MEMOIR OF HENRY CLAY, PP. 4-39

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649279166

Memoir of Henry Clay, pp. 4-39 by Robert C. Winthrop

Except for use in any review, the reproduction or utilisation of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including xerography, photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, is forbidden without the permission of the publisher, Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd, PO Box 1576 Collingwood, Victoria 3066 Australia.

All rights reserved.

Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form or binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

www.triestepublishing.com

ROBERT C. WINTHROP

MEMOIR OF HENRY CLAY, PP. 4-39

Trieste

MEMOIR

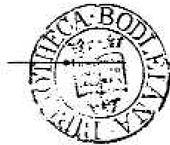
OF

HENRY CLAY:

BY

ROBERT C. WINTHROP.

PREPARED AT THE REQUEST OF THE NEW-ENGLAND HISTORIC-GENEALOGICAL SOCIETY, AND PRIVATELY REPRINTED FROM THEIR FORTHCOMING VOLUME OF MEMOIRS.



CAMBRIDGE:
JOHN WILSON AND SON.
University Press.
1880.

210. h. 306.

The Bodleian Library,
Oxford, England,
from
Robt. C. Winthrop

oston,
U. S. A.

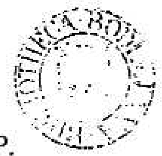
MEMOIR

OF

HENRY CLAY:

BY

ROBERT C. WINTHROP.



94.

and almost feminine hand, which may be seen alike in his earlier and later autographs. He was never one of those statists, of whom Shakspeare tells us, who "held it a baseness to write fair." In these relations, too, he undoubtedly became imbued with that love of legal study, on which he entered seriously at nineteen years of age, and which he prosecuted so successfully as to obtain a license to practise law before he was twenty-one. Above all, in these relations he acquired the friendship and confidence of George Wythe, who was not only one of the Signers of the Declaration of Independence and a distinguished member of the Virginia Convention which ratified the Federal Constitution, of which he was an earnest advocate and supporter, but who signalized his love of human freedom by emancipating all his negroes before his own death, and making provision for their subsistence. The influence of such a friendship and such an example could hardly fail to manifest itself in the future life of any one who enjoyed it. It was better than an education.

Young Clay, however, was not destined to remain long within the immediate reach of that influence, as, some years before the death of the great Chancellor, he had removed from Richmond and entered on a new scene of life. His mother, who had been married again after a widowhood of ten years, had changed her residence to Kentucky, then a new Commonwealth, just separated from Virginia, whither her son, who was devotedly attached to her, soon followed, and opened a law office in Lexington. Thenceforward he was to be known as the Great Kentuckian. Thenceforward the gallant young State, with whose earliest fortunes he had thus identified himself, was to have no more brilliant orator, no more distinguished statesman, no more beloved and devoted citizen, than Henry Clay.

Entering her Legislature, as the representative of Fayette County, in 1803, at twenty-six years of age, he so

commended himself to the favor and confidence of his fellow-members, that, before three years had elapsed, he was chosen by them to fill a vacancy in the Senate of the United States; and, if the tradition be correct, he actually took his seat in that exalted body before he had quite attained the age of thirty, prescribed by the Constitution of the United States.

While welcoming Mr. Clay to Boston, as Chairman of a Young Men's Committee, in the autumn of 1833, I found that he was indisposed to have this early breach of Constitutional requirements alluded to, or inquired into, with too much particularity. "I think, my young friend," said he, "we may as well omit any reference to my supposed juvenile indiscretions." He was then of an age to pride himself more on his ardent devotion to the Constitution, than on any precocious personal popularity, or any premature political advancement.

This first term of service at Washington was a brief one, ending with the existing session. But it did not expire until he had made his mark on the national calendar as an earnest and powerful advocate of internal improvements. During the following year, he had returned to the Legislature of Kentucky, and was chosen Speaker of the House of Representatives of that State. But in 1809, he was again sent to Washington, to fill another vacancy in the United States Senate, where he served with distinction for two years. And now, in 1811, he enters the field of a still more conspicuous and responsible service, having been elected Speaker of the House of Representatives of the United States, almost by acclamation, on the very first day of his taking his seat as a member of that body.

