

From the MSS. 179.

AN

INAUGURAL DISCOURSE,

DELIVERED BEFORE

THE

NEW-YORK HISTORICAL SOCIETY,

BY THE

HONOURABLE GOUVERNEUR MORRIS,

(PRESIDENT,)

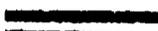
4th SEPTEMBER, 1816;

THE 206th ANNIVERSARY

OF THE

DISCOVERY OF NEW-YORK,

BY HUDSON.



NEW-YORK:

Printed and Published by T. & W. Mercein.



1816.

NEW-YORK HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

RESOLVED, *That the thanks of this Society be presented to the Honourable GOUVERNEUR MORRIS, for the Inaugural Discourse, delivered by him this day; and that Doctor DAVID HOSACK, SAMUEL BOYD, Esq. and Mr. JOHN PINTARD, be a Committee, to communicate this Resolution, and to request a copy of the Address for publication.*

Extract from the Minutes.

JOHN PINTARD,

Recording Secretary.

September 4th, 1816.

DISTRICT OF NEW-YORK, ss.

BE IT REMEMBERED, that on the nineteenth day of September, in the fortieth year of the Independence of the United States of America, T. & W. MERCEIN, of the said district, have deposited in this office the title of a book, the right whereof they claim as proprietors, in the words following, to wit:

“ An Inaugural Discourse, delivered before the New-York Historical Society, by the Honourable Gouverneur Morris, President, 4th September, 1816; the 206th Anniversary of the Discovery of New-York, by Hudson.

IN CONFORMITY to the act of Congress of the United States, entitled “ An act for the encouragement of learning, by securing the copies of maps, charts, and books, to the authors and proprietors of such copies, during the times therein mentioned;” and also to an act, entitled “ An act supplementary to an act, entitled an act for the encouragement of learning, by securing the copies of maps, charts, and books, to the authors and proprietors of such copies, during the times therein mentioned, and extending the benefits thereof to the arts of designing, engraving, and etching historical and other prints.”

THERON RUDD,
Clerk of the District of New-York.

DISCOURSE, &c.



GENTLEMEN,

THE place your partial kindness has called me to occupy seems to require, and I hope, therefore, will excuse an attempt to point out some benefits which may be derived from this Institution. Something more to repay the munificence of our State Legislature than the grateful sentiment which it has inspired.

Let me, however, before I enter on the subject, express our thanks to the honourable Corporation of New-York for the convenience we derive from their goodness. The intelligent liberality which devoted a spacious building to Science and the Arts, not only reflects honour on them, but sheds lustre on this great commercial emporium of the United States. Let the sordid collect and the riotous squander hoards of useless or pernicious treasure; be it yours, municipal fathers, to expend the fruit of honest industry on objects which embellish your city, and spread the influence of learning, genius, and taste over the hearts and minds of its numerous inhabitants. Your conduct has proved your conviction, that, in order to promote virtue and multiply the

sources of social bliss, wise magistrates will direct the people to laudable pursuits, and impressing on them a just contempt for sensual gratification, raise and adorn the moral dignity of man.

We live in a period so enlightened, that to display the use of History would be superfluous labour. It would be the mere repetition of what has already been expressed, by eminent authors, on various occasions. They have told us that History is the science of human nature; philosophy teaching by example; the school of princes.

Dazzled by the splendour of such brilliant eulogy, the mind's eye is bereft of distinct vision. But reason, pausing and collecting her powers, raises a great preliminary question: What is History? Is it the eloquence of Livy, the shrewdness of Tacitus, or the profound sense of Polybius?

