

**THE DOVER PULPIT DURING THE
REVOLUTIONARY WAR, A DISCOURSE
COMMEMORATIVE OF THE
DISTINGUISHED SERVICE RENDERED BY
REV. JEREMY BELKNAP, D.D., TO THE
CAUSE OF AMERICAN INDEPENDENCE**

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The Dover pulpit during the Revolutionary War, a discourse commemorative of the distinguished service rendered by Rev. Jeremy Belknap, D.D., to the cause of American independence by George B. Spalding

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GEORGE B. SPALDING

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DISCOURSE.

And with them were the prophets of God helping them.—Ezra 5 : 2.

The popular mind looks upon the historic page as a child looks at a painting. It is the few imposing forms standing in the foreground, which hold the exclusive gaze of each. Neither has an eye for perspective. They both fail to catch those more refined and really nobler figures upon which the Divine Wisdom or the artist's genius has most busied itself. It is the military hero, with his waving plume and his gleaming sword, who fills the eye and the imagination of both children and men, while the poet and the thinker, in their common garb, are left unnoticed. Where the page of history is one simply of military conquest, as where it records the triumph of Alexander over the Persians, of necessity the one shining figure is the great Grecian soldier, and the only study of the history of his period is the study of his campaigns and battles. So, too, to almost an equal degree, it may be said of that period in French history where Napoleon riveted upon himself the gaze of an affrighted world. It was a drama

through which one passion moved, and where one colossal form filled the stage. There was no perspective, no background of great principles, no sublime characters living and dying in the inspiration of spiritual truths and ideas, — none of these looming up even obscurely behind the scenes of smoke and slaughter. The history of France, and I might almost say the history of Europe, from 1796 to 1815, a period of about twenty years, is simply a history of Napoleon and his generals.

But there are other pages of history, which, though they too record the progress and result of battle and siege, and recount the exploits of generals and soldiers, yet must needs give their largest space to the more important narrative of the rise and movement of those great ideas and sentiments which are first sown by Heaven in the souls of prophets, scholars and thinkers, which then reach out to seize upon and influence the heart of a people, and finally find their issue and victory upon the field of battle.

This truth has its many illustrations, but there is none so brilliant and conspicuous as that found in the true history of the American War for Independence. "Lives of Washington and his Generals," narratives of those seven years of heroic courage, vast suffering, and unconquerable faith, on the part of their half disciplined, starving, and almost always defeated armies,— these furnish us but a small part of the real material of that mighty epoch. On the great canvas, these hold the foreground, and first challenge the attention. They

are worthy to be had in everlasting remembrance. There is little danger of their ever failing of this. But to him who has any eye for perspective, there are other forms filling the spaces of the canvas beyond: scholars, orators, statesmen, seers, whose faces glow with even a purer light, in whose great thoughts and words had already been fought out the mighty victory which the sword did afterward only confirm. For the calm, dispassionate voice of history has declared, "The Revolution was an accomplished fact before the war commenced."

Behind the towering form of Washington; behind his noble *confreres*, Gates, Green, Knox, Schulyer, Stuben, Sullivan, Lee, Ward; behind those ranks of starved, bleeding, dying, but unconquerable soldiers, there rises an immortal group: the Adames, Hancock, Otis, Jefferson, Henry, Franklin, Robert Treat Paine, accomplished lawyers, sagacious statesmen, eloquent speakers. Before the insurrection of arms, there had been insurrection in the thoughts and words of these great civilians. Some of these men in way of philosophical treatise, others through legal argument, others still in fiery, irresistible appeal, had for years before open rebellion began, been pointing the people to the steady encroachments of England upon their liberties, and arousing them to the needed pitch of indignant protest, and at last deadly resistance.

But look again; gaze deeper into the receding canvas, and you will see behind these great political leaders, other forms, faces attenuated to a higher spir-

ituality, to a finer scholarship, and to a more sacred passion. Before Adams or Hancock, or Franklin or Jefferson had uttered their denunciations of British tyranny, before even the possibility of resistance to arbitrary power had been thought of by them, before they had even dreamed of independence and of a union of the colonies in a great nationality,—these men, in the inspiration of a gospel which is that of liberty, had been laying bare the falsity of royal assumptions, expounding the principles of good government and of manhood in the state, and schooling legislators, judges and people to an understanding of those civil rights which are the offspring of religious freedom,—and, as events thickened, in advance of all others, they were ever narrowing the issue between the colonies and the home government, concentrating more and more the aroused indignation of an oppressed people into the idea of resistance, and pointing out to the sagacious statesmen of the day the principles and method of a vital union and co-operation among the provinces. Who are these men who hold the background in the picture, whose very obscurity serves to make more prominent these others. They were Congregational ministers!

