

A

DISCOURSE

ON

THE BENEFITS OF CIVIL HISTORY

DELIVERED BEFORE THE

NEW-YORK HISTORICAL SOCIETY,

DECEMBER 6, 1810.

BY HUGH WILLIAMSON, M. D. LL. D.

A MEMBER OF THE SOCIETY.

NEW-YORK HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

December 6, 1810.

RESOLVED, that the thanks of this Society be presented to Doctor HUGH WILLIAMSON, for the Discourse delivered by him this day before this Society; and that the Rev. Doctor MILLER, Doctor DAVID HOSACK, and Mr. PINTARD, be a committee to impart this Resolution, and request a copy for publication.

Extract from the minutes,

JOHN PINTARD,

Recording Secretary.

A

DISCOURSE, &c.



Gentlemen of the Historical Society,

A SOCIETY formed for the purpose of preserving the history of a nation, while that nation is yet in its infancy, is certainly to be classed among the institutions of modern times. It is not recommended by the practice of our ancestors, or by the venerable rust of antiquity. The several nations who have come into existence, at different periods, on the face of the earth, may have been, for aught they are enabled to tell us, *AUTOCHTHONI*. They may have sprung from the earth, as the Grecians boasted of themselves; for their origin is sunk in the dark vale of forgetfulness. It was not, as I conceive, that many of the existing nations originated, like the ancient inhabitants of Rome, from a set of robbers, who for that reason had no desire to speak of their ancestors; nor is it clear that the original settlers of every country were unacquainted with letters, and for that reason could not preserve their history; though that in many instances was doubtless the case. It can hardly be questioned, that the sons of Noah possessed a high degree of knowledge. The Chinese and Hindoos at present seem to possess little else than the fragments of their learning. But knowledge at first was chiefly trusted to the memory; and it was safely trusted in that manner when the duration of life was eight or

nine hundred years. It followed, that when the posterity of Noah began to separate into small families, and settle in a wilderness; and when those families increasing, made war upon one another, a circumstance that caused new dispersions, (the duration of life in every succeeding generation becoming shorter and shorter,) tradition must have failed, knowledge disappeared, and the several nations on the face of the earth, in a few ages, became nearly savage. This abbreviation of human life, and a similar decay of memory, made the art of writing necessary; but before that practice became general, the origin of nations was forgotten.

Our ancestors, and the several nations who have grown up and perished, had no idea of the importance of civil history; they did not perceive that it might serve as one of the best lights to posterity. If the first settlers in every region, when civil government was instituted, have neglected to preserve the history of early occurrences, their descendants, in sundry cases, have made ample amends. They have not only gone back to the very beginning of the nation, but they have gone many a thousand years beyond it.

The oldest credible history of any nation, that has descended to us, is the history of the family of Abraham. That history was written a little more than thirty-three hundred years ago, and is so well supported by collateral circumstances, that it cannot be disputed. The oldest history of any other nation, that has the semblance of truth, is the history of the Grecians by Herodotus. That history was written a little more than twenty-two hundred years ago. When I speak of the oldest history that bears the appearance of truth, it is not to be understood that some nations have not the history of older times than either of the people mentioned. The Chinese, the Egyptians, and the Hindoos, de-