Not only those who have participated in the conduct of national affairs, but those also, whose attention has been engrossed by personal concerns, cannot have failed to observe, that facts, as well as motives, are frequently misrepresented. That events are attributed to causes which never existed, while the real causes remain concealed. Presumptuous writers affecting knowledge they do not possess, undertake to instruct mankind by specious stories founded on idle rumour and vague conjecture. Those who are well informed smile at the folly. Great

minds disdain to tell their own good deeds: it seems, moreover, to those who have managed public business, almost impossible that the tittle tattle of ignorance should meet with belief. Nevertheless, such writings, though sheltered by contempt, from contemporaneous contradiction, are raked out, in a succeeding age, from the ashes of oblivion, and relied on as authority. History, compiled from such materials, can hardly teach us the science of human nature. It is, at best, an entertaining novel with the ornament of real names. Philosophy, indeed, at a later day, may bring her balance of probability, put the evidence of opposed facts in different scales, and deduce fair-seeming conclusions from an assumed principle that man is a rational creature. But is that assumption just? or, rather, does not History show, and experience prove, that he is swayed from the course which reason indicates, by passion, by indolence, and even by caprice? When the foundation is false, the superstructure must fall. Such writings, therefore, however illumined by the rays of genius, or adorned by the charms of style, instead of showing man a just image of what he is, will frequently exhibit the delusive semblance of what he is not.

When we consider History, in the second point of view, as teaching morality by example, it seems evident that examples, if not drawn from real life,

instead of informing, may mislead the mind, and instead of purifying, corrupt the heart. Neither is it certain that wholesome nourishment will always be extracted even from truth. Like other food, it may be so mixed and manipulated as to nauseate, or so seasoned as to give false appetite, stimulate morbid sensibility, and excite spasmodic action. A facetious writer who, in a rapid view of centuries, ridicules the misery of injured virtue, displays the glory of successful vice, laughs at the restraint of moral principle, and chuckles at the commission of crimes, may (if he please) call his work philosophy teaching by example; but example so selected and genius so employed, are more likely to accomplish a scoundrel than to form an useful member of society.

Again, if History be taken as the school in which statesmen are to be taught, there can be little hope that politics—that sublime science to make a nation great and happy—will be acquired by reading the relation of mutilated events, attributed to false causes. Such compilations tend to inculcate erroneous notions; and these, where the fate of millions is concerned, can never be indifferent. If measures pregnant with misery are considered as sources of prosperity, the best intentions may produce the worst effects.

Mature reflection, therefore, will diminish our surprise that many, skilled in History, are ignorant

of the world. Long is the list of learned men who know not how to manage the common concerns of life, and not a few are rendered, by the violence of untamed passion, incapable of controlling themselves, much less of governing their fellow-creatures. Perhaps it is not rash to suppose that more accurate, more extensive, more useful knowledge of our nature may be derived from the intuitive perception and personificating power of Shakespeare, than from the laborious research and acute discussion of Hume.

Many important events are on record, and however dark and doubtful the testimony of ancient chronicles, there exists a great number of authenticated facts. These, when collected, may be called the Skeleton of History. But how much must depend on judgment and skill in putting the scattered materials together: and, again, the solid bones duly placed and connected, those muscles must be added which give symmetry, strength, and grace. At last the goodly form, complete in all its fair proportion, when language spreads a finish over the promethian frame, how must its appearance be affected by the colouring it receives? The same event, treated by different historians, comes white from one hand, tinged with a rosy blush from another, and from another black.

The reflection and experience of many years have led me to consider the holy writings, not only as

most authentic and instructive in themselves, but as the clue to all other history. They tell us what man is, and they, alone, tell us why he is what he is: a contradictory creature that, seeing and approving what is good, pursues and performs what is evil. All of private and of public life is there displayed. Effects are traced, with unerring accuracy, each to the real cause. We see, in the beautiful story of Joseph, how envy, destroying the peace of families, leads to cruelty and to crime. How a dignified condition is degraded by lust. How the wrath of despised wantonness stimulates a woman to deadly revenge. How the heart-burnings in a shepherd's family drove a minister of state to the foot of Pharaoh's throne. And how, for purposes still more important, a shepherd-boy was enabled to govern a mighty kingdom.

From the same pure Fountain of Wisdom we learn that vice destroys freedom; that arbitrary power is founded on public immorality, and that misconduct in those who rule a republic, necessary consequence of general licentiousness, so disgusts and degrades the nation, that, dead to generous sentiment, they become willing slaves. We read that, in the latter days of Samuel, the judges "*turned aside after lucre, and took bribes, and perverted judgment.*" A more miserable state of society can hardly be conceived. Then laws to protect the weak against the strong,

the innocent against the wicked, become instruments of oppression and torture. Then order is lost, confusion rules, and, to borrow expressions from the favourite bard of nature,

“ Wrong becomes right, or rather, right and wrong,
 “ Between whose endless jar justice resides,
 “ Have lost their names ; and so has justice too.”

