

JOSEPH REED: A HISTORICAL ESSAY

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Joseph Reed: A Historical Essay by George Bancroft

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HISTORICAL ESSAY**

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JOSEPH REED:

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HISTORICAL ESSAY.

BY

GEORGE BANCROFT.

"I saw too glory's holy flowers
Bound common brows profanely twined."
SCHILLER.

NEW YORK:

W. J. WIDDLETON, PUBLISHER.

1867.

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TO MIAU
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JOSEPH REED :

A HISTORICAL ESSAY.

TWENTY years ago William B. Reed, of Philadelphia, published a life of his grandfather, Joseph Reed, or, as he now styles him, the "President" of Pennsylvania. He had prepared himself for his work by long research, under favorable auspices, and had amassed a storehouse of materials which he opened to others with liberality. An all-pervading zeal for redeeming the memory of his ancestor was obviously the motive which ruled him. The time was favorable; the political animosities which prevailed in the last century had died away; family hostilities had ceased, and the men of this generation scorned to keep alive the personal enmities of the past. Were it not for his family aspirations he would, without a dissenting voice, have been distinguished among contemporary writers on American history. But the analysis of his statements shows that he suffered himself to be carried away by a passion to create an undeserved reputation for one from whom he was sprung. As a historian, I was bound to pronounce a dissenting opinion. Having fulfilled my duty, it could not surprise me, and it could not offend me, that the biographer should en-

TO MR
ABROU

deavor to relieve the name of his ancestor, and to vindicate the views which I had overthrown. Once more he undertakes the impossible task of rolling his grandfather's reputation up hill into the position of a leading patriot. I only wish he had conducted the new display of his ardor with an accuracy from which I might have derived instruction, and an equity which need not have required a reply. I have through a long life accustomed myself to look to great and general principles, and never to take part in personal vituperation and asperities. It is my nature to dwell upon that which is generous and great, and to turn away from that which is paltry and mean; and while I do not feel at liberty to temper honest judgment by a desire to win the favor of the descendants of those of whom I write, I always pass over in silence the weaknesses and follies which neither portray the times nor illustrate events. No one but myself knows the candor which I have exercised, for no one else knows what materials have been before me and have been put aside. To be forced into establishing defects of character in another is most irksome; the time consumed in the exposure seems like a waste of life, and now more than ever when so little of life remains to me.

Wishing to husband every moment for the completion of an almost finished volume of American history, for several weeks I refused to see the tract upon "President" Reed, by his grandson, and it was but a few days ago that it was forced upon my attention. The pamphlet contains abundant evidence that the author is conscious of the feebleness of his cause. In his zeal to upset evidence derived from men of honor, who, by no fault of their own, fought against us, but who wrote dispassionately

of scenes which they witnessed, he runs a tilt against the established canons of criticism. To raise a prejudice, he has even the inconceivable weakness, when his grandfather's good repute is in question, to class Riedesel among Hessians, and to throw a slur on Münchhausen for his name. He goes about feeling everywhere to see if by chance he can find some means of exciting against me the prejudice of any man, or community, or section of country. He runs from North to South in the hope to rouse some latent prejudice, that he may have associate accusers. He tries to enlist in his behalf the pride of the honored State of Pennsylvania, by styling his grandfather its "President," though he was born elsewhere, and died in private life, was never chosen President by the direct vote of the people, never protected their good name, and has no right to sequester their glorious deeds to his private benefit. If men of the highest merit have in the course of my narrative appeared as not wholly faultless, he seeks to place his ancestor in the group with the best of them. An author of a history of the republic has exhibited "President" Reed as entering a false plea before the world; the grandson contents himself with leaving the charge unrefuted, and caviling at some inaccuracy in the citation of a letter. The same historian complains of Reed for a want of fidelity to Washington; the pleader, with the folly of a petulant child, thinks it a sufficient reply to assert that another of Washington's secretaries had erred in the same way. Moved by the very natural excitement which comes from seeing the monument which he had erected to the pretended virtues and services of his ancestor crumbling to the dust, the grandson discusses the theme as a subject for invective and personality, though

angry words have not a feather's weight before the tribunal of historical criticism. He exaggerates the charges brought against his grandfather, and will hear of nothing but extreme criminations, as an artful legal practitioner before juries who come and go, but whose verdict for the particular case is final, may be willing to get a culprit acquitted by making it out that the indictment against him charged a little too much. He insists on presenting the question as one of life and death, when the difference between us is in itself too wide to need exaggeration. William B. Reed describes his grandfather as a prominent and steadfast patriot of the Revolution; I regard him as shuffling, pusillanimous, and irresolute. The grandson elevates him to the position of a disinterested and guiding statesman; I see that he was governed by selfish considerations, and in moments of crisis was of no significance. The grandson esteems him for fidelity and candor; I find his character tainted by duplicity. The grandson exalts him as a hero whose fortitude increased with adversity; I present him as a vacillating trimmer, who in 1774 and 1775 was not heartily in the cause of his country, and who near the end of 1776 meditated defection.

In discussing these topics I shall treat them as a fit subject for scientific investigation. For this purpose I shall have occasion to do little more than produce from my note-books a chronological statement of authenticated facts. I address myself to those who are most familiar with thorough literary criticism and inquiry; or, since the "President" and his grandson belong to the profession which has so largely attracted to its ranks the talent of the country, I will write as though I were addressing our ablest lawyers or the judges of our courts of appeal.