

AN
ORATION,

PRONOUNCED

IN THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH AT
CONNECTICUT FARMS, N. J.

BEFORE

THE CITIZENS OF THE TOWNSHIP OF UNION.

ON THE

FOURTH OF JULY, 1818.

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BY PETER KEAN, ESQ.
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PUBLISHED AT THE REQUEST OF THE COMMITTEE OF ARRANGEMENTS.

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“ This government, the offspring of our own choice uninfluenced and unawed, adopted upon full investigation and mature deliberation, completely free in its principles, in the distribution of its power, uniting security with energy, and containing within itself a provision for its own amendment, has a just claim to your confidence and support. Respect for its authority, compliance with its laws, acquiescence in its measures, are duties enjoined by the fundamental maxims of true liberty.

“ Promote, then, as an object of primary importance, institutions for the general diffusion of knowledge. In proportion as the structure of a government gives force to public opinion, it should be enlightened.”

Washington's Farewell Address to the People of the U. S. Sept. 1796

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ELIZABETH-TOWN :

PRINTED BY J. AND E. SANDERSON

1818.

ORATION.



THIS day forty-two years, the Independence of these United States was proclaimed.

While we are met to renew the remembrance of an era so properly looked up to by Americans as the period from which to date their national being; we may be permitted to hope that we shall perform this duty in a spirit of charity and moderation becoming Christians and Republicans.

To describe the chivalrous rencounters in which our fathers exhibited the hardihood of ancient bravery, adorned by the polished refinement of civilized warfare; to recount the toils, the privations, the sufferings, cheerfully sustained, nay! eagerly embraced by the gallant spirits to whom, under Providence, we are indebted for the successful termination of the war of independence; to unfold the plans devised by the consummate Captain who led our armies; to portray the discomfiture of the minions of a weak, wicked, and corrupt Ministry; to record the triumphs of a virtuous and united band of Freemen—are themes worthy of the highest powers.—But why dwell on them now? Can their remembrance be enlivened by language? or can any but an inspired tongue add lustre to the bright idea America has con-

ceived of her Washington? Lives there a man so dead to honourable sentiment, who, as often as this day returns, does not review “with his mind’s eye” each event of that memorable struggle, from the fight of Lexington to Cornwallis’ surrender? Where should we seek for the cold-hearted being, who, on the recurrence of each revolving political year, neglects to contemplate with enthusiasm, the virtues of our country’s leader, and his gallant followers; and to offer up his fervent praises to the beneficent Author of good, for having blessed America with such a General and such an Army?

Confident that you, my Fellow-Citizens, have anticipated whatever I could say commemorative of this important crisis;—assured, by my knowledge of your well-regulated piety, that your hearts have accompanied your beloved Pastor in aspirations of gratitude to the Almighty Ruler of Nations, for having cast your lot in a land consecrated to civil freedom; I shall call your attention to other periods of our history.

The few years intervening between signing the treaty of peace in 1783, and the adoption of the Constitution in 1789, were dark and gloomy. The virtuous efforts of the “war-worn veterans”—the arduous labours of the sagacious statesmen, who had secured our independence, were almost forgotten amidst the deep and sullen feeling of domestic misery, and national suffering, that appalled every honest heart, on witnessing the anarchy and misrule beginning to prevail, and threatening to increase, during the existence of a confederation daily proved inadequate—anarchy and misrule the more alarming, because fomented by the designing votaries of State supremacy—a race of men, just wise enough to be cunning; just cunning enough to be specious; just specious enough to delude weak and unsuspecting minds.

These men, by fanning the embers of discontent ; by encouraging the turbulence of the hot and disaffected, who, after revolutions, always hang loose on society, with every thing to gain and nothing to lose from intestine broils and domestic ruin ; concentrated the worst passions of our nature in one black and dismal cloud, which threatened to pour from its capacious bosom a torrent of fraud, and insubordination, and violence, and rapine ; formed to sweep, in its desolating course, every remaining land-mark of honesty, and law, and virtue, and religion.

Such was the posture of affairs, when he who had led our armies to victory emerged from retirement, to confer new and inestimable benefits on his country.