Reduced to this forlorn condition, the more sedate and respectable members of the community, seeing no security for property or for life, seek shelter under the wings of absolute power. “ *The elders said make us a king to judge us like all the nations.*” Samuel, his aged bosom still warm with patriotic sentiment, endeavoured to preserve the old form of equal right. To this end, he assembled the people, and displayed a highly wrought, but faithful, picture of evils which would grow out of despotism. In vain. Men sore with present suffering have not temper to reflect on remote consequence. In the maddening moment, they are deaf even to the voice of a prophet. “ *The people said, we will have a king over us, that we may be like all the nations, that he may judge us, and go out before us, and fight our battles.*” Here is a profound lesson of political wisdom, given long before Aristotle’s Ethics, very long before Machiavel’s Discourses on the first Decade of Livy, and still longer before Montesquieu’s

Spirit of Laws. When the last of these authors, in sprightly repetition of his predecessors, tells us that virtue is the principle of republics, he offers human testimony to confirm divine authority. That form of government which God himself had established, that code of laws which God himself had promulgated, those institutions which infinite wisdom had provided, in special relation to the climate, soil, and situation of the country, to the genius, temper, and character of the people, became intolerable from the prevalence of vice and impiety. It is a trite maxim, that man is governed by hope and fear. The desire of pleasure, wealth, and power, the apprehension of poverty, pain, and death, prompt generous reward, speedy severe punishment, are the human means to invigorate duty, stimulate zeal, correct perversity, and restrain guilt. But experience teaches that profligates may gain all the enticements of life, and criminals escape punishment, by the perpetration of new and more atrocious crimes. Something more, then, is required to encourage virtue, suppress vice, preserve public peace, and secure national independence. There must be something more to hope than pleasure, wealth, and power. Something more to fear than poverty and pain. Something after death more terrible than death. There must be religion. When that ligament is torn, society is disjointed, and its members perish. The nation is

exposed to foreign violence and domestic convulsion. Vicious rulers, chosen by a vicious people, turn back the current of corruption to its source. Placed in a situation where they can exercise authority for their own emolument, they betray their trust. They take bribes. They sell statutes and decrees. They sell honour and office. They sell their conscience. They sell their country. By this vile traffic, they become odious and contemptible. The people, compelled to gulp down the poison they had mingled, feel their vitals twinge, and in anguish exclaim, *Away with these pretended patriots. Begone, hypocrites. Begone. Let a single man be invested with executive and judicial authority.* Master and owner of the state, he will, for his own sake, protect it against foreign foes, and provide for an impartial administration of justice; that his subjects, secured and enriched, may multiply and thus increase his wealth and power. In the simple language of Holy Writ they say, "*He will judge us, and go out before us, and fight our battles.*" Two centuries have not yet passed away since Europe saw a similar effect from a similar cause. The Danes, writhing under oppressions of their nobility, conferred absolute power on their king, by general suffrage.

We find in Sacred History another important political lesson: that the possession of sovereign power corrupts the best heart. The second Jewish king,

a man peculiarly favoured by the King of kings, after leading an exemplary private life, no sooner ascends a throne, than, a prey to unbridled desire, he becomes first vicious, then criminal. If, as the advocates of infidelity have gratuitously supposed, that book had been written by bigoted priests, they would have concealed the guilt of their pious protector. They would have held him out, an impeccable example, for admiration and imitation. They would have covered, with bright varnish, the hideous traits of adultery and assassination. But truth, telling what he was, gives a lesson awfully instructive. It teaches the frailty of our nature, and the danger of trusting too much power even to the purest hands.

