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Emerson, William, 1769--1811.

An Oration Pronounced July 5, 1802.

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AN

ORATION

Pronounced July 5, 1802,

AT THE REQUEST OF THE INHABITANTS OF THE

TOWN OF BOSTON,

IN COMMEMORATION OF THE ANNIVERSARY OF

American Independence.

BY THE REV. WILLIAM EMERSON.

Some truths are not by *Reason* to be try'd,
But we have sure EXPERIENCE for our guide.

DRYDEN.



BOSTON:
MANNING & LORING, PRINTERS, NO. 2, CORNHILL.

[A 1802]

Vote of the Town.

AT a Meeting of the Freeholders and other Inhabitants of the Town of Boston, duly qualified and legally warned in publick Town-Meeting, assembled at Faneuil-Hall, the 5th day of July, A. D. 1802:

On motion, *Voted*, That the Selectmen be, and hereby are appointed a Committee to wait on the Rev. WILLIAM EMERSON, 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 the Independence of the United States of America; in which, according to the Institution of the Town, he considered the feelings, manners, and principles, which led to that great National Event; and to request of him a copy for the press.

Attest. WILLIAM COOPER, *Town-Clerk.*

BOSTON, JULY 5, 1802.

GENTLEMEN,

IN compliance with custom, I resign to your pleasure the Oration this day delivered.

I am, Gentlemen,

With sentiments of respect,

Your humble servant,

W. EMERSON.

The Selectmen of Boston.



Oration.



IT is the glory of nations, as it is of individuals, to increase in wisdom, as they advance in age, and to guide their concerns, not so much by the result of abstract reasonings, as by the dictates of experience. But this glory is no more the uniform felicity of ancient states, than of their ancient citizens. In the eighteenth century, the British nation had existed thirteen hundred years ; seen ages roll away with wrecks of empires ; marked thousands of experiments in the science and the art of civil government ; and had risen to a lofty height of improvement, of freedom, and of happiness. It was yet the misfortune and the disgrace of this kingdom, so famous in the annals of modern Europe, to war with the principles of her own constitution, and to tread, with presumptuous step, the dangerous path of innovation and unrighteousness.

This sentiment will be vindicated by considering, as on this occasion we are bound " to consider, the feelings, manners, and principles,

which led to the declaration of American Independence, as well as the important and happy effects, whether general, or domestick, which have already flowed, or will forever flow, from the auspicious epoch of its date."

In assisting your performance of this annual duty, my fellow-citizens, I claim the privilege, granted to your former orators, of holding forth the language of truth; and I humbly solicit a favour, of which they had no need, the most liberal exercise of your ingenuoussness and benevolence.

The FEELINGS of Americans were always the feelings of freemen. Those venerable men, from whom you boast your descent, brought with them to these shores an unconquerable sense of liberty. They felt, that mankind were universally entitled to be free; that this freedom, though modified by the restrictions of social compact, could yet never be annulled; and that slavery, in any of it's forms, is an execrable monster, whose breath is poison, and whose grasp is death.

Concerning this liberty, however, they entertained no romantick notions. They neither sought nor wished the freedom of an irrational, but that of a rational being; not the freedom of savages, not the freedom of anchorites, but that of civilized and social man. Their doctrine of equality was admitted by fo-

ber understandings. It was an equality not of wisdom, but of right ; not a parity of power, but of obligation. They felt and advocated a right to personal security ; to the fruits of their ingenuity and toil ; to reputation ; to choice of mode in the worship of God ; and to such a liberty of action, as consists with the safety of others, and the integrity of the laws.

Of rights like these, your ancestors cherished a love bordering on reverence. They had inhaled it with their natal air : it formed the bias and the boast of their minds, and indelibly stamped the features of their character. In their eyes honour had no allurements, wealth no value, and existence itself no charms, unless liberty crowned the possession of these blessings. It was for the enjoyment of this ecclesiastick and political liberty, that they encountered the greatest dangers, and suffered the sharpest calamities. For this they had rived the enchanting bonds, which unite the heart to its native country ; braved the terrour of unknown seas ; exchanged the sympathies and intercourse of fondest friendships, for the hatred and wiles of the barbarian ; and all the elegancies and joys of polished life, for a miserable sustenance in an horrible desert.