The principles of our civil liberty and of our national independence, which forty millions of people in these days are celebrating, did not find their first utterance in the great Declaration. They did not spring to life in the debates of the Provincial Congress. They did not originate in the elaborate papers of Adams and

Jefferson. They did not leap forth to their first light in the impassioned eloquence of James Otis, or the vehement appeal of Patrick Henry. They had their birth in the Election Sermons, in the Fast and Thanksgiving Discourses of the Congregational ministers of New England.

When and where did the American Revolution begin? The question can be variously answered. The children in the schools have been taught to say, "At Lexington, April 19, 1775."

But the question has been better answered by John Adams, who, speaking of the argument of James Otis, delivered in 1761, in the old Town-house of Boston, now the old State-house, against the Writs of Assistance, exclaimed, "James Otis breathed into this nation the breath of life. Then and there the child Independence was born. In fifteen years, i. e., in 1776, it grew up to manhood and declared itself free." But a better and a truer answer awaits us. Robert Treat Paine, the great lawyer and statesman, one of the signers of the Declaration, called Dr. Jonathan Mayhew "The Father of civil and religious liberty in Massachusetts and America." Twenty-five years before those guns were fired in the streets of Lexington, eleven years before Otis launched the bolts of his fiery argument at the Royal Court in Boston,—eleven years before this, the young preacher, just then in his thirtieth year, from his pulpit of the West church, in that city, preached a sermon which a historian has called, "The Morning Gun of the Revolution." It was a ser-

mon concerning which the elder Adams said, "It was read by everybody, celebrated by friends, and abused by enemies. It was seasoned with wit and satire superior to any in Swift or Franklin."

I have read through this famous discourse, and have been astonished not only at the grand sweep of its argument, but especially at the fearlessness of its entire spirit. The preacher says: "When once magistrates act contrary to their office and the end of their institution,—when they rob and ruin the public, instead of being guardians of its peace and welfare,—they immediately cease to be the ordinance and ministers of God, and no more deserve that glorious character than common pirates and highwaymen." This certainly was a sharp arrow in the side of the King's defenders, who so stoutly affirmed that "The King can do no wrong," and that "Submission, clear, absolute, and without exception, is the duty of the subject." But the preacher went on to assert another duty of the subject than this. "A people," he says, "really oppressed in a great degree by their sovereign, can not well be insensible when they are so oppressed; and such a people,—if I may allude to an ancient fable,—have, like the Hesperian fruit, a dragon for their protector and guardian. Nor would they have any reason to mourn if some Hercules should appear to dispatch him. For a nation thus to arise unanimously and resist their prince, even to the dethroning him, is not criminal, but a reasonable way of vindicating their liberties and just rights. It is making use of the means, and the only means which

God has put into their power for mutual and self-defense. And it would be highly criminal in them not to make use of this means. It would be stupid tameness and unaccountable folly for whole nations to suffer *one* unreasonable, ambitious and cruel man, to wanton and riot in their misery. And in such a case it would, of the two, be more rational to suppose that they that did not resist, than that they who did, would receive to themselves damnation."

Here was a lesson set for the men and the boys to learn. How well they learned it, may be seen in the words of John Adams, twenty-five years afterward, when he exclaimed in 1775, "We are not exciting rebellion. Opposition, nay, open, avowed resistance by arms against usurpation and lawless violence, is not rebellion by the law of God or the land."

"To draw the character of Mayhew," writes Adams, "would be to transcribe a dozen volumes." "This transcendent genius," he adds, "threw all the weight of his great fame into the scale of his country from the first, and maintained it there with zeal and ardor to his death." It was this Congregational minister who suggested to James Otis the idea of committees of correspondence, a measure of greatest efficiency in producing concert of action between the colonies, a thing of vital importance. Thus he writes to Otis, in June, 1766, "You have heard of the *communion of churches*, and I am to set out to-morrow morning for Rutland, to assist at an ecclesiastical council. Not expecting to return this week, while I was thinking of this in my bed,