Another sublime lesson follows, in the succeeding reign. The widest scope of genius, the completest acquirement of science, the maturest strength of intellect, are combined in one man; and that man wears a crown. By his wisdom he accumulates the world's wealth in one of its narrowest districts. He rears a stupendous monument of pious magnificence. It is consecrated to the living God. And, then, the royal architect commits follies that would almost disgrace an idiot. In the prostration of manly strength, he seeks pleasures that elude his grasp; leaving, in a bosom chilled by age, the dulness of satiety, and the loathings of disgust. Happy had

the wise man's weakness been restrained, even in that excess. But, alas! his bright intellect is so obscured, by the apathy of exhausted desire, that he worships sticks and stones, in pitiful condescension to the consorts of his lust. If this part of the story were tested, by fashionable rules of evidence, we should perhaps be told that, as superlative wisdom cannot be combined with excessive weakness, the tale of his debauchery must be an interpolation, by some foe to his fame, or the account of his talents, an invention to gratify national pride. Thus Solomon's character might come, from the philosophic crucible, all gold or all dross. But experience avouches the historic truth. We have known, in English annals, a man whose capacious mind embraced all science. With a rare power of intuition, he not only pointed out the means by which knowledge might be enlarged, but seems to have perceived the remote bound to which it could extend. And yet that wonderful man sullied his soul, by accepting a bribe. The character a great English poet gave to Chancellor Bacon, is not wholly inapplicable to the Jewish king: "The greatest, wisest, meanest of mankind."

But the most important of all lessons is, the denunciation of ruin to every state that rejects the precepts of religion. Those nations are doomed to death who bury, in the corruption of criminal desire, the awful

sense of an existing God, cast off the consoling hope of immortality, and seek refuge from despair in the dreariness of annihilation. Terrible, irrevocable doom! loudly pronounced, frequently repeated, strongly exemplified in the sacred writings, and fully confirmed by the long record of time. It is the clue which leads through the intricacies of universal history. It is the principle of all sound political science.

The lapse of ages, and the change of manners, of religion, of government, of customs, and of character, frequently render examples of one age and country inapplicable to the circumstances of other countries and of other times. The ferocity of barbarians, and the perfidy of courtiers, become, indeed, more striking by satiric contrast; but rude hospitality cannot be made a model for polite conviviality; neither can the charms of refined conversation correct, by example, the coarseness of rustic mirth. As little can the stern severity of Roman virtue, though it swell the youthful bosom with enthusiastic admiration, teach the conduct which befits a Christian people. Hearts chastened by the religion of love would recoil from the Brutus who beheads his son, and the Brutus who plants a dagger in the breast of his friend, but for the lavish encomium of orators, poets, and historians. Those celebrated names are embalmed by the incense of eighteen centuries, and

our sight grows dizzy as we snuff the deleterious fragrance of flowers strewed on their tombs by lengthened generations. But when the gloomy Philip consigns Don Carlos to an early grave; when the amorous Henry sends Biron to the scaffold, we cannot but pity such interesting victims, though their lives may have been justly forfeited to the law. Whence this difference of sentiment? It may, perhaps, be found in that difference of manners which makes us view with horror the Roman practice of sending their superannuated slaves to perish on an island on the Tiber, and fills us with astonishment that the African Scipio should be celebrated for chastity, because he did not violate a distinguished female prisoner. The laws and manners of every nation, taken in the mass, have, generally speaking, a due relation and proportion. They so influence and correct each other, that the business of life goes smoothly on. The social harmony is full. There is no jar. And, though some features may be too salient, there is no deformity. Yet particular institutions may be selected, which, submitted to foreign judgment, will be pronounced monstrous or ridiculous. Travellers, who view what they see through the medium of preconceived notions, measure what they meet with by the standard of early education, and weighing the conduct of others in the scale of their own opinion, find that, wherever they go, there

is much to blame and much to reform. But when strangers, blinded by prejudice, are raised to power, they multiply proofs, already too numerous, that regulations uncongenial to national feeling are inconvenient, if not injurious, and that rash reformation leads to ruin. From the same cause it happens that institutions which have been fruitful of good, in one age or nation, may be as fruitful of evil in another nation, or another age.

Every man, therefore, will find the history of his own country the most interesting and the most instructive. Moreover, as the state of society is changed, by time and chance, the laws, too, must change. New disorders require new corrections, and when the reason of ancient ordinances no longer exists, they fall into oblivion. History and law, therefore, are sister sciences. They support and enlighten each other. But the history of one country can have little connection with the laws of another, and still less can the native code be modified by exotic manners.

