

**TRIBUTES TO THE
MEMORY OF
ROBERT C. WINTHROP,
DECEMBER 13, 1894**

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THE MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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Massachusetts Historical Society.

DECEMBER MEETING, 1894.

THE stated meeting was held on Thursday, the 13th instant, at three o'clock, P. M.; the President, Dr. GEORGE E. ELLIS, in the chair. There was an unusually large attendance of members, as it was understood that the time would be specially devoted to tributes to the memory of the late Hon. ROBERT C. WINTHROP, who had died since the preceding meeting, in his eighty-sixth year.¹

After the reading of the record of the last meeting, the PRESIDENT said that, in accordance with a vote of the Council, the regular order of business would be laid aside, and that there would be no communications of the usual character. At the close of the meeting some votes which it would be necessary to pass at the present time would be offered by the Treasurer. He then said: —

We have with us here to-day the remembrance only of an associate so long identified with these rooms, and so valued and honored by us as one who brought to the Presidency of this Society distinctions won in the highest ranges of public service. There are many places, scenes, and fellowships in which the career and qualities of Mr. Winthrop will be reviewed and commemorated. His life, lengthened through the fullest span of years till its springs were exhausted, gave him

¹ Mr. Winthrop was born in Milk Street, Boston, May 12, 1809, and died at 90 Marlborough Street, Boston, November 16, 1894.

space for the exercise of his rich endowments, attainments, and accomplishments in many and varied fields of elevated distinction. His full career was divided, in nearly equal terms of years, into three widely different forms of service and experience. In very early manhood he came into public life under the most favoring influences of opportunity and popularity. With a fine personality, gifted in presence and in speech, highly cultivated in scholarship, literary and classical, with pre-eminence in family and social position, he was courted and honored by rapid advancement, in civil, military, and political offices, in his native State. He justified the partiality shown to him by his full ability to meet all expectations, by his elevation of character, his talents, aptitudes, and eloquence, on many exacting occasions.

The second strongly marked period of his career was that which found him in honored positions in our national legislature, in the convulsions and distractions of the most perilous struggle in the life of our country, a storm in which two seas met. It was a time and an occasion of trial, with glooms and catastrophes, through which no earnest and prominent responsible actor passed unscathed by party heats, acrimony, and challenging of principle or courage. Mr. Winthrop's temperament and his instructed judgment prompted him to stand for conciliation and peace to the utmost edge of the alternative presented to our country. The alternative being decided, a fervid and steadfast patriotism guided his course, without passion or bitterness, till the issue closed. Privileged are those among us who have lived only after that conflict. For those of us who passed through it the best we can now do is no longer to revive or agitate those strifes, but to reserve them for quiet hours of reading and thought. It was among the privileges of his lengthened life that Mr. Winthrop survived not only all his leading contemporaries, but also the most embittered memories, misjudgments, and alienations arising from them. Such of them as concerned himself were kindly reviewed and conciliated. In the serenity and calm of advancing years, the

memory of them came to him only with gentle speech and judgments of charity. Politics exempted him from choosing place or responsibility in after contentions of parties.

The third period of Mr. Winthrop's life was that in which he was best known to most of you here. It has been, in the main, one of retired dignity, — the statesman's, the scholar's, the honored citizen's years of retrospect and repose. Yet it has been by no means an idle term, enriched as it was by labors of the mind and pen. Our last great bereavement as a Society took from us that loved and gifted man to whom all bright occasions made their appeal for a Poem. To Mr. Winthrop like appeals were made for Prose. Besides the multiplied occasions on which, with learning, grace, and felicitous speech, he met the constant course of time in events, with successive actors, it was his privilege to rehearse and glorify the four most signal incidents in our national history, — the Plymouth pilgrimage, the Centennial of Independence, the triumph at Yorktown, and the dedication of the Washington Monument. More than one hundred and fifty of our own countrymen, of various distinctions, besides many of eminence abroad, have received from his pen biographical or memorial tributes. From the four published volumes of his orations, addresses, and speeches, might be culled a well-nigh continuous history, narration, or relation of the chief incidents, local and national, in our annals, interspersed with the agency and influence of leading characters. In the wide and comprehensive range of benevolent and philanthropic methods which are in action so vigorously in our own privileged community, his years of retirement were most assiduously engaged. His name and his contributions are mentioned in connection with each and all of them, either as the official head in their management or as a generous patron. Our best organized charitable institution and method, Bible and other religious societies, the Children's Hospital and other noble objects, engaged his devotion and oversight. Chief among them was one most dear to him.

It is well known, at least to some of us here, that after that philanthropic banker, George Peabody, had exercised his own judgment in disposing his munificent benevolence in England, he visited his native country with the intent of dividing a yet larger sum for like objects here. He found that he needed not only suggestions, but discerning and wise counsel, intelligent advice. This he sought and received from Mr. Winthrop, his close friend for many years, of whose character and qualities he had the highest estimate. The largest gift our Society had up to that time received, in money, from any individual donor was that of Mr. Peabody; and he wished it understood, not being himself a votary of history, that his gift was wholly a personal testimony to our President. To the last month of his life, with its feebleness and its burdens, Mr. Winthrop gave his absorbed zeal and his patient oversight, in supervision and in detail, to the administration of the great Peabody Education Fund for the South. It was more than a surmise for some of us, that Mr. Winthrop's love and labor in that service were moved by a sympathetic desire to heal the wounds of a desolating strife.

The chief matter for recognition by us here in the long career of our late associate, in the wide range of his accomplishments and interests, is his connection with and his great services to this Society. More than once, in pleasant private converse with him in his later years, he said to me that the place he has filled here, with its duties and opportunities, had furnished many of the highest pleasures and satisfactions of his life. As a member of the Society for more than half of the century of its existence, and its President for thirty years, only our older members are fully informed how much the Society, in its present vigor and activity and resources, is indebted to his wise promptings and oversight. His family name, from that noble, honored, and revered leader and Governor of this wilderness Colony who first bore it, with its gatherings of repute and esteem for generations, might indeed have fitly entered into the