Mr. Clay was six times elected Speaker of the House, and held that lofty position longer than any one in the history of our country, before or since. No abler or more commanding presiding officer has ever sat in a

Speaker's Chair on either side of the Atlantic. Prompt, dignified, resolute, fearless, he had a combination of intellectual and physical qualities which made him a natural ruler over men. There was a magnetism in his voice and manner which attracted the willing attention, acquiescence, and even obedience, of those over whom he presided. He was no painstaking student of Parliamentary Law, but found the rules of his governance more frequently in his own instinctive sense of what was practicable and proper, than in Hatsell's Precedents, or in Jefferson's Manual. He was, in some sense, a law unto himself, and could he have bent himself to compose or compile a Code of Proceeding for the House over which he presided, its Rules and Orders might have escaped the chaotic confusion from which so many vain efforts have been made of late years to extricate them.

He betrayed to me one of the characteristic secrets of his success, more than thirty years afterwards, when I had the honor of occupying the same Chair. "I have attentively observed your course as Speaker," said he to me one day, most kindly, "and I have heartily approved it. But let me give you one hint from the experience of the oldest survivor of your predecessors. *Decide — decide promptly — and never give your reasons for the decision.* The House will sustain your decisions, but there will always be men to cavil and quarrel about your reasons."

Mr. Clay's terms of the Speakership, beginning in 1811 and ending in 1825, were more than once interrupted by other and not less important public avocations. He resigned the Chair in January, 1814, on his appointment, by President Madison, as one of the Five Commissioners to Ghent, to negotiate the treaty which resulted in the peace between Great Britain and the United States in 1815. John Quincy Adams, Albert Gallatin, Jonathan Russell, and the elder James A. Bayard, were his colleagues in that memorable negotiation. No one has ever

questioned the great importance of Mr. Clay's services on that Commission. He had been the leader of the War Party on the floor of Congress, and had been more instrumental than any other man in bringing about the Declaration of War. His duties as Speaker never prevented him from taking an active part in the debates when the House was in Committee of the Whole, and his voice at that period was as commanding on the floor as it was in the Chair. So ardent and strenuous was he in demanding that the rights of his country on the ocean should be vindicated, and the wrongs of her sailors and her trade redressed, even by an appeal to arms, and so much confidence did he inspire in his own readiness, courage, and capacity to take any part which might be assigned to him in the conduct of the war which he advocated, that President Madison is well understood to have contemplated, at one moment, offering him the command of the American Army. Clay had many of the attributes of a great soldier, and might perchance have won as distinguished a name in the field as he did in the forum. But the higher and nobler offices of peace were happily reserved for him, and he for them.

Re-elected to the Speakership, on his return from Ghent, he resigned it again in 1820, owing to the pressure of his private affairs; but he retained his seat as a member of the House, and took a leading part, from time to time, in the great "Missouri Compromise" debate of that period. Indeed, to him, more than to any other man, has always been ascribed the passage of that memorable measure, — one of the landmarks of American History, — which limited Slavery by the latitude of 36° 30′. Mr. Benton, in his "Thirty Years' View," says: "Mr. Clay has been often complimented as the author of the Compromise of 1820, in spite of his repeated declaration to the contrary; but he is the undisputed author of the final settlement of the Missouri Controversy in the actual ad-

mission of the State." That was the first great controversy which threatened to bring about the establishment of geographical parties, so emphatically deprecated by Washington in his Farewell Address, — parties divided by a Slavery and Anti-Slavery line, and "squinting," if not looking directly, towards a dissolution of the Union, or an attempt to dissolve it by civil war. It is, however, a most striking fact in our subsequent political history, that the Compromise thus effected, and which was so vehemently opposed and denounced by the great mass of the Northern people and their Representatives at the time, came at last, in the process of time and chance and change, to be counted as one of the special securities and safeguards of the Free States against the unlimited extension of Slavery, and that its mad repeal was the subject of even more indignant and violent agitation and remonstrance by the North, in 1854, than its original adoption had been, in 1820. Few persons who knew Mr. Clay will hesitate to say that it never would have been repealed, had he survived, in health and strength, to take part in the controversies of that day. Douglas would not have dared to propose it in his presence. And no one can fail to perceive and admit that the immediate result of that repeal was precisely what its passage was designed to prevent, — the formation of geographical parties, with a fatal inclination, as it proved, towards civil war.

It was during the last days of the debate on this Missouri Bill, in 1821, that Mr. Clay was wrought up to such a pitch of impatience and impetuosity, that, having been twice thwarted by the technical ruling of his successor in the Chair, he was heard vociferating in tones that none but he could command: "Then I move to suspend *all* the rules of the House — Away with them! Is it to be endured that we shall be trammelled in our action by mere forms and technicalities at a moment like this, when the peace, and perhaps the existence, of the Union is at