

HENRY WHEATON, AN APPRECIATION

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Henry Wheaton, an Appreciation by William Vail Kellen

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WILLIAM VAIL KELLEN

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AN APPRECIATION

**BEING THE ADDRESS DELIVERED BEFORE THE
ALUMNI OF BROWN UNIVERSITY ON THE OCCA-
SION OF THE ONE HUNDREDTH ANNIVERSARY OF
HIS GRADUATION, JUNE SEVENTEEN, MDCCCII**

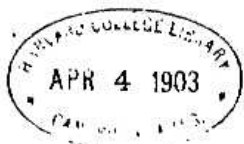
BY WILLIAM VAIL KELLEN, PH. D.

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The Author

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HENRY WHEATON

*Mr. President, Fellow Alumni of Brown University,
Ladies and Gentlemen:*

ONE hundred years ago next September, when Commencement meant the commencement, and not, as now it means, the end of the Academic year, Henry Wheaton was graduated from Brown University.

It is to render honor to the life, character, and world-service of this great son of "Brown" and of Rhode Island that we are gathered here to-day. Perhaps, taking into account the extent, the variety, and the value of his life-work, and the size of the stage on which he acted worthily his part, he may be called the greatest son of his Alma Mater, as he certainly was the greatest son of this Commonwealth. As was said by one of the eulogists of Chief Justice Marshall,—“The very greatness and completeness of his work prevent our appreciating how great he was.” It is eminently fit and proper that the State of his birth, the city of his early residence, the Courts before which he essayed to practise and the Bar of which he was an early member, should unite with the College in the celebration of this notable anniversary.

The “little compass of an hour,” conventionally allotted to celebrations such as this, irrespective of the importance of the occasion, limits me to outlin-

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ing in a few bold strokes the life, the attainments, and the accomplishments of this eminent man,—portraying his youth and his manhood by allusion to salient traits and to unusual experiences only, and describing his noble and peerless work by the briefest generalization.

If the sketch lacks coherence and form, ascribe this unfortunate result, I pray you, to the speaker's want of skill, and not to any lack of precision in mental quality or of beauty in moral contour on the part of this ideally useful and symmetrical but, alas, all too brief life.

Wheaton has paid the penalty visited too often upon those who have done mighty work secluded from the public gaze, or who have served their country, however faithfully, abroad; for I do not find that the name, fame, and exceptional qualities of this great man have been held up in oral discourse as a conspicuous example of the ideally gifted, loyal, and useful citizen, to the proud contemplation of appreciative age or for the encouragement of ambitious and ingenuous youth, either in his native State or without its borders, in the more than fifty years that have elapsed since his untimely death, except for a little contemporaneous comment and an address delivered at a single meeting of the Bar Association of his adopted State. Such neglect of itself would justify the devotion of this day and hour to such a theme, if any excuse were needed beyond the fact that this festival-time corresponds to the cen-

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tenary of his graduation from this Venerable Institution.

Henry Wheaton was born in Providence, Rhode Island, on November 27, 1785.

The Wheatons were of Welsh descent, and the emigrant, Robert, settled successively in Salem, Rehoboth, and Swansea across the line in Massachusetts, and there plied his trade as a tanner. Subsequently his descendants migrated to Providence, where Seth Wheaton, the father of Henry Wheaton, described as "a man of strong and determined character and of great natural sagacity," became a successful merchant, and later, upon retiring with a competence, the President of the Rhode Island Branch of the United States Bank—a position that stamped him as a leader in this community. Wheaton's mother, as notable for an "extreme purity of character" as for "sweetness of temper," was a woman of native common sense, a strong intellect, and of rare refinement. Wheaton would seem to have been indebted to both parents in about an equal degree for his vigorous intellect and practical sense, but to his mother chiefly for the finer qualities and tastes which he possessed in so notable a degree.

Wheaton however owed much of his early zest for knowledge to Dr. Levi P. Wheaton, his maternal uncle and future father-in-law, who, besides exerting a potent influence on Wheaton's whole life, was an uncommon man, meriting, though time is so precious, more than a passing notice. Dr. Wheaton

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entered Rhode Island College—the first attempt at naming this Institution—in 1774, when Dr. Manning, its founder, and Professor Howell constituted the Faculty, and, with the sole assistance of a member of the Junior class, formed its whole teaching staff. Dr. Wheaton left college in 1778, served in a military hospital in Providence, was afterwards a surgeon upon an armed privateer, and, taken a British prisoner, was put in charge of a prison-ship at New York, where he rendered good offices to his ill-fated fellow-prisoners. Peace came, and late in 1782 Dr. Wheaton received his degree, lived in New York for a while, but finally settled in Providence, where he practised medicine for upwards of fifty years. Of strong and varied parts, a masterful man, he would have become, if he had devoted himself to politics, in which he was greatly interested, a person of great mark and influence. This extract from a letter written by Wheaton to his uncle on August 10, 1845, gives a glimpse of the influence exerted by the elder over the younger during his formative years:

“I went a few days since to Potsdam to see the first performance of ‘Medea’—the tragedy of Euripides translated into German. . . . I thought of you as I was sitting there and wished you could have been with me, as it would, I am sure, have given you great pleasure to see the Greek tragedy revived,—we used to enjoy Sophocles so much in reading him together.”

Dr. Wheaton, surviving his nephew, lived to be ninety and retained his faculties unimpaired to that

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great age, reading for seven or eight hours a day all the new books as they issued from the press and criticising them in his note-book as he read. In the last entry he commented on a passage condemning our then more general national habit of chewing tobacco: "As an instance," says his memorialist, "of the manner in which Dr. Wheaton endeavored to profit, even at his advanced age, by any useful advice, we would mention that he himself renounced this habit, in which he had freely indulged for many years, in consequence of reading this passage." His memorialist does not seem to connect this belated reformation, however, with the further fact that eight days later the old doctor died.

An intimacy, not usual perhaps between an uncle and a nephew and due rather to allied tastes and mutual respect than to the dual relationship, lasted throughout their mutual life. How much the younger felt indebted to the elder is revealed in a passage from a letter written by Wheaton to his uncle on May 10, 1848, when the latter was in his eighty-third year, and the former was at the height of his reputation: "I am always glad to see your handwriting, so fair and firm, and hope you will not consider it as the discharge of a debt. I am your debtor in all things, owing you more of what I am than to all others; besides the double ties of blood and connection by which we are bound together, — I will say no more, as I know you will understand me and reciprocate all my feelings in their fullest extent."