It was impossible for descendants of such men not to inherit an abhorrence of arbitrary power. Numerous circumstances strengthen-

ed the emotion. They had ever been taught, that property acquires title by labour ; and they were conscious of having expended much of the one for little of the other. They were thence naturally tenacious of what they possessed, and conceived, that no human power might legally diminish it without their consent. They had also sprung from a commercial people ; and they inhabited a country, which opened to commerce the most luxuriant prospects. Of course, property with them was an object of unusual importance. Inhabitants of other regions might place their liberty in the election of their governours ; but Americans placed it in the control of their wealth : and to them it was a matter of even less consequence, who wore the robes of office, or held the sword of justice, than who had the power of filling the treasury, and appropriating its contents.

The resolves and attempts, therefore, of the British government to raise an American revenue, they viewed as a thrust at their liberties. By these measures, they felt themselves wronged, vilified, and insulted. If they acknowledged the pretended *right of parliament to bind them in all cases whatever*, it cleft, like a ball of lightning, the tree of colonial liberty, giving its foliage to the winds, and its fruit to the dust. There was no joy, which it did not

wither; no hope, which it did not blight. An angry cloud of adversity hung over every department of social life. Demands of business, offices of love, and rites of religion, were, in some sort, suspended, and the earliest apprehensions of the American infant were those of servitude and wretchedness.

Such were the feelings, which impelled resistance to Great-Britain, and the rejection of her authority. They were the feelings of men, who were vigilant of the rights of human nature, of freemen, whose liberties had been outraged, of patriots, determined never to survive the honour of their country.

American independence was also induced by American MANNERS. The planters of this western world, especially of New-England, were eminent for the purity and lustre of their morals. They were industrious from choice, necessity, and habit. Their mode of living rendered them abstinent from enervating pleasures, and patient of toil. The difficulties of subduing a rough wilderness, the severities of their climate, and the rigour of paternal discipline, were almost alone sufficient to preserve in their offspring this simplicity of life. It had, however, a yet stronger guard in their military and civil, literary and religious institutions.

Exposed continually to the incursion of hostile and insidious neighbours, they trained

their youth to the exercise of arms, to courage in danger, and to constancy in suffering.

The forms of their government were popular. They exercised the right of choosing their rulers ; and they chose them from the wisest and best of the people. Virtue and talents were indispensable qualifications for office, and bribery and corruption were unknown and unsuspected.

A deep foresight and an expanded generosity directed their plans of education. Colleges were founded in the midst of deserts ; and the means of knowledge and goodness were within the reach of all ranks of the community. Every householder was the chaplain of his family ; every village had its instructor of children ; every parish its minister of the gospel ; every town its magistrate ; and every county its court of justice. The study of the law, which is ever conservative of liberty, had a due proportion of followers, among whom it numbered as eminent civilians, as any age or country has produced. The colonists, in short, enjoyed all those advantages, which conduce to intelligence, sobriety, hardihood, and freedom in a people.

Such were the manners, which distinguished Americans for a century and an half. They were the manners of men, who, though poor, were too rich to be venal ; though hum-

ble in pretension, too proud for servility ; and though overlooked in the mass of mankind, as possessing no national character, yet convinced the proudest monarchy in the world, that an attempt to oppress them was dangerous, and to conquer them, impossible.

The impossibility of subjugating America consisted not in the customs and manners only, but likewise in the political PRINCIPLES of her sons. They honestly believed, what they boldly avowed, that the assumption of parliament was a violation of law, equity, and ancient usage.

These colonies originally were composed of men, who were rather ejected from Britain, as nuisances of the state, than fostered as her dutiful children. If, when their increasing population and riches became an object of attention, they owed any thing to the parent country, it was to the king, who gave them their charters, and not to the parliament, which had expended neither cost nor concern in their settlement, and taken no part in the management of their internal affairs. Whilst the governor represented the royal authority, the provincial assembly was to each province what parliament was to Britain. It framed laws, levied taxes, and made every provision for the publick exigence. In regard to the single article of commerce, parliament did, indeed, ex-

ercise an unquestioned power of monopoly. In all respects else, it was unknown to the colonies. When, therefore, this body, in which the colonists were not represented, asserted the right of colonial taxation, its claim was unjust; and with the same right in reality, if not in appearance, might the colonial assemblies have gravely maintained the identical supremacy over the people of Britain, which parliament assumed over the people of America.

