so strongly opposed as to a union of parties. And why this opposition to what is so rational, and so congenial to the feelings of every liberal and ingenuous mind? Would it require the abandonment of principles they deem correct, or the adoption of opinions they consider erroneous? No: on the altar of reconciliation they would need to sacrifice nothing but their errors, their prejudices, their implacable animosities, and their inveterate party antipathies. And would this diminish their self-complacency, or lower them in the estimation of men of noble minds? For their opposition to union, these violent, obstinate partisans, be they republicans or be they federalists, have another, and with them probably, a stronger motive:—It would dash to the earth their darling hopes, strip them of the factitious consequence they possess in turbulent times, and sink them into their natural insignificance. Their object is not the welfare of their country; but to advance a party to power, or to prevent a party's gaining it. A great proportion of the people, though differing perhaps in points of speculative opinion, would be united in feeling and in object, as the brethren of one happy family, were it not for a few ambitious demagogues, who impose upon their understanding and play upon their passions. Enceladus, recumbent beneath *Ætna*, is fabled to shake the mountain by the turning of his limbs: so a clamor-

ous, factious newspaper editor, by infusing the gall and venom of his own narrow soul into the columns of his paper, convulses the whole community, inflames the angry passions of party, and poisons the happiness of social intercourse. Think not that these remarks are pointed exclusively to newspaper editors of the one party or the other. Both parties can boast some such doughty champions of their cause. To the liberal and the honest mind it is a subject of deep regret that newspapers, which are to so many in our country the almost only sources of political information, are so often tinged with the gall of bitterness, and filled with the ebullitions of party rancour. Conducted as they have been, and in some instances now are, they do not guide the inquiring mind to truth, but bewilder it in the mazes of error. They do not cherish an attachment to our political institutions, but foment passions which, if indulged, may prove their ruin. Conducted in this manner, they are not a blessing but a curse to our country. In politicks, as in religion, there will ever be different speculative opinions. This difference is the natural and necessary result of the different structure of men's minds, of their different education, their different intellectual habits, and the different opportunities they possess of acquiring information. All should be firm in maintaining what they believe to be truth, and firm in opposing what they consider error. But no one should be so arrogant as to think his own judgment infallible; or so illiberal as to judge another dishonest in principle, because he happens to embrace a different speculative opinion. An intolerant, persecuting spirit is as reprehensible in politicks as in religion; and it is no less destructive of social

happiness, when it denounces a man for his political sentiments, than when it condemns him for his religious tenets. To judge another a friend or an enemy to his country, as his political opinions conform to or vary from yours, betrays a narrowness of mind and an ignorance of human nature. To cherish animosity or unfriendly feelings towards a political opponent, who, with all his errors of opinion, may love his country with equal ardour—to suffer your dislike of his politicks to produce in you an aversion to the man, however splendid his talents, or unsullied his moral character, indicates a depravity of heart and an obliquity of understanding. All who love their country, in which they enjoy so much political happiness—all who have contemplated with regret the deplorable effects that in times past have flowed from the indulgence of political animosities, and all who perceive with anxious apprehension the dangerous tendency of cherishing implacable party antipathies, must observe, with strong emotions of pleasure, the conciliatory temper which republicans and federalists now cherish towards each other.

Every view we can take of our country is calculated to strengthen our patriotism, to elevate the tone of national pride, and to swell our hearts with gratitude to Heaven for having given us “so pleasant a heritage.” Our territory is extensive, embracing almost every variety of climate—our soil is prolific, yielding to industry in rich profusion all the necessaries of life. Possessing such a country, we should never permit the interests of agriculture to languish from neglect: and it is matter of felicitation, that of late, especially in New-England, more than usual attention is paid to

this subject. Societies have been formed, which have for their object the improvement of agricultural science. An agricultural spirit, indeed, catching from heart to heart, has pervaded the whole community. Even learning leaves her wonted and favourite pursuits, to direct the efforts of agricultural industry. When we consider that the cultivation of the earth is attended with advantages that do not flow from any other pursuit—that the labour it requires promotes health of body and soundness of mind—dissipates the gloom that broods over the scenes of sedentary life, and sheds over the heart a perpetual sunshine; and when we reflect that it is favourable to virtue, and promotive of sobriety of manners and purity of morals, the present flourishing state of our agriculture cannot fail to swell our hearts with emotions of joy.

The commerce of our country is another theme on which we might dwell with delight.—Freed from the shackles by which it was for a season fettered, it now floats on every ocean, and wafts wealth to our shores from every country. In view of the many interesting objects that are suggested by the return of this anniversary, who can help exclaiming with enthusiasm—How many and how rich are our blessings! How enviable, in comparison with that of other nations, is the situation of our country—free, affluent and happy—sustaining a proud rank among the nations of the earth, and rapidly winging her flight to still brighter glory.