With a firmness great minds only can evince, he interposed his weight of character and his well-earned popularity, to save this people from impending ruin. He strenuously advised calling a convention. He presided over that convention when called, and by his moderation and dignified impartiality, was greatly instrumental in moderating local prejudices, in reconciling differences of opinion, and in producing that hearty co-operation of the best talents and best feelings of the country, that induced the adoption of the Constitution.

His exertions did not terminate here. Elected (I need not say with what unanimity) to be our first President, he hastened to adjust a system adapted to the development of the vast resources of this rising empire, by giving a proper direction to the spirit of enterprize that characterizes the natives of these States. Calling to his aid men of well-tried talent and zeal for the public service, he speedily dispelled the fears entertained ; and commanded public confidence, by recommending laws for the security of public and private rights. With the

cool and deliberate wisdom characteristic of his actions; with a reach of thought that pervaded each department of government, he laid deep and broad the foundations of national greatness. No sooner had his skill placed the corner stone, than the edifice gradually rose to majestic grandeur, and assumed a form, and proportion, and comeliness, and strength, none but a master's hand could have given.

To say that our form of government is faultless, would be to predicate of a production of human wisdom, what reason and revelation both teach us can alone be affirmed of the works of the Creator. But I aver, and confidently challenge contradiction, that the wisdom of man has never devised a system in which liberty of conscience, freedom of opinion, the right of property, and civil liberty, were more fully secured to the individual, while administration have ample means to punish crime, to restrain disorder, to call out the military force of the country, and to command the wealth of the nation for the only end it should ever be used, a liberal expenditure for internal improvement, the protection of commerce, and the security of national honour.

Is this proposition denied? Let him who questions its truth behold the millions this day assembled in the temples of the Most High, to return thanks for the blessings they enjoy; and he will cease to doubt. Let him listen to the exulting assertions of a great people, while with one voice they exclaim, We worship the Creator in the mode most conformable to our consciences; we pursue vocations selected by ourselves, in the manner we think best calculated to promote our several interests, without any restraint, except that imposed by honesty and justice; we are taxed by our immediate representatives, who are amenable to us for their public acts.

justice is purely administered ; agriculture flourishes, while commerce distributes its productions, bringing in return an abundant harvest of wealth." The incentives to active industry are various ; and squalid poverty is rarely to be met with, unless originating, either mediately or immediately, in vice.

Neither are these, great as they are, all the blessings we boast. There are feelings of pride, which, when they flow from well-earned reputation, either in arts or arms, give a moral elevation to the national mind. Of these feelings we have no common share. We are descended from patriots who shed their best blood to vindicate their chartered rights. Recent occurrences have proved that we have not degenerated. The conquerors of Europe have fallen before the deadly aim of our marksmen ; and the piercing keenness of our bayonets, has taught British veterans that the blood circulating in our veins, like their's, can be freely shed on the field of victory. The thunders of our navy have been heard with terror by a before matchless foe ; and the red cross of England has lowered in submission to the triumphant stars of the American banner.

In no country is education so extensively diffused. If we have not rivalled older nations in finished scholars, we have at least equalled them in profound statesmen, learned jurists, powerful orators, sound philosophers, and ingenious mechanics. In a word, we are the countrymen of Washington, and of Hamilton ; of Jay, and of Patterson ; of Henry, and of Ames ; of Franklin, and of Rittenhouse ; of Livingston, and of Fulton.

Is there one who hears me whose heart does not respond to these feelings of ingenuous pride ? Is there a Jerseyman within the reach of my voice. who forgets that

the hills around us have been consecrated to freedom by the blood of his father ?

Venerable shades, who on this classick spot fought your last fight, and breathed your last sigh for all the heart of man holds dear ; if ever we cease to appreciate your worth, “ may our tongues lose their utterance and our right hands forget their cunning ! ”

It is proper, on occasions like the present, to consider the incidents that mark our own times.

Most of us have seen infidelity impiously assailing all the peculiar sources of the Christian’s hope and consolations : the virtuous and pious have watched its progress with grief : although they never doubted, that He, who for infinitely wise ends suffered the “ scorner to prevail, and the wicked man to be exalted for a season,” would in his own good time “ laugh them to scorn, and consume them in his fierce anger ; ” yet they feared lest the poison should affect our national morals. No man who reflects on the history of the last twenty years, will say that these fears were groundless.