Was it, then, right in the colonies to resist the parliament, and wrong to resist the king? No. For the king had joined the latter to oppress the former, and thus became, instead of the righteous ruler, the tyrant, of this country, to whom allegiance was no longer due.

Americans called themselves free, because they were governed by laws originating in fixed principles, and not in the caprice of arbitrary will. They held, that the ruler was equally obliged to construct his laws in conformance with the spirit of the constitution, as were the people to obey them when enacted; and that a departure from duty on his part virtually absolved them from allegiance.

Let not this be deemed a licentious doctrine. Who is the rebel against law and order, the legislator ordaining, or the citizen resisting, unconstitutional measures? It is the unprinci-

pled minister, who artfully innovates on the custom of governing ; the ambitious senator, whose self is his god ; the faithless magistrate, who tramples on rights, which he has sworn to protect ; these are the men, who, by perverting the purposes of government, destroy it's foundations, bring back society into a state of war, and are answerable for its mischievous effects. Not those who defend, but those who attack, the liberties of mankind, are disturbers of the publick peace ; and not on you, my countrymen, but on thee, O Britain, who killedst thy people with the rod of oppression, be the guilt of all that blood, which was spilt in the revolutionary war !

Here, then, you find the principles, which produced the event, we this day commemorate. They were the principles of common law and of eternal justice. They were the principles of men, who fought not to subvert the government, under which they lived, but to save it from degeneracy ; not to create new rights, but to preserve inviolate such, as they had ever possessed, rights of the same sort, by which George III. then sat, and still sits, on the throne of England, the rights of prescription.

Hence, through the progress of our revolution, these principles continued their operation. Armed in the uprightnes of your cause, you disdained an appeal to those ferocious

passions, which commonly desolate society in times of commotion. No man lost his life for resisting the general opinion. Instruction maintained it's influence, law it's terrors, and religion it's divine and powerful authority. Property was secure, and character sacred; and the condition of the country was as remote from a savage democracy, as from a sullen despotism.

Such was the American revolution. It arose not on a sudden, but from the successful petitions and remonstrance of ten long years. It was a revolution, not of choice, but of necessity. It grew out of the sorrows and unacknowledged importance of the country; and having to obtain a definite object by definite means, that object being obtained, was gloriously terminated.

As evidence, that I have not misrepresented the "feelings, manners, and principles," which gave birth to your independence, recollect the early, regular, and effectual methods adopted by the United States, to form a national constitution of civil government.

That continental patriotism, which, in a time of war, was able to bend individual interest to the common benefit, proved sluggish, precarious, and totally inadequate to the purposes of union and order in the season of peace. There lacked a principle of cohesion, springing

from the certain tendencies of human passion, which should compel the knowledge, industry, and emulation of every citizen to promote the opulence and power of the country.

Such a cement was recognized in the federal constitution. Its healthful operations, guided by its celebrated framers and friends, revived the languishing spirit of Columbia. Our consequent rapid population had scarcely a parallel in history. Individuals suddenly multiplied into families, families into towns, and towns into populous and flourishing states. What liberty was to the people of Europe in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, government was now to this country. It patronized genius and learning, gave stimulus to enterprise, and reward to labour. It encouraged agriculture and manufactures; unfurled the sails of commerce; lifted publick credit out of the mire of contempt; and placed America on a dignified eminence among the nations of the earth.

These are among THE IMPORTANT AND HAPPY EFFECTS OF A DOMESTICK NATURE, WHICH HAVE ALREADY FLOWED FROM OUR national independence.

There is, moreover, a GENERAL EFFECT, WHICH WILL FOREVER FLOW FROM THE AUSPICIOUS EPOCH OF JULY 4, 1776. As often, as the sun shall enlighten this day, in

each successive revolution of our orb, it will admonish the rulers of mankind of the folly and danger of innovations in government.

