

**DANIEL WEBSTER, THE ORATOR: AN
ADDRESS DELIVERED BEFORE THE
BROOKLYN INSTITUTE OF ARTS
AND SCIENCES AND THE NEW
ENGLAND SOCIETY OF BROOKLYN**

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Daniel Webster, the Orator: An Address Delivered Before the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences and the New England Society of Brooklyn by Albert E. Pillsbury

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Daniel Webster

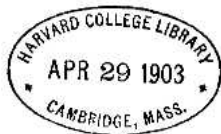
The Orator

An Address delivered before the Brooklyn Institute
of Arts and Sciences and the New England
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By Albert E. Pillsbury

1852

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Daniel Webster, the Orator.

In one of his most famous speeches, Webster paid this eloquent tribute to Samuel Dexter, in which the speaker stands unconsciously revealed:—

“He was a lawyer, and he was also a statesman. He had studied the constitution that he might defend it. He had examined its principles that he might maintain them. More than all men, or at least as much as any man, he was attached to the general government and to the union of the states. His feelings and opinions all ran in that direction. A question of constitutional law was, of all subjects, that one which was best suited to his talents and learning. Aloof from technicalities and unfettered by artificial rules, such a question gave opportunity for that deep and clear analysis, that mighty grasp of principle, which so much distinguished his higher efforts. His very statement was argument. His inference seemed demonstration. The earnestness of his own conviction wrought conviction in others. One was convinced and believed and assented because it was gratifying, delightful, to think, to feel and believe, in unison with an intellect of such evident superiority.”

It is Webster himself, the orator, lawyer, and statesman, who is here painted by his own hand in a portrait for which Dexter sat, but of which none but Webster could fill the outlines. We are to look at Webster the orator. It is the most attractive if not the most important character in which he appeared. Webster's greatest power was the power of

speech. As an orator he won his highest triumphs, and as an orator he will be longest remembered. His pre-eminence as a lawyer and statesman was largely due to his surpassing powers of clear, eloquent, and convincing statement. There were other lawyers of his time who had more learning of the books, and a few who were quite his equals in comprehensive grasp of legal principles. There were statesmen who had more qualities of leadership, more organizing and constructive power, more depth and permanence of conviction. As a consummate master of speech, Webster is without a rival in our history, if he has a superior in the history of eloquence.

Half a century has now passed since Webster's death, and threescore and ten years since he reached the summit of his powers. The atmosphere is cleared of the incense of praise and the mists of detraction which rose about him in his own time. His contemporaries have disappeared, and the memory of the greatest of them is fading. Historic events have intervened, of the utmost importance, almost transforming the character of the government. Another generation of statesmen has appeared, done its work, and passed away. That Webster is still among the first in interest of all our great characters is striking evidence of the permanent hold which he took upon his countrymen. The great political changes which have befallen since his day, so far from obliterating his memory, have helped to preserve it; for in every one of them his influence was felt and his authority invoked, as it is invoked to-day, even by those who would pervert it. The new procession of historic figures which has passed across the national stage has hardly crowded him from the central place. The reason is not far to seek. Webster stamped himself indelibly upon the American mind. To an extent of which we are not always conscious, he wove himself into the very fabric of the government. His word directed the course of the public thought on national topics. His great speeches be-

came part of our history, our literature, our constitutional law, almost of our national existence.

Webster was a product of nature. The schools and society added little to him. The unpeopled wilderness in which he was born and grew up permeated his character and was reflected in his mind. His native spot was on the frontier of the New Hampshire settlements, where his earliest associations were among trackless forests, rivers, lakes, and mountains, the vast sublimity of primitive nature. He was a delicate child, with a large head, coal-black hair, great black eyes, which none who saw them ever forgot, and a complexion so swarthy that they called him "little black Dan." In some notes of his life he says, "Two things I did dearly love,—reading and playing." Being much fonder of these than of hard work, he was of little use on the farm. An elder brother facetiously said that Dan was sent to school "to make him equal to the other boys." In truth, however, physical weakness and intellectual promise together devoted him to an education which his parents could ill afford to bestow, with results that greatly repaid the sacrifice.

His mind was attuned in childhood to the dominant note of his life. Webster's character centred in devotion to the Union,—a devotion amounting to passion. Born in January, 1782, he was in his seventh year when the Federal constitution was before the people for adoption. It was the theme of all tongues. Webster's father, a man of marked character, a captain in the French war and in the Revolution, personally known and trusted by Washington, and of rank and influence among his neighbors, was an ardent advocate of the constitution and a member of the New Hampshire convention which made its ratification complete. The household and neighborhood talk about the constitution was among little Dan's earliest recollections. One of his first possessions was a cotton handkerchief on which the instrument was

printed at large, where he first read it; and as he told this story, he used to add, "I have known more or less about it ever since." These things became part of the substance of his mind. But the orator was not yet born. As a boy, he could not speak before the school. "Many a piece," he says, "did I commit to memory, and recite and rehearse in my own room over and over again; yet, when the day came, when the school collected to hear declamations, when my name was called, and I saw all eyes turned to my seat, I could not raise myself from it. When the occasion was over, I went home and wept bitter tears of mortification."

It was not until his college days that he discovered his powers of speech. Once awake, they developed so rapidly that before he left Dartmouth his reputation was established as the best speaker in the college. The earliest of his productions remaining is a Fourth of July oration of 1800. He began, as most young men do, by copying the worst faults of his contemporaries; and these youthful excursions are interesting chiefly for the contrast between their stilted and artificial rhetoric and the simplicity, directness, and force with which he spoke only a few years later, when his own genius had begun to assert itself. In the speech of 1800, Columbia appears "in the forum of the nations, and the empires of the world are amazed at the bright effulgence of her glory." Washington is a character who "never groaned but when fair Freedom bled." On a similar occasion in 1802, he pictures America before the Revolution as confronted with "the frightful form of Despotism, clad in iron robes, reclined on a heap of ruins; in his left hand taxation—his right grasped the thunders." This is bad enough, but the courts and senates of that day were full of such bombast, and the common people heard it eagerly. Already the constitution is his theme. The sentiments are Webster's own, and are remarkably just and manly for a lad hardly out of his teens.

The style, which is borrowed, gives but little promise that the speaker would live to produce oratory worthy to be compared with the greatest examples of any age.

In college, Webster was more distinguished for general reading and information than for scholarship. The best of his training was derived from the discipline of his nine years at the Portsmouth bar. In that period he developed a severe and unerring taste that rejected from his style of speech the faults of the contemporary school, and prepared him to create a school of his own. In this he was much aided by the chastening influence of Jeremiah Mason, his constant antagonist, a man who rarely uttered an inapt or superfluous word. Webster richly repaid this service. His encomiums have rescued Mason from the oblivion that awaits all mere lawyers, however eminent in their day and generation.

Webster's public life began at a critical time in the affairs of the country. The constitution, "extorted," as John Quincy Adams said, "from the grinding necessity of a reluctant people," had already begun to chafe. The doubts and misgivings with which the people had created a Federal government armed with real powers, had soon developed into open discontent. As early as 1798 the ill-advised alien and sedition laws brought out the first direct menace against the perpetuity of the Union. Before the echo of the Virginia and Kentucky resolutions died away, the embargoes and the war of 1812 swept American commerce from the seas and forced the maritime states into an attitude of hostility to the administration, if not to the government itself, which culminated in the Hartford convention. In the midst of these excitements, Webster made his first entry upon the public stage, as a representative in Congress from his native state of New Hampshire. The very beginning of his public service gave evidence that a new man and a new orator had appeared.