duce their history from an earlier period. They have claims to great antiquity. The Chinese have a chronology of princes that extends back to the great Fo-hi, who stands at the head of their race. He lived many centuries before the flood of Noah. His origin was somewhat miraculous; for, like the Trojan Eneas, he was the son of a goddess. That celestial personage, walking on the bank of a river, was encircled by a rainbow, and after twelve years, she was delivered of a son. This son of a rainbow, from whom a long race of princes descended, was not so kind as to enlighten the world by any marks of his wisdom. But as Confucius himself, the great Chinese legislator, confesses, that for want of evidence, he could give no certain account of his nation beyond three thousand years, which carries their history back to the birth of Noah, all pretences of Chinese historians to greater antiquity, are doubtless the pure effect of vanity. When Confucius mentions three thousand years as the duration of the empire, he seems to have used a round number, that was nearly correct: for Noah was born about two thousand five hundred years before the age of Confucius. There are many reasons for believing, that Noah, about one hundred and fifty years after the flood, removed from Persia to China, of which he became the first patriarch, or emperor; and the fabulous history of the Chinese writers, makes this opinion nearly certain. When they tell us, dealing in wonders, that their first emperor was the son of a rainbow, they must have borrowed the fable from the circumstance of that emperor being the man to whom the first rainbow was given, in confirmation of a covenant. It is admitted, that Confucius is the most correct heathen philosopher of whom we have any account; but he modestly disclaimed being the author of the precepts that he taught. He borrowed them, as he said, from the

writings of men who flourished fifteen hundred years before his time. Those men had been contemporary with Noah, and doubtless were instructed by that excellent man.

The Egyptians, when they had learning among them, carried back their history to a surprising length of time. They had long been governed, as they alleged, by divine beings. Those divine princes were succeeded by a race of mortals. Herodotus was informed by their priests, that from the age of Menes, the first of mortal kings, to Sethos, who died about two thousand four hundred and eighty years ago, there had been a regular succession of princes, who reigned in all about eleven thousand three hundred and sixty-six years. This was a longer succession than has fallen to the lot of any other kingdom. But the most astonishing circumstance observed in that long dynasty was, that the sun, contrary to his usual course, rose twice in the west, and sat in the east. People there are among us, who affect to believe this story, and they have a pleasure in repeating it, as we presume, because it contradicts the Mosaic history of man. The man who is capable of digesting this story, is prepared to see the invisible mountain.

The Hindoos have by far the highest pretences to antiquity. Their sacred book, that contains the institutes of civil and religious duties, was received, as they pretend, from the supreme being himself, by a subordinate divine being, about one thousand nine hundred and sixty millions of years ago. From another divine being, of the same rank, there descended two races of kings, called children of the sun, and children of the moon, who reigned in different parts of India, about three millions of years. When compared to those people we are perfect ephemera. The ancients do not seem to have believed that much benefit could arise from correct

history, else they would have been more careful to preserve it. The pontiffs in Rome had the charge of preserving their annals; the magi in Persia should have been their historians: the priests in Egypt had the charge of preserving their public transactions. We know in what manner they discharged this part of their duty; for in the time of Herodotus, they could not tell when or by whom their pyramids were built; nor could they give any credible account of Sesostris, who was confessedly among the greatest of their kings. Could any credit be given to such men, when they talked of a succession of kings for more than eleven thousand years?

The great defects or chasms in civil history are not the only faults of which we complain: the frequent departures from truth in what they have written, is another subject of serious complaint. When I speak of their neglect of truth, I have no reference to those writers who tell us of gods and demi-gods who reigned in days of old. Such writers are beyond criticism. But Herodotus himself, who is called the father of history, was a dealer in romance. Like a poet, he sought to please rather than to instruct. He gave us a collection of stories that he advanced on the mere authority of faithless tradition. This father of history has been too well imitated by the greater number of his posterity. Perhaps the satirist said rather too much, when he proposed to write a history "*in the common form,*" in which *there would not be a line of truth*, except this single assertion, that *the whole of it was false*.

The historian is often biassed by national prejudices, which induce him to depart from the truth, or he may wish to embellish his history by dealing in the marvellous. The effects are nearly the same. I will give a small specimen of each kind:—An ancient historian, whose ancestors were Goths, and had been driven from their country by the Huns

when they passed from Asia into Europe, speaking of the Huns, gives the following account of their origin : He says, that a certain Gothic king, removing from Scandinavia into Sarmatia in Asia, discovered, that among his subjects there were many witches. He banished those witches into a wilderness at a considerable distance. Evil spirits that inhabited the desert fell in love with the witches, by whom they had children : these were the ancestors of the Huns. However ridiculous this story must appear, it was advanced by a respectable historian at the risk of his character. It is known that the famous Attila invaded the Roman territories in Italy more than once ; but it is not so clear that he ever came to Rome. We are told, however, by Damascus the historian, that in the fifth century he marched to Rome with a great army of Scythians. That under the walls of the city he encountered a Roman army equally numerous. They fought with such uncommon fury, that the whole of both armies were killed, except a few who were lifeguards to the king, or the commanding general ; that for three days and three nights after the slaughter of the armies a constant war was carried on between the souls of the dead Romans and Scythians, with much uproar or noise. How many of them were killed, the author has not stated, nor was it necessary. The story is sufficiently wonderful.

Historians, too, in order to gratify the vitiated taste of their readers, are apt to commend the worst of men with more ardour than they commend the best. “*Probitas laudatur et alget.*” Few men in any country are admired for a single murder, or a single act of robbery. But the man who murders thousands and tens of thousands ; who desolates whole kingdoms, robbing every inhabitant, and filling the country with mourning widows and perishing children ; that man is sure to be great

under the historian's pen. Herod, the Jewish king, a monster of barbarity, who murdered his wife and two or three of his own sons, was called GREAT, merely because he was prodigal of human blood.

Ancient historians, biassed by superstition, that disease of the human mind, are not more correct, nor more to be credited, in the account they give of natural phenomena, than in their history of civil transactions. I will state but a single case: One of their historians, speaking of a great luminous, stony substance, that fell in the river Argos, a few years before the Peloponnesian war, tells us, that "for seventy-five days before it fell, there was seen in the heavens a large body of fire, like a burning cloud, casting out fragments like shooting stars." If he had told us that the luminous body appeared seventy-five minutes, instead of days, before it fell, he would have exceeded the truth very much: but the phenomenon would have been less miraculous. This, however, we learn from the story, that the circumstance of a great ignited, stony substance, such as lately fell from the upper regions in Connecticut; such as fell not long since in India, and such as have lately fallen in sundry parts of Europe, was observed to fall two thousand years ago in Greece. And we learn, to our mortification, that to this hour we are perfectly ignorant of the origin, or cause, of those phenomena.

Keeping in view the cases in which the historian may have been tempted, by some unworthy motive, to forsake the truth, civil history may be read with pleasure and advantage. It is not only the most amusing, but it is the most instructive part of human literature. Being creatures of yesterday, we are indebted to history for the greater part of what we know. We are tenants of a spot on this globe, and that for a few days only. It is little that we have seen. History gives us an astonishing length

of days: for it makes us cotemporary with every nation that ever flourished. Accompanied by this Mentor, we take a short view of the antediluvian race of men. We traverse the greater part of Asia, observing the destruction that was made by the armies of Cyrus and Alexander, and we visit every part of Europe, and a considerable part of Africa, attending to the legions of Rome. We converse with the great men and wise men, the statesmen and philosophers, of Greece and Rome. Descending to later ages, we observe the Goths, the Vandals, and the Saracens, overturning old kingdoms and old forms of government; introducing new customs, and attempting, with no small degree of success, to cover the world with a thick cloud of ignorance. Fatigued and disgusted with the chieftains of a dark age, we attend to the progress of society, and we observe that learning, like the fabled Phoenix, is rising from the ashes of its parent. The world is illuminated by a new discovery—the art of printing; and the nations of Europe enjoy some degree of freedom, prosperity, and peace. Our sight and our strength remaining, we approach the nineteenth century, when we see another Atila, rising in his might, and making war with the genius of liberty. We see him overturning every state on the old continent that had any pretences to political freedom, and introducing a new species of military despotism. The tenth plague of Egypt was usually supposed to be the severest stroke with which God, in his wrath, had ever chastised a nation; but the military conscription is much more calamitous: it is not contented with the *first born*; for in many cases it sweeps off the oldest, the youngest, and every other son in the family. This man is bidding fair to cover the bright luminary of science by a total eclipse, and to darken the world by a long night of ignorance.

We are taught by history how it was that nations have acquired learning, power, and riches; and how they sunk into ignorance, poverty, and contempt. We are also taught a lesson that claims the particular attention of our fellow citizens in this state, and the attention of this society: We are taught that learning and the useful arts have always flourished in a free government, and have constantly shrunk beneath the sword of a conqueror. It is not that wise men or learned men are the productions of any particular soil or climate; they are constantly begotten and nourished by civil liberty. The Egyptians, as we know, were long since distinguished by their learning, but the tenure of property in that nation was secure; every man lived on his own lands, and the bounds were correctly marked. Lest the annual inundations of the Nile should deface their landmarks, they had recourse to annual surveys. For this reason the Egyptians were called *a nation meted out*. It appears that a great proportion of the inhabitants of that kingdom lived upon their own lands. If this had not been the case, they could not have subsisted, during a long famine, by selling their lands to the king. The Egyptian monarchy, as we know, was overturned above two thousand years ago, and that unfortunate nation has ever since been ruled by foreign princes. The subject at this time has neither liberty nor property. We observe the consequences. It would now be a poor compliment to any man to say, that "*he is learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians.*"

The Grecians, about twenty-five hundred years ago, enjoyed a great degree of civil liberty. It followed, as a natural consequence, that the Grecians exceeded all other nations in arts and learning. The Grecians, or rather the Athenians, were not

indebted to soil or climate for the extraordinary progress they made in science and the liberal arts; they were merely indebted to the high degree of liberty they enjoyed. Sparta was but a few leagues distant from Attica; the soil, climate, and language, nearly the same: but the citizen in Sparta was hampered by a rigid military discipline. It was a discipline that chained the mind by inflexible rules, and pervaded the very forms of social intercourse. Hence it followed that the Spartans made little progress in arts or learning. Lest it should be alleged that the climate of Attica, and not the form of government, had been the parent of learning, we find that learning among those people withered beneath the touch of Alexander, and perished beneath the legions of Rome.

It has been correctly observed, that the history of a few centuries would do much toward forming a prophet; and this prophetic inspiration is confessedly among the most essential benefits that can be derived from civil history. The same causes will ever produce the same effects; and the things that have happened will happen again, in the like circumstances. When we have traced the steps by which a nation has acquired power, wealth, and knowledge, we shall be taught, by the same historian, how it was that they sunk into poverty, ignorance, and contempt. We are taught that commerce has ever produced riches, and some degree of learning. By commerce Palmyra in the desert became a splendid city. Tyre, Carthage, Alexandria, Venice and Amsterdam, were enriched by the same prolific stream. The inhabitants of each city retained such a degree of civil liberty, that the tenure of his property was secure; therefore the citizen was industrious.

It may be worth while, for a few minutes, to consider in what manner some of the most respectable

free states have been destroyed. Of the ancient states, I shall only consider Greece and Rome. While the small republics of Greece retained that principle of virtue, by which they were formed and connected, we know what glory they acquired by repelling the numerous and formidable armies of Persia. In comparing their situation with ours, it is hardly necessary to observe, how few those people were in number, when compared with the citizens of the United States; nor what a rivulet the Hellespont was when compared with the Atlantic ocean. But the very men who had effectually resisted the myriads of Persia, sunk beneath the arms of Macedon. These facts may seem to be improbable, but they are not to be questioned. The states by prosperity were diseased. Let us attend to the operation of their disease in the Athenian republic alone. Men there were in Athens, as in all societies, who were too indolent and too vicious to support themselves by honest industry. Those Lazaroni, those pests of society, in all cases, expect to be supported by the public, and where the people have the rule, they succeed by flattering the people. The Athenians had become rich by industry and commerce, and the people in general were greatly debauched. They cared little about the state, or about the other Grecian republics. The demagogues flattered their vices. They gratified the people by promoting plays and other public amusements: money was necessary to the support of their measures; and, to the eternal reproach of those people, the money that had been collected for military defence, was expended in supporting comedians and buffoons. The Lazaroni to whom I refer, the men who seduced the people, had long been in the pay and service of Alexander of Macedon.

