

**A NATIONAL  
LIBRARY NOT  
A MAUSOLEUM**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649277292

A National Library Not a Mausoleum by Various

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Cover @ 2017

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*By John Quincy Adams.*

PRIVATELY PRINTED.

1884.

*Washington.*

1880  
to  
1881

## A MAUSOLEUM OF BOOKS.

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Not willing to impose a titular falsehood on the understanding of readers, it is fair to say, at the outset, that my harmless headline refers to that repository of the dead, that lumber room of extinct immortalities, the present Library of the United States, or, as it is generally known and called, the Library of Congress.

The curious reader may be interested in some mortuary tables and statistics gathered by an "Old Mortality" among books out of this burying-ground of letters. Title pages are the tombstones in this crowded cemetery, not library, but a graveyard of authors.

And if I wanted to cool the ardor, or dash the spirits of a young and rising author who was just beginning his literary career in the New World, I think I could do it in no way more effectually than to take him by the hand and lead him through the crooked, dark and winding ways of this labyrinth of literature; or better, leave him in the midst, without a clue and without a guide, to be impressed by the unimaginable horrors of the situation, and the hopelessness of ever finding his way out again. I would do by him as the monks of old did by their visitor in the Catacombs, show him, indeed, not skulls and thigh-bones of saints built into the walls of crumbling vaults and mouldering arches, but I would show him every niche and alcove stuffed with the mummy cases of dead and dried authors; cords of them piled on the floors, or stacked up in the galleries, and the rising tiers of them, even to the roof, of the heavily loaded shelves of the Library, solidly packed with "preserved brain," of which the imaginary sconces would resemble most those grinning pyramids of human skulls which Timour the Tartar was wont to erect for trophies on the sites of razed and conquered cities. Behold, I would

say, the sad relics of departed authors, the shining rows of old Immortalities defaced and obscured, the kings of science and the giants of literature buried in a pauper's graveyard along with the nameless dust of hordes of ephemeral writers; the intellectual trash and treasure of the Nation entombed in one vast sepulchre, one huge and indiscriminate heap, and while the sense of the nothingness of fame and of human glory was upon him, like the smell of churchyard mould, as it came out in the odor of their leathern burial-cases from the charnel vault of decayed authors, I would turn to the youthful aspirant for posthumous renown, and gravely inquire, "But after all, my friend, is it true that you wish to be buried here?"

Ah, yes, the great mausoleum of books, the Mount of Purgatory of authors, a vast monument of mistaken industry and neglected genius, whereon the representatives of a free and glorious country, the official heads of the sovereign people, have inscribed for a perpetual warning to writers, the *hic jacet* of all literary ambitions. And if that did not cure him for all time of the scribbling mania, then there is no virtue in hellebore, and no use for any further proscriptions. But if one of that illustrious body who stood sponsor at the christening and have given their name to this Library were to come to me for advice or consultation, I could only point him to the work, in part of his own creation, and say, would you behold the splendid monument of the generosity of Congress, and its equal title to glory and disgrace, what more do you need than to look around you? And I should be apt to conclude with asking *him* the triumphant question, "But what are you going to do with it?"

It is rumored that after ten years of procrastination (as long as the siege of Troy,) Congress is prepared to move on the works; that out of the smoke of words will come the fire of action; that members are resolved that the session shall not go by without seeing the library question settled; that rather than not settle it, Congress is ready to do almost



any rash and desperate deed, like choosing an improper site for the Library, or contracting to build in a style and on a scale altogether unsuited and disproportionate either to the present or future needs of the institution. It is well, indeed, that the library question should be settled; but it is vastly important that when settled it shall stay settled, because rightly settled.

The Library of Congress rightly enjoys a certain distinction. It is the largest in the land, and the fifth or sixth in rank and importance among the great government libraries of the world. It is destined to the first rank, and it should be, if it is not, the model of American libraries. On all accounts it is entitled to consideration.

But, it may be asked, what interest has Congress in it? What use or benefit is served by the Library at all commensurate to the care and cost of maintaining it? If this vast collection is of no use, its mere size is no reason for its continuance.

But if it is not used, the fault at least is not in the Library or its keepers. It is a question for the non-user. But what need of many books when a few only are wanted from time to time in the business of legislation? It is not a question of bare use and need. And if it were, who can tell what particular volume, out of the half million in the Library, may not be needed, some day, to settle some point in debate or in committee room?

You want a quotation, say, from yesterday's stock-board; or the plank of a political platform; or the statistics of production of some staple of your own or other countries; or it is a question of manufactures or commerce; or the customs of a foreign city; or the origin of a name; or the cost of a public building; or the history of an institution; and frequently, the knowledge of persons and places; or, perhaps, you only wish to verify a quotation; or you dimly recall a passage in some author which you wish to find. It is impossible, then, to say what book may not be called for, or what requisition made for unusual and out-of-the-way sources of

information. Not fewer books but more are constantly required to satisfy the exacting demands of an age of intelligence. And the man who does not march abreast of the intelligence of the age will soon be left behind it. The truth is that books—the tools of wise men—are used more and more, and they are used by members exactly in proportion to the range and quality of their intelligence.

No public man to-day is thoroughly equipped and furnished for the work of a legislator who is not interested in books, in all books, and prepared to make incursions into any province of human knowledge. To say, then, that Congress has no interest in the Library is to insult its intelligence. Nor does it any credit to the sagacity of members to cry out, Oh! but we want only a parliamentary library. Give us fifty thousand out of your five hundred thousand volumes, and the rest may go. Solid and useful works on history and political economy, on statistics and government, on jurisprudence, and international law and legislation, these are what we want; but as for mere literature and science, fiction, poetry, and the general run of books of to-day, we have no use for them. And what we don't want we don't propose to keep and pay for. Why not turn these books over to the District for a free public library, or divide them up among the established literary institutions of the country? Yes, why not? Because, in the first place, these books have been acquired by Congress acting in trust for the whole country, and they have become the property and heir-loom of the Nation. Among them are the books once possessed by Thomas Jefferson, forming his library, and with his initials stamped upon their leaves. Will you scatter them to the four winds of heaven? Others have come to us by bequest of donors, by exchange or gift of foreign governments, while thirty thousand volumes are now annually pouring in upon us by the copyright law. At no distant date the rate will be doubled, and much sooner, if the proposed law or treaty of international copyright shall be reached and passed. Then, every American has a

stake in the Library. No visitor at the Capitol but looks with pride on this magnificent collection, or but thinks with shame and sorrow on its possible loss and destruction. He thinks it ill comports with the dignity and prosperity of these United States to disperse or destroy by neglect the record of our country's literature, and the documentary proofs of our origin and growth as a people.

What, will you destroy the bible of American history, and along with it the family record of the Nation? Go then, and face the scorn and contempt of the civilized world. Go to the great government libraries and museums of France, of England, of Italy, of every European and Asiatic country, and tell them what you have done. Tell them that America has no record and no literature worth possessing, and that so far as it had any, you did your best to erase and destroy it from the face of the earth! Propose to them your example, and await their answer. It makes no difference whether or not you appreciate the literary, artistic and scientific value of the collection; it has a value quite independent of your estimates. It is not merely a storehouse of information, a magazine, an armory. It is highly useful no doubt, