

**HISTORIANS AND HISTORICAL
SOCIETIES. AN ADDRESS AT THE
OPENING OF THE FENWAY BUILDING
OF THE MASSACHUSETTS
HISTORICAL SOCIETY, APRIL 13, 1899**

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Historians and historical societies. An address at the opening of the Fenway building of the Massachusetts historical society, April 13, 1899 by Charles Francis Adams

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Historians and Historical Societies

AN ADDRESS

AT THE OPENING OF THE FENWAY BUILDING OF
THE MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

APRIL 13, 1899

BY

CHARLES FRANCIS ADAMS, LL.D.

PRESIDENT OF THE SOCIETY

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HISTORIANS

AND

HISTORICAL SOCIETIES.

IN 1791, — eight years more than a century ago, — the site upon which this building stands was an indistinguishable portion of the “Roxbury flats,” as the region hereabouts had immemorially been called, — the neck-ward side of Boston’s Back Bay. It was a remote, unfrequented locality; while Court Street, as the ancient Queen Street of provincial times had three years before been renamed, was still a place of residence. On the 21st day of January, of that year, eight Boston gentlemen met by appointment in the house of one of their number, William Tudor, — the house then standing on the corner of Court Street and what was still known as Prison Lane, now Court Square, — the present familiar site of the northerly portion of Young’s Hotel. Four of the eight were ministers, — divines of the provincial period: all were men of middle life, the oldest, James Sullivan, being in his forty-eighth year, while Thomas Wallcut, the youngest, was only thirty-three. The constitution of Massachusetts had at that time been adopted only ten years before. John Hancock was, for the eighth time, Governor of the Commonwealth; it was but the second year of the first administration of Washington. The eight gentlemen, all born British subjects and only recently become citizens of the young republic, had met for the purpose of forming an historical society, — certainly the first organization of its kind in America, possibly the first in the world. They called it simply “The Historical Society,” a name which, three years later, when a formal act of incorporation was obtained from the Legislature, became “The Massachusetts Historical Society,” — the name the organization has ever since borne, and now inscribed over the entrance to this, its third building and sixth abiding-place.

As one thinks of those eight gentlemen gathered in the parlor of the Court Street dwelling on that January day, 1791, and the purpose for which they were there met, one of the great rhetorical passages of English literature suggests itself, especially to an American, — Burke's much quoted vision of Lord Bathurst, — then, it may be added, not yet become a classic, seeing that it was uttered only fifteen years before, and Burke was still living, a man of sixty-two. In that memorable passage, you will recall, Burke pictures to the House of Commons an angel as drawing aside from before the eyes of him whom he describes as "the auspicious youth," the curtain which veils futurity, and revealing the wonders he was destined to see. Had the Genius of History, invoked that day in the comfortable, four-square Boston dwelling by those eight gentlemen, — four of them divines of the earlier Massachusetts stock, — raised for them in like manner that curtain veiling futurity, it is curious to reflect on the range of feelings he would have excited, — astonishment, wonder, admiration, disgust, apprehension, fear. Their future is our past; what they would have apprehended darkly we have seen face to face. Let us look at it for a moment, if we can, through their eyes, and in Edmund Burke's mirror.

The angel of Lord Bathurst, you remember, enhanced the rising glories and commercial grandeur of England, by first unfolding bright and happy scenes of household prosperity and domestic honor; then, presently, pointing out in the larger and grander panorama which gradually opened, a little speck, scarce visible in the mass of national interest, a small seminal principle rather than a formed body, he went on: "Young man, there is America, — which at this day [1704] serves for little more than to amuse you with stories of savage men and uncouth manners, yet shall, before you taste of death, show itself equal to the whole of that commerce which now attracts the envy of the world. Whatever England has been growing to by a progressive increase of improvement, brought in by varieties of people, by succession of civilized conquests and civilizing settlements in a series of seventeen hundred years, you shall see as much added to her by America in a single life!"

Burke, I am well enough aware, is a dangerous spirit to invoke. His imagination and his rhetoric suggest a standard

with which no one cares to challenge comparison; nor is it altogether easy to drop at once from his lofty sustained expression to our simpler modes of speech. I will try to do so. When the founders met, the town of Boston numbered, it is supposed, some 20,000 inhabitants; and its original topography, as well as its forms of political life, were almost unimpaired, — the town-meeting and its board of selectmen still ruling the little peninsula, which a single bridge only connected with the mainland. Physically it was thus in all essential respects the Tri-mount on which one hundred and sixty years before Winthrop found Blackstone dwelling, — a hermit in a wilderness. Intellectually, and politically even, it did not greatly differ from the Boston of Cotton Mather, Zabdiel Boylston and Samuel Sewall, — the Boston in which Franklin was born and Samuel Adams agitated, — the same Boston whose affairs Thomas Hutchinson administered so well. But one physical aspect of the Boston and its immediate vicinity of 1791 has peculiar interest for us here now and on this occasion. The Common, an unenclosed pasture stretching down to the easterly beach of the Back Bay, was on the outskirts of the town; and beyond it lay a broad tidal estuary, fringed by reaches of salt marsh through which creeks and channels wound a sinuous way, along whose edges, the haunt and the home of curlew and wild fowl, the eel and the bivalve, tall sedge grass waved. The single traditional road, with rude structures here and there along its sides, still led from near the foot of the Common, across the Neck, to the neighboring town of Roxbury; and this building stands on an extension of what was then known as Frog Lane, within the limits of Roxbury, and in the midst of what would have seemed to those eight gentlemen in Court Street a dreamy exhalation from the familiar "Flats."

Such was the situation in the fast-aging eighteenth century. The nineteenth has now already drawn yet nearer to its close. Now imagine the Genius of History raising, that January day, the curtain which covered futurity from before the eyes of our founders, as Burke's angel raised it before those of Bathurst. The thought, even at this time, suggests a shiver. What, it might almost be asked, did not that century, then about to begin, now closing, have in store, — what ingredient for surprise, whether that of admiration or of horror? Pursuing the

course suggested by Burke, the eyes of the founders would first have rested on scenes of domestic honor and prosperity not less alluring than those which would have made glad the heart of young Bathurst. True, in the Boston of to-day the founders would have sought in vain to recognize some familiar feature of their home. Its very profile is changed; for two of Trimount's three hills are gone. If they looked long enough, and with a scrutiny sufficiently close, they might, among the towering monuments of modern trade, detect a few familiar buildings, — King's Chapel, their State House, the "Old South," Faneuil Hall; but Boston, reaching out over its busy thoroughfares to one half the points of the compass, — Boston, absorbing adjacent territory, creating new territory, would have ceased to be a peninsula, while in what they knew as the Back Bay marshes, — now dotted with trees and shrubbery, and become a region of watercourses, driveways and parks, — in this by them least-suspected quarter would be pointed out the home of the Society they had that day met to create.

It was at this stage in the vision that the angel called Bathurst's attention to America, — the scarcely visible speck — the "seminal principle rather than a formed body." History, not territory, was the domain our founders were gathered there to enter upon. And it would seem as if it could not have been without a gleam of Satanic mischief in his face that the genius of the occasion now unrolled the record of those then living or but lately dead, who, tested by the coming century's judgment, had by their writings most contributed to historic thought and historic methods; for it is not easy, though it assuredly verges on the ludicrous, to imagine the dismay with which those four divines at least would have read, blazoned on the roll in letters of a resplendency which obscured and even obliterated the rest, the names of Gibbon and Voltaire. Voltaire, the scoffing French infidel, — at once the loathing and the terror of the orthodox; — Gibbon, the free-thinker, whose history its president was that very year about publicly to announce, was not tolerated as part of the curriculum of the neighboring university. Milot's "Elements," whatever that may be, was, as a text-book, preferred, while "Gibbon's history was never thought of."