Sound politicks is ever conversant with expedience and the temper of the age. It is not a science, which may be learned in the closet, and forced into practice against nature and circumstances. An endeavour, therefore, to engraft untried theories, however plausible, upon the usual mode of administering affairs of state, is always an hazardous undertaking. The man, who would rashly change even a government confessedly corrupt, betrays pitiable ignorance and presumption. What then shall be thought of English ministers, who impinged on rights and usages, which, for generations, had strengthened and adorned the ancient empire, and were imparting nourishment to this infant realm; and who expended thousands of lives and millions of money in a fruitless effort to legalize their wrongs?

Although, then, the American revolution must be considered, in regard to this country, the most honourable and felicitous, and in the view of the historian, the most splendid, event the world ever saw, yet to legislators in all climes and periods, it conveys this solemn instruction; it teaches them in a voice, louder than the thunders of heaven, to be just and wise: just in not abridging the freedom and

invading the properties of their fellow-men, and wise in not abandoning the measures of a temperate policy for the gairish projects of innovation.

If, however, this revolution contain a monition to rulers against political speculations, a revolution of later date affords similar warning to every description of men. The vicissitudes of France, during the twelve past years, defy the pen of description, and deter the writer, who values his credit with posterity, from essaying the record of truth. See there, ye vaunting innovators, your wild and dreadful desolations ! Whatever was visionary in metaphysick, or violent in practice, you greedily adopted ; and as hastily destroyed whatever bore the semblance of order, rectitude, and antiquity. You fixed no bounds to either your ambition or cupidity. Not content with banishing faith, and law, and decency from the gallick dominion, your ever changeful and unhinging policy assumed the forms of hostility to other governments, and threatened to bring upon the whole civilized world the decades of disorder and rapine.

Yet what have Frenchmen gained by all this revolutionary error and phrenzy ? After warring with science, they now encourage it ; after abolishing christianity, they have restored it ; and after murdering the mildest of despots,

their present republick is a mere mixture of military depotism and of popular slavery.

In thus animadverting on the conduct and character of a foreign government, I fulfil a painful, but necessary duty. It is a necessary part of this day's solemnity, because the American, has sometimes been confounded with the French, revolution,* when that bears no more resemblance to this, than the movement of a regular and beneficent planet is like the wanderings of a comet, which "from his horrid hair shakes pestilence and war," † "importing change to times and states." ‡ It is necessary, because along with the political innovation, which was ravaging Europe, there came abroad an infidel philosophy, equally subversive of freedom, as of morals. For how shall the liberty of individuals be preserved in a state of universal licentiousness? And after the prostration of religious principle, how can you hope for purity of manners? What shall support the superstructure, when the foundation is removed? Who ever put faith in the national convention of France, after it had denied the existence of God? Or what was ever more farcical, than a report on morals from the mouth

* A very instructive and valuable tract on this topick is found in a pamphlet, printed at Philadelphia, entitled "The origin and principles of the American revolution, compared with the origin and principles of the French revolution, translated from the German of Gentz, by an American gentleman."

† Milton.

‡ Shakspeare.

of Robespierre, whilst that monster of faction was wading to empire in the blood of his country? It is, finally, necessary, because this unholy spirit of atheism has already deteriorated the political and moral condition of this country, and still menaces our hopes, privileges, and possessions.

Should it be the fate of America to drink still deeper of the inebriating bowl, its government, whose existence depends on the publick sentiment, must fall a victim to the draught. Should the rulers of our country, especially, ever become intoxicated with the poison; should they deviate from the course prescribed by their wise predecessors, incautiously pulling down what had been carefully built; should they mutilate the form, or impair the strength of our most excellent constitution; should they amuse themselves with ephemeral experiments, instead of adhering to principles of certain utility; and should they despise the religion and customs of our progenitors, setting an example of impiety and dissipation, deplorable will be the consequences. From an head so sick, and an heart so faint, disease will extend to the utmost extremities of the political body. As well may you arrest the flight of time, or entice the moon from her orbit, as preserve your freedom under atheistical rulers, and amidst general profligacy of habit. Libertinism and lethargy, an-

