

**ORATION BEFORE THE PHI BETA
KAPPA SOCIETY OF BROWN
UNIVERSITY, PROVIDENCE, R. I.,
ON COMMENCEMENT DAY,
SEPTEMBER 7, 1842**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649262229

Oration Before the Phi Beta Kappa Society of Brown University, Providence, R. I., on
Commencement day, september 7, 1842 by Francis C. Gray

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

FRANCIS C. GRAY

**ORATION BEFORE THE PHI BETA
KAPPA SOCIETY OF BROWN
UNIVERSITY, PROVIDENCE, R. I.,
ON COMMENCEMENT DAY,
SEPTEMBER 7, 1842**

ORATION

BEFORE THE

PHI BETA KAPPA SOCIETY

OF

BROWN UNIVERSITY,
PROVIDENCE, R. I.,

ON

COMMENCEMENT DAY,

SEPTEMBER 7, 1842.

By FRANCIS C. GRAY.

PROVIDENCE:
B. CRANSTON AND COMPANY.
1842.

AMONG our numerous anniversaries, there are none more interesting than those, in which we come up from the cares, and the turmoil, and the contentions of the world, like the Jews of old yearly to their temple, to the sacred seats of learning; to witness the proficiency and do honour to the merit of the Youth, who, having completed their collegiate course, are about entering on the duties of society, and to welcome them as fellow labourers in the field of life. The occasion carries us back to the period, when we stood, as they do, on the threshold of existence, gazing eagerly into a future, not with clouds and darkness resting on it, but glowing with the sunshine of hope, and peopled with the brightest visions of youthful expectation. It carries us forward to the day, when they will look back, like us, on realities — how different from their dreams! It is good for us to be here, and being here, to contemplate the past and the future. For us, who have come up hither from our daily pursuits, as it tends to revive in all their original

ardour, the generous purposes and high resolves of our youth, so that we may descend again into the arena of the world, refreshed and reinvigorated for its conflicts. It is good for them, to pause before they step down among us, and to recal the principles here inculcated, with the firm resolution, that in every hour of temptation or of peril, they will cling to them and hold them fast. It is good for us both, to look round on our actual position, and forward on the task before us, and to consider in what manner it may be best accomplished, what are the dangers and the obstacles in our way, and how we may avoid or surmount them.

Such a survey will show that there are many circumstances in our present condition, leading to the belief, that the generation now rising into active life, in America, is destined to exert an uncommon influence on the fortunes, not only of our country, but of the whole human race; and it is my purpose at this time to point out some of those circumstances, and some of the dangers and the duties, that attend its career.

I am induced to select this in preference to any literary topic, by a sense of its immediate importance. There are periods, when some great struggle is going on, in which all men have an equal interest, and which all must be called on to meet, when the summons may be fitly sounded, not only in the groves of the academy, but even from the pulpit, to bid all be up and doing. Such a struggle is already begun. How long it will last, or how it

may end, I know not; but I am persuaded, that within fifty years, and during the life-time of some of those, who this day quit these halls, it may produce results, such as have rarely been brought about during a similar period. It has seemed to me, therefore, that I could not occupy the hour allotted to me, more usefully than in stating the reasons of this opinion; and if in so doing, I shall impress on the mind of any one a conviction of its justice, and a deep sense of the duty resulting from it, so as, in any degree, to confirm his resolution or animate his efforts in the performance of that duty, I shall not have spoken altogether in vain.

To men living in the midst of the world, the present moment is always of quite enough importance; and the controversy of the day, whether political, religious or literary, absorbs so much of their attention, that they rarely look beneath it, even though it be in fact but as a ripple on the surface of the mighty stream, whose irresistible current sweeps on unheeded. The student, on the other hand, whose knowledge of the world is derived mainly from books, and whose fancy is filled with the forms of heroes, who have founded or overthrown empires; of sages, who have established schools of philosophy; and of patriots, who have saved their country in the hour of peril; is apt to look upon our own times as degenerate and commonplace, and to dream that it were better to have lived in the days of old, when he might have heard

the lessons of divine philosophy from the lips of their authors, and have witnessed, perhaps shared the labors of the great men he admires. Such an idea has no doubt crossed the imagination of many of our young friends; but let me say to them and to their youthful contemporaries: You know not your fate. It may be, that you, who are now entering into active life, need not look back to any age with regret, that you were not born to partake its duties and its triumphs, for if the signs of the times may be trusted, there have been few periods in the history of mankind more big with the fate of nations, than that, from which the veil of futurity is in your day to be lifted; few theatres more worthy the regards of men and of angels, than that, where you are destined to tread.

A mighty revolution has long been going on throughout the whole of civilized Europe, not a revolution in the forms of government alone, but in the whole structure of society. Slow, indeed, and fluctuating in its progress, but so important in its object and results, that all the merely political revolutions, which have shaken that quarter of the world for centuries, changing dynasties and establishing or subverting thrones and empires, are, in comparison with it, but as the dust of the balance.

Eight centuries ago, the mass of its inhabitants were bowed down to the earth under the iron yoke of the feudal system, subjected to the mere caprice of petty military despots, under whose stern rule they were almost without rights, and entirely with-

out security ; and destitute even of the semblance of political power, so that neither rulers nor ruled ever dreamed that the happiness of the people was any object of government, or the will of the people any source of authority. But almost all the great changes, which have taken place during that long period, have tended, more or less, to elevate the condition and character, to increase the acknowledged rights and the political power, and to promote the comfort of the people. Many events, which seemed in themselves unmitigated evils, were made, by the blessing of heaven, to work together, in the end, for the advancement of this great good. The constant wars of these chieftains with each other ; the crusades, in which the whole chivalry of Europe poured out their blood like water ; and in England especially, the wars of the Roses, during which three-fourths of the nobles of the land fell upon the field or on the scaffold, by diminishing the power of the great lords, increased the relative influence of the people. Many politic sovereigns also granted important privileges to the latter, for the sole purpose of making them a check on the turbulence of the nobility. The invention of gunpowder brought them nearer on a level with their steel-clad masters. Improvements in agriculture and the mechanic arts and the extension of commerce gave them wealth, — and wealth is power. The establishment of towns and cities, in consequence of these improvements, gave them union and organization, — and these are power. The

cultivation of literature and the sciences, especially when aided by the art of printing, diffused knowledge among them, — and knowledge is power. It is hardly possible to overrate the influence of the reformation of religion in promoting the same great result, not only in Protestant but in Catholic countries also. Moreover, the consciousness of increasing strength led them to seize every opportunity for throwing off their burdens, and not unfrequently with success. And though in many cases the ignorance resulting from their former degraded condition, or other causes, prevented their maintaining their newly acquired rights, and made them fall back under the dominion of their former rulers, yet these occasional and momentary triumphs created more respect for their strength and more unwillingness to drive them to extremity, and thus tended, on the whole, to elevate their position in society; so that, though the wave advanced and receded, the great tide of liberty was always rising.

There is another circumstance in the history of the transatlantic world, to which I would call your attention. For four centuries past, the nations of Europe have been gradually and constantly extending their sway over all the other portions of the globe. Our own continent may be deemed entirely subject to their rule, and is chiefly peopled by their offspring. I speak not now of the validity of the claim thus to extend their power, nor of the manner in which that claim has, in many cases, been enforced; but merely of the fact of such extension,