

**AN ORATION PRONOUNCED
BEFORE THE PHI BETA KAPPA
SOCIETY OF HARVARD
UNIVERSITY, JULY 17, 1851**

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An Oration Pronounced Before the Phi Beta Kappa Society of Harvard University, July 17, 1851
by William B. Sprague

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WILLIAM B. SPRAGUE

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PRONOUNCED BEFORE THE

PHI BETA KAPPA SOCIETY

OF

HARVARD UNIVERSITY,

JULY 17, 1851.

By WILLIAM B. SPRAGUE, D. D.

ALBANY :
GRAY, SPRAGUE & Co.
.....
1851.

With the writer's kindest regards.

TO THE

HONOURABLE ROBERT C. WINTHROP,

PRESIDENT OF THE PHI BETA KAPPA SOCIETY,

This Oration

IS INSCRIBED,

IN TESTIMONY OF HIGH RESPECT FOR

HIS PRIVATE VIRTUES,

HIS ENLIGHTENED PATRIOTISM

AND

HIS WELL EARNED HONOURS.



ORATION.

It would be difficult, I believe, to find a subject distinctively American, that might not receive some aid in its illustration, from the hallowed associations belonging to the spot on which we are assembled. If I were to speak of American genius, the proudest examples would throng upon me from your own College catalogue. If I were to speak of American literature, I should feel that I was standing beside the cradle in which she was rocked, and breathing the pure air that has sustained and invigorated her. If I were to speak of American institutions, I could not forget that there are grave-yards on every side of me, in which their illustrious framers and defenders sleep. If I were to speak particularly of American liberty, I should recognize in the very names of your towns, the symbols of

her early struggles and bloody baptism. But the topic on which I design to speak, is more general than any of these, and may be said, in some sense, to include them all—it is the AMERICAN MIND—her *character* and *destiny*. It opens, I know, into an almost boundless field; but you need not be startled at the prospect; for I mean to range about, here and there, till the hour is over, and then leave you,—if not to the good will of the muses, as I had expected, at least to your accustomed interchange of bright thoughts and kindly feelings,—however little I may have said either to gratify or to profit. Meanwhile, I am sure that we all feel it as a burden upon our spirits, that my honoured friend, who was to have shared with me these exercises, instead of being here to delight us by the creations of genius, has had occasion to seek that deep retirement which is so congenial to the stricken heart.* May Heaven impart to him the spirit of a quiet and trusting mourner, and quicken us to heed

* Mr. J. T. Fields was prevented, by a severe domestic bereavement, from delivering the poem, which he had prepared for the occasion. While the exercises were in progress, however, the Rev. John Pierpont unexpectedly appeared, and was cordially welcomed, as his substitute.

the voice that mingles its notes of warning even with our mutual rejoicings and literary festivities.

It would not be strange if some of you should infer from the announcement of my subject, that I am meditating a fresh offering to our national self-respect,—a service with which possibly an uncharitable world might connect the idea of supererogation. I confess that I have no nervous sensitiveness at hearing our country decently praised; and if I could be betrayed into such a foible any where, doubtless it would be at the acknowledged centre of her greatness. I intend, however, to speak soberly, as unto wise men; and if I should succeed in making any of you more thankful for the privilege of being American citizens, or more watchful against the perils that encircle our birthright, or more active in advancing the nation's prosperity, the utmost that I propose to myself will have been accomplished.

There are certain circumstances from which we might form a probable judgment of the mind of an individual, anterior to any knowledge of

its actual development—I refer particularly to birth and education. If you were about to choose a friend or a counsellor, a ruler or even a servant, you would not deem it unsuitable, especially in the absence of more direct evidence, to inquire what blood was flowing in his veins, and what influences had moulded his character. The same rule of judgment is applicable to the mind of a nation. If you will form a conclusion at once intelligent and comprehensive, in respect to its tendencies, its capabilities, its prospects, you must begin to study it in the very first page of its history; nay, you must go back to the period when it was bound up in the character of some other nation, and mark the process by which it assumed a distinct existence. And then you must trace the diversified influences which have operated in its formation, viewing them, so far as may be, in both their separate and combined action. I admit that your judgment must depend ultimately on your observation of the actual result, rather than on a philosophic analysis of the influences by which it has been obtained; still, you cannot suitably appreciate