And from this point forward it is greatly to be feared the heretofore beneficent Genius would have assumed an ever-

increasing Mephistophelian aspect in the eyes of those newly emancipated colonists, — the eight historical Fausts of Boston, — while the vision would have become altogether painful in its interest and its surprises. Again it changed. And now the very foundations, the accepted primal facts, the basic syenite, as it were, not only of human history but of religious belief, one by one crumbled away, and Adam, even, had not waked and walked in Eden. No longer descended from angels, man had been evolved from an ape. And worse yet was to come; a world in which the principles of historical criticism, applied to the books of Herodotus, were also applied to those of Moses; and, in no irreverent spirit be it said, the Saviour even was discussed and weighed as a young Jewish philosopher, — the son of a Nazarene carpenter. They little dreamed it, those eight gentlemen, — for at best they were not of the imaginative kind; though, for that matter, had they been of imagination all compact, they would hardly have dreamed it the more, — they little dreamed that the world, their world, even then stood on the very brink of the French revolution, — that chasm yawning between the centuries.

But it is time to have done with Burke and with visions, and come to the matter in hand. Hard upon sixty years have now elapsed since Thomas Wallcut, the last survivor of that little party of 1791, was borne to his grave. The life of the Society they organized includes within a mere span the entire development of modern historical processes and philosophy; and it is at worst not more than a pardonable exaggeration to say that our organization goes back to the movement which, as respects historical method, thought and expression, was the equivalent of that other movement of two centuries before in art and letters, which we call the Renaissance. Of the later movement our Society has been a part. It has in a greater or less degree sympathized in its spirit; sooner or later, it has accepted its results. That spirit and those results are the theme for to-day; and, in measuring what has been already accomplished, I shall endeavor in some degree to forecast what remains immediately to be done: for in the great process of evolution the last step ever leads to the next. There is no finality in results.

The lines along which the process of thought and study

directed to history were in future to be pursued had already, in 1791, assumed definite shape. Coming at once to the concrete, our fathers — and by the phrase “our fathers” in this connection I refer to the generation which intervened between us and the founders — looked upon Hume, Robertson and Gibbon as the three great modern historians, — that incomparable English triumvirate through whose example and precepts the classic traditions had been revived. No better method of reaching a correct understanding of the progress up to this time made in what we would fain believe to be the science of history can, therefore, be devised, than by taking these three writers as a landmark, — a starting-point, as it were, — to estimate their work from the standpoint we occupy. It is only necessary further to premise that they all antedate our Society; for, though Robertson and Gibbon did not die until 1793 and 1794, their work had in 1791 been done. The publication of Hume’s history, begun in 1754, was completed in 1761; Robertson’s *Charles V.*, on which his reputation to-day mainly rests, appeared in 1769; while the first volume of “*The Decline and Fall*,” which included the famous fifteenth and sixteenth chapters, came out in 1776, and the last volume in 1788. Between the publication of the earliest English historical work of the modern school and the organization of this Society, thirty-six years had, therefore, elapsed.

Looking back through the perspective of an additional century, there can be no manner of question that those histories marked, for the years between 1750 and 1790, a distinct step in advance. Through them historical work was at last differentiated from other literary pursuits, and the day was forever gone when polite and elegant writers of the Goldsmith and Smollett type could make a living from booksellers by alternating a history of Greece with one of *Animated Nature*, a history of Rome with a comedy or a novel, and a history of England with a poem, a volume of essays, or a book of travels. From that time forth historians were to constitute a class by themselves. Accordingly, all other historical writers in the English tongue before 1791 may, in comparison with these three, — Hume, Robertson and Gibbon, — be dismissed from consideration. These three were workers, though not the first workers, in a new field; for Bossuet, Condorcet, Montesquieu and Voltaire had, though in another tongue, already preceded