He had discovered their pride and their want of virtue, and he found their price. They became his advocates before the people. While other men al-

leged that his intentions were hostile to liberty and the republic, those men contended that he respected the republic, and his intentions were friendly. The people believed, and were destroyed.

The commonwealth of Rome was destroyed by a different process from that which proved fatal to Athens and Greece. As it braved the attempts of a foreign enemy, it was indebted to a citizen for its overthrow. Julius Cæsar contemplated the ruin of his country. This, as he knew, could not be effected but by the help of the common people; wherefore he attempted, by all possible means, to acquire popularity. When he had obtained the rank of consul, which he obtained by corruption, he promoted a law for the general division of property among the people, and another law for distributing corn among the idle and worthless vagabonds in Rome. His measures were opposed by the nobles, the wealthy, and the prudent; therefore he threw himself on the people, and claimed their protection. The people gratified his wishes. They raised him to the highest commands in the army. He gained the affection of the army, and made slaves of the people. While we attend to the rise and fall of other republics, we should not forget that historians should be considered as a species of pilots who set up beacons to show us the rocks and shoals on which other nations have suffered shipwreck. We have not subsisted many years as a republic, but we have experienced the uncommon fortune of becoming wealthy, luxurious, and old, in a few years. If we are less attentive to the history of ancient republics, let us consider, that within the memory of man, there were some very respectable republics in Europe. They have disappeared, and,

“Like the baseless fabric of a vision,
Left not a trace behind.”

The destruction of those republics is not charged, as I think, to the account of bribery, or to the artifice of a demagogue. The two most powerful of them destroyed themselves. There had been political disputes in each republic, as in all free governments. The warmest party, who called themselves patriots, called in the assistance of a powerful nation. Assistance was not refused, and their patron crushed them to death by his embraces.

The more cause we have to lament the general defects in ancient history, and the more cause we have to complain that there is hardly a country on the face of the earth whose original settlement and consequent progress can be discovered, the more industrious this society should be to preserve a small section of the globe, or the settlement and progress of a small colony from the great tomb of oblivion. It is not only our duty to have it faithfully recorded, how this part of the world was settled by civilized men, but also to show in what manner, and by what means, the inhabitants increased in useful knowledge and virtue; for it is not to be questioned, that a great proportion of the first settlers had but a small share of learning; and some of their chief officers were very deficient in virtue. Posterity will take little interest in knowing that the inhabitants may have doubled their number in twenty years; but they may be desirous to know by what means the subjects had obtained such a degree of information, toward the end of the eighteenth century, as to understand the principles of civil liberty, and contend successfully for their rights. Posterity will expect to be informed, and it will be your duty faithfully to record, what steps were taken in this eventful epoch, about the beginning of the nineteenth century, to promote virtue and the general stock of knowledge among the people. It was

observed by a great philanthropist, that fewer criminals are incarcerated in Scotland or in Switzerland than in any other part of Europe. The reason he assigns for this difference is, that the common people in Scotland and Switzerland are more generally instructed than in any other part of the civilized world. They are more generally taught to read, and are taught the principles of the christian religion, the foundation of good morals. His reasoning on this subject was doubtless correct. For ignorance is the fruitful parent of vice; and the man who knows his duty is most likely to attend to it. In this critical period, it will therefore be the duty of government to multiply the means of instruction; it will be their duty to see that every citizen is taught to read, at whatever expense that may be done; and you will take a pleasure, for the benefits of posterity, in recording the fact. Posterity may be desirous to know, and it will be your duty to record, whether men in public trust, instructed as they are by ancient history, and by the recent fate of European republics, had been careful to check the dangerous progress of internal faction; to preserve peace; to cultivate harmony among their fellow citizens, and to retain the confidence and affection of the sister republics.