Permit me then, gentlemen, to offer my cordial congratulations to you, and, through you, to our fellow-citizens, that this Institution is rapidly collecting and accumulating materials for a history of our own country. Materials which, establishing facts by indisputable authority, will enable the future historian

accurately to deduce effects from the true cause, correctly to portray characters taken from real life, and justly assign to each his actual agency. Let us, humble as we are, and humble we ought to be comparing ourselves with the Eastern hemisphere, let us proudly aver, that if, in modern history, the period, when barbarous hordes broke the vast orb of Roman empire, be one great epoch, the discovery which immortalized Columbus, presents another not less worthy of attention. If that era, when Europe poured her crusading population on the southern shores of the Mediterranean Sea, mark the lowest depression of human character, its greatest elevation will be found in the present age. Our struggle, to defend and secure the rights of our fathers, tore away that veil which had long concealed the mysteries of government. Here, on this far western coast of the broad Atlantic Ocean; here, by the feeble hand of infant unconnected colonies, was raised a beacon to rouse and to alarm a slumbering world. It awoke, and was convulsed. What tremendous scenes it has exhibited! The history of our day is, indeed, a school for princes; and, therefore, the proper school for American citizens. Exercising, by their delegates, the sovereign power, it is meet they know how to assert and how to preserve their freedom. Let them learn the mischief that follows in the train of folly. Let them

learn the misery that results from immorality. Let them learn the crush of impiety. Let them learn, also, for such we trust will be the final event, that when the altars of idolatrous lust had been overturned, and those of JEHOVAH restored; when nations severely scourged had sincerely repented, they were favoured with as much civil liberty, and as much social enjoyment, as consist with their absolute and relative condition. Permit me, also, to cherish a belief that the partial distress and general inconvenience produced among us, by late events, will have a salutary influence on public manners. War, fruitful as it is of misery and wo, is nevertheless medicinal to a nation infected by the breath of foreign pollution, engrossed by the pursuit of illicit gain, immersed in the filth of immoral traffic, or unnerved by the excess of selfish enjoyment. It draws more close the bond of national sentiment, corrects degrading propensities, and invigorates the nobler feelings of our nature.

I add, gentlemen, with the pleasure and the pride which swell your bosoms, that America has shown examples of heroic ardour not excelled by Rome, in her brightest day of glory, and blended with milder virtue than Romans ever knew. These examples will be handed down, by your care, for the instruction and imitation of our children's children; make them acquainted with their fathers; and grant, Oh God! that a long and late posterity, en-

joying freedom in the bosom of peace, may look, with grateful exultation, at the day-dawn of our empire.

GENTLEMEN,

By the occasion which called us together, we are reminded that Hudson discovered, in 1609, the river which bears his name. Imagine his amazement, had some prophetic spirit revealed that this island would, in two centuries from the first European settlement, embrace a population of twice fifty thousand souls.

Europe witnessed, in eight years, four events which had great influence on the condition of mankind. The race of English monarchs expired with Elizabeth in 1603. Henry the Fourth of France was assassinated in 1610. In the same year the Moors were expelled from Spain. And, in the next, Gustavus Adolphus became king of Sweden. These events excited, as they ought, much attention. But the discovery of Hudson's River, within the same period, was of such trivial estimation as to occupy no space in public annals.

Oh man! how short thy sight. To pierce the cloud which overhangs futurity, how feeble. But why be surprised that European statesmen, two centuries ago, were indifferent to what passed on the savage coast of America; when, at the same time,

the existence of Russia was unnoticed and almost unknown.

Little more than a century has elapsed since the decisive victory of Pultowa introduced the empire of the Czars to the society of European nations; an empire which stretched out from Germany to Kamschatska, from the Black Sea to the Frozen Ocean, contains a greater extent than was ever traversed by the Roman eagle in his boldest flight. That vast empire, so lately known, and so little understood, resisted, unshaken, the shock of embattled Europe, poured the rapid current of conquest back from the ruins of Moscow to the walls of Paris, and stands a proud arbiter of human destiny.

A mission of no common sort was lately about to proceed from the New World to the Old. From that which in 1600 was a dreary wilderness, to that which in 1700 was a cold morass. It was contemplated that a vessel of novel invention, leaving this harbour, should display American genius and hardihood in the port of St. Petersburg. If this expedition be suspended or laid aside, it is not from any doubt as to its practicability.

There are persons of some eminence, in Europe, who look contemptuously at our country, in the persuasion that all creatures, not excepting man, degenerate here. They triumphantly call on us to exhibit a list of our scholars, poets, heroes, and states-

men. Be this the care of posterity. But admitting we had no proud names to show, is it reasonable to make such heavy demand, on so recent a people. Could the culture of science be expected from those who, in cultivating the earth, were obliged, while they held a plough in one hand, to grasp a sword in the other? Let those who depreciate their brethren of the West, remember that our forests, though widely spread, gave no academic shade.

In the century succeeding Hudson's voyage, the great poets of England flourished, while we were compelled to earn our daily bread by our daily labour. The ground, therefore, was occupied before we had leisure to make our approach. The various chords of our mother tongue have, long since, been touched to all their tones by minstrels, beneath whose master-hand it has resounded every sound, from the roar of thunder, rolling along the Vault of Heaven, to the "lascivious pleasings of a lute." British genius and taste have, already, given to all "the ideal forms that imagination can body forth," a "local habitation and a name." Nothing then remains, for the present age, but to repeat their just thoughts in their pure style. Those who, on either side of the Atlantic, are too proud to perform this plagiary task, must convey false thoughts, in the old classic diction, or clothe in frippery phrase the correct conceptions of their predecessors. Poetry is the

splendid effect of genius moulding into language a barbarous dialect. When the great bards have written, the language is formed; and by those who succeed it is disfigured. The reason is evident. New authors would write something new, when there is nothing new. All which they can do, therefore, is to fill new moulds with old metal, and exhibit novelty of expressions, since they cannot produce novelty of thought. But these novel expressions must vary from that elegance and force in which the power and harmony of language have been already displayed.

Let us not, then, attempt to marshal, against each other, infernal and celestial spirits, to describe the various seasons, to condense divine and moral truth in mellifluent verse, or to imitate, in our native speech, the melody of ancient song. Other paths remain to be trodden, other fields to be cultivated, other regions to be explored. The fertile earth is not yet wholly peopled. The raging ocean is not yet quite subdued. If the learned leisure of European wealth can gain applause or emolument for meting out, by syllables reluctantly drawn together, unharmonious hexameters, far be it from us to rival the manufacture. Be it ours to boast that the first vessel successfully propelled by steam was launched on the bosom of Hudson's River. It was here that American genius seizing the arm of European science, bent to the pur-

pose of our favourite parent art the wildest and most devouring element.

The patron—the inventor are no more.— But the names of Livingston and of Fulton, dear to fame, shall be engraven on a monument sacred to the benefactors of mankind. There generations yet unborn shall read,

Godfrey taught seamen to interrogate,
 With steady gaze, tho' tempest-tost, the sun,
 And from his beam true oracle obtain.
 Franklin, dread thunder-bolts, with daring hand,
 Seized, and averted their destructive stroke
 From the protected dwellings of mankind.
 Fulton by flame compell'd the angry sea,
 To vapour rarified, his bark to drive
 In triumph proud thro' the loud sounding surge,

This invention is spreading fast in the civilized world; and though excluded as yet from Russia, will, ere long, be extended to that vast empire. A bird hatched on the Hudson will soon people the floods of the Wolga, and cygnets descended from an American swan glide along the surface of the Caspian Sea. Then the hoary genius of Asia, high throned on the peaks of Caucasus, his moist eye glistening while it glances over the ruins of Babylon, Persopolis, Jerusalem, and Palmyra, shall bow with grateful reverence to the inventive spirit of this western world.

Hail Columbia! child of science, parent of useful arts; dear country, hail! Be it thine to meliorate

the condition of man. Too many thrones have been reared by arms, cemented by blood, and reduced again to dust by the sanguinary conflict of arms. Let mankind enjoy at last the consolatory spectacle of thy throne, built by industry on the basis of peace and sheltered under the wings of justice. May it be secured by a pious obedience to that divine will, which prescribes the moral orbit of empire with the same precision that his wisdom and power have displayed, in whirling millions of planets round millions of suns through the vastness of infinite space.

FINIS.