

**OBSERVATIONS ON THE HISTORY OF
VIRGINIA: A DISCOURSE DELIVERED
BEFORE THE VIRGINIA HISTORICAL,
AT THEIR EIGHTH ANNUAL MEETING,
DECEMBER 14, 1854**

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Observations on the History of Virginia: A Discourse Delivered Before the Virginia Historical, at their eighth annual meeting, December 14, 1854 by R. M. T. Hunter

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R. M. T. HUNTER

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Observations on the History of Virginia:

A DISCOURSE

DELIVERED BEFORE THE

VIRGINIA HISTORICAL SOCIETY,

AT THEIR

EIGHTH ANNUAL MEETING,

DECEMBER 14, 1854.

BY HON. E. M. T. HUNTER.

PUBLISHED BY THE SOCIETY.

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1855.

DISCOURSE.

*Mr. President and Gentlemen
of the Virginia Historical Society:*

When I received the invitation to deliver your annual discourse, I was so well aware that I could not bring to the task that fullness of knowledge which is essential to do justice to the subject, that my first impulse was to decline the honor, highly as I esteemed it. But, upon subsequent reflection, it struck me that I might perhaps render useful aid to your Society, by calling public attention, in some degree, to the great importance of the objects of your pursuit, and the high value of such labors not only to ourselves, but to others. I cannot be accused of error in bearing such testimony to the great objects of your pursuit, by those who reflect upon their nature and tendencies. For surely one of the highest offices that man can render to his race, is to store up the experience and the ideas of the present generation for the uses of those which are to succeed it, and to render such treasures of the past accessible to his cotemporaries. Next in importance to him who first conceives the great thought, or originates the high example, stands the man who preserves the example and perpetuates the thought for the everlasting use and possession of the generations which are to succeed him. It is through man's capacity to use the experience and the thoughts of his fellows,

and to store up and accumulate such treasures by adding the present stock to that of the past, that he mainly secures the means of the progress and growth which so distinguish him from all other animals. To ascertain the extent of the development which the human race may attain by the use of such means, we have only to compare the Anglo-Saxon, the Celt or the Teuton of to-day, with his rude ancestors, who roamed through the forests of Gaul, or of Germany, as described to us by Cæsar and Tacitus. (I will not take the more striking comparison between the Bushman or Fetish worshiper of Africa with his civilized cotemporary, because that might be ascribed more to a difference of race than of cultivation, to which alone I refer at present. The first presents a case quite strong enough for the purposes of illustration, as there is almost as much difference between the former and present condition of the races, as between the first and last state of the statue man, imagined by the French philosopher to awaken, sense by sense, into existence, until he stood completely clothed in all the attributes of humanity.) Take, then, the savage ancestor and the civilized descendant and compare them, sense with sense, and faculty with faculty, and how vast is the difference! The vision of the first was bounded by the limits of the sensible horizon; a few miles upon earth, and some of the larger objects in the heavens alone were visible to him, whilst he was entirely unconscious of the myriads of beings, living and moving within and around him. The vision of the last penetrates into the very depths of space, and discovers worlds and systems of worlds, all unknown to his rude progenitor; he weighs their substance, measures their dimensions, and calculates their motions, with an accuracy which the other hardly attained with regard to the objects of his immediate contact; or, turning his magic glass, he explores a microcosm in the almost infin-

itesimal atom, and becomes sensible of myriads of beings, who people it and give it life. How many more times, then, is the last a man, as compared with the first, if tested by the sense of sight alone! Tried by the faculties of physical strength and motion, the difference is still as great in his favor. He directs and controls the most subtle and powerful physical agencies, and imprisons captives far mightier than Samson, who grind blindly at his mill. Still more wonderful is his superiority in the means of communicating with his fellow. His thoughts are exchanged in seconds over distances through which formerly they could not have been communicated in months; and he himself flies along the earth with a speed greater than the horse, and perhaps equaling that of the bird. In this vast increase of the means for accumulating strength and for association amongst men, how much greater is the amount of power which falls to the share of the civilized individual than that to which the savage ancestor could by possibility have aspired!

Doubtless the wild man of the woods could distinguish between sounds, as pleasant or unpleasant, as grave or gay, but what sense had he of the hidden harmonies which floated in the air around him? Did he dream that the very air which he breathed could be modulated into sounds which subdue the senses by their tones, and stir the soul to its inmost depths, speaking in the only universal language known to man, with an unerring concord, and a certainty of expression which the original curse of Babel has never reached to confuse or destroy? So, too, he must have had some idea of the beautiful, in the forms of things; but it was as transitory as the lights and shadows which flitted by him. To fix the idea ere it fled, and reproduce it in forms more eloquent than words; to make sentient the cold impassive stone, and to embalm emotions and sentiments in lights borrowed from heaven,

would have been indeed to him an "art and a faculty *divine*," so far did it transcend his power of execution. Nor is the superiority of the last over the former generation of the men of whom I have been speaking, less striking in a moral, than in a physical point of view. Conceptions over which a Newton, or a Leibnitz, or Bernouilli, or Euler, toiled in his study, are now the daily exercises of boys at college; and the higher and subtler analysis of La Grange, or La Place, is probably destined to be mastered with equal facility hereafter. Ideas whose origination cost so much to a Plato, or an Aristotle, a Bacon, a Des Cartes, or a Kant, are now the common property of the world, and thousands understand thoughts which probably not one of them could have discovered.

In times of peace, and since the invention of printing, it may almost be said that each generation starts from the point that the last had attained; and if in comparing the present with the past, we find so vast a difference in favor of the existing generation of men, with what proud hopes may we not be justly inspired for the future progress of our race! If the difference between the two generations whom I have compared be such as would seem to a superficial observer to indicate a superior nature in the last, what may we not rightfully expect of future improvement, when we think of the greater opportunities for progress which each succeeding generation will enjoy? A proud thought this, but not too proud, if we remember, with becoming gratitude and humility, to whose power it is that we owe these faculties and opportunities, and endeavor to fulfill the conditions upon which alone such a promise could have been given. One of these conditions undoubtedly is, that we should preserve the experience and the ideas of the past and the present, for the use of the future. Without this faculty of one

man to use and possess himself of the example and ideas of another, our race could never have reached the point to which it has already attained; and without the means of preserving these examples and these ideas, that faculty could not be exercised. To preserve these is the historian's function, yours, Sir, and that of the Society over which you preside.

I have already said that I rate the historian next only in point of importance to him from whom first emanates the great example, or high conception, and who, by original discovery, extends the boundaries of human thought; and to this extent I think experience will fully bear me out. The historian is the treasurer who stores away and preserves the moral wealth of the human race, and hoards up the ideas and conceptions which are as essential to its spiritual growth and elevation, as material means are to its physical existence. But there is one great and never to be forgotten difference between the two species of wealth, moral and material, which leaves no doubt as to the superior value of the former. In the first, each may enjoy all, and yet leave no smaller individual share to another; it is not consumed by its use, and suffers no loss by division; in the last, when one takes a part, less is left for his neighbor. In the first, the broadest socialism is practicable, the property is improved from its possession by many, and such is the law of its increase and growth; in the latter, individual and exclusive possession of a part seems to be the law of the growth of the whole, and hence arise manifold difficulties, to which I may perhaps allude, but cannot in this place develop. In a few words, the difference between the two, is all the difference between the finite and the infinite.

I have dwelt somewhat upon this topic, even at the risk of seeming metaphysical, because I felt that I was touching upon a subject which is hardly enough consid-