Thanks be to God ! the season for apprehension is at an end, and we are this day permitted to enumerate among the causes for gratitude, the formation of societies in every state, whose exertions in the gratuitous distribution of the Bible, are blessed with that increased zeal for religion, necessarily created, by an acquaintance with the benign principles of the gospel.

The age of reason and philosophy, “ falsely so called,” is past, and it is our happy lot to witness the commencement of an age of common sense and piety, in which skepticism and infidelity will no longer be considered passports to literary fame, or political power.

The spirit of party, so long a scourge to our country, breaking in upon the peace of neighbourhoods, sapping

the foundations of family concord, and embittering the sweet and tender charities that unite man to man, is laid ; and it is with peculiar satisfaction we recognize in the chief magistrates of our general and state governments, the rulers of a people, not the heads of a faction.

Neither should we, as Jersey men, omit to notice with approbation the alteration effected in our courts of common pleas ; an alteration promising advantages that will continue to augment with our increasing industry, population, and wealth.

The transactions of Europe for the last twenty-five years, afford a solemn lesson. The mind sickens at the recollection of the crimes and barbarities of which civilized man, while freed from religious restraint, has been capable. Such has been the nature of the conflict, such the moral excitement, that the soul, hurried on by its feelings, has scarcely found a breathing-time, to reflect on the results of this unparalleled warfare. Peace is restored ; but the fruitful seeds of future contests are profusely scattered. The crater of the volcano is closed ; but the hollow murmurings within, denote the existence of ample materials for another eruption.

Much has been done to disenchant the deluded--much to curb the turbulent. The blood-stained robes of infidelity have been stripped from her cadaverous carcass, and she has been exhibited in her naked deformity. The genius of feudal tyranny has been crippled. The march of mind has been gigantic. Important concessions have been made to the legitimate rights of man. The slave trade, (so long a reproach to humanity,) has been forbidden. But much more remains to be done. The increased intelligence of her people lays a just claim to an extension of civil freedom : if this claim is not

met in a spirit of conciliation and wisdom, the total abruption of her forms of civil polity must ensue.

It were a want of justice, not to laud the honourable example Alexander, of Russia, is setting to the potentates of the world, by fostering the gradual improvement of mind throughout his extensive empire ; thus demonstrating, that he who has so deservedly been hailed father of his people, and their deliverer from the invader's sword, will leave no means untried to rescue them from the no less appalling bondage of mental darkness.

What shall we say of the revolution in South-America? Abhorrent as is the superstition, the bigotry, the narrow colonial policy, the cold-blooded, cowardly tyranny of the Spanish king ; the sole adherent of the slave trade ; and the blind restorer of the inquisition ; yet, can we find any thing in the principles or conduct of his Cis-Atlantic subjects, evincive of their fitness to be freemen? In that fair and fertile portion of the earth, where all besides is lofty and sublime, or beautiful and lovely—where nature, as if in sportive mood, has put on her every charm to woo the senses to delight, and bid the soul luxuriate amidst endless sweets—man alone is degenerate. A convincing proof, that rulers by limiting commercial intercourse, or restraining freedom of inquiry on any subject, whether political, religious, or literary—debase the minds, enervate the activity, and destroy the physical and moral usefulness of a people. All then we can offer the Spanish Americans is, our best wishes for their regeneration, and a sincere hope, that by the attrition of the ill-digested and discordant materials composing their population, a spark may be elicited, that will kindle a flame of patriotism in the rising generation, worthy of the better days of their Spanish ancestors.

My countrymen ! Providence has committed to us a great, and a precious trust ; no less a trust than the guardianship of our own honour, happiness, and liberty, and of those of posterity. It becomes us then to consider, maturely to consider, the modes best calculated to preserve these “ jewels without price.”

The existence of a federate republic, in which independent states should cede a portion of their sovereignty to a government formed to legislate for the general interest, has been supposed impossible. The experience of nearly thirty years has demonstrated the fallacy of this supposition. The states composing the Union have yielded to the general government the powers necessary to carry on intercourse with foreign nations : they have authorized it to declare war, to conclude peace, to raise armies, to build navies, to call out the militia in case of invasion, to levy taxes, to establish a judiciary, and to regulate commerce. At the same time they have reserved to themselves many important attributes of sovereignty, which bring the state authorities constantly in contact with the people, thereby creating an influence daily felt and seen. Some of the states are sufficiently powerful in population, in territory, and in wealth, to become important sovereignties. They do not want leaders who from selfish motives will endeavour to keep up an influence subversive of the end for which the constitution was formed. We who are members of a small state should watch this tendency with jealousy ; and while we withhold our support from any party who would stretch the powers of the general government beyond their constitutional limits ; we must equally shun the machinations of those, who, under the pretence of keeping down executive power and influence, would give an undue preponderance to a state faction. Our

safety, importance, and well-being, are blended with the Union ; and in proportion as government exercises its functions with firmness, with dignity, with liberality, and with justice, are these promoted. Should we not then be wary in listening to the invectives of the factious, who are already cabaling both in the north and the south, to put down an administration deservedly approbated by the best men of all parties ?—an administration headed by a president who has imitated the political and moral virtues of “the father of our country,” by recommending and carrying into effect measures for strengthening our military and naval power ; by resisting foreign aggression with firmness ; by promoting agriculture, commerce, and manufactures ; by organizing plans for internal improvement, calculated to give strength and perpetuity to the Union ; by scrupulously abstaining from any act infringing on the powers reserved by the states ; and by openly manifesting his respect for religion.

In a government constituted as is ours, the citizen who omits to exercise his elective franchise, or who in its exercise, is swayed by private views to assist in giving offices to any but the honest and intelligent, abandons his own best interests, and those of his country. Neither is he less criminal, who neglects any fit occasion to discountenance licentiousness, and to lend all the aid his weight of character, and the force of example can afford, to the cause of religion and virtue.

Would we faithfully execute this trust ? we must not forget that the welfare of a nation is to be augmented principally by cultivating the arts of peace.

Our political, civil, moral, and religious institutions, have attracted the attention and elicited the praise of the enlightened of the old world. May we not hope, that time is only wanting, for American literature to acquire

a fame commensurate with the resources of the country, and the intellectual vigour and enterprising spirit manifested by our citizens in the hour of danger, in improving the useful arts, and in the conduct of public affairs? The present is a season of peace, but not consequently of inactivity : it affords a fit occasion for exertion in the attainment of excellence in the sciences that adorn civilized man, and render him capable of appreciating and enjoying the intellectual pleasures for which he has been fitted by his Maker. I trust we do not want a disposition to embrace so happy a moment for entering on this honourable competition with refined nations; and that, by establishing literary institutions, by fostering societies for the promotion of agriculture, by cultivating the national mind, by furthering plans for the embellishment and internal improvement of the country, we shall acquire for our times a reputation as lasting and as grateful, as that of the glorious era we commemorate.

Would we perform our duty to those dear pledges of affection committed to our care by the Deity? Do we wish to be remembered with gratitude and affection by our children? Is it our desire to fit our sons to be freemen? We must then leave no means untried to inculcate the precepts of morals and religion; we must imprint upon the minds of our youth a knowledge of the principles of our government, and of the history of the country; we must early teach them to avoid the corrupting influence of indolence; we must point out to them and allure them to pursue “the right path of a virtuous and noble education; laborious indeed at the first ascent, but else so smooth, so green, so full of goodly prospects and melodious sounds on every side, that the harp of Orpheus was not more charming.”

My countrymen ! let us not be deluded ; let us not deceive ourselves. “ Evil communications corrupt good manners.” Liberty can not long exist amidst irreligion and vice : she is the reward of the virtuous and the brave, and can only be maintained by the intelligent.

Go then, fathers ! teach your sons by your example, as well as by your precepts, how to deserve to be free. All history is open to you ; its pages teem with awful warnings, while they perpetuate the fame of “ nations, and kindreds, and people,” once great and happy ; but now fallen, in consequence of their irreligion, their vices, and their ignorance. May we learn wisdom from their example !

Why these monitions to you ? You have drank too copiously from the cup of virtuous pleasure, foolishly to dash it from your lips. You have too long enjoyed the happiness arising from conscious rectitude and honest independence, lightly to risk its loss, or weakly to shrink from any task calculated to insure its continuance.

Persevere, then, in well doing ; and may the conviction of having striven, throughout a life crowned with years, to transmit the blessings of civil liberty, together with a pure and spotless reputation, to your descendants, smooth your dying pillows, and gild your last hours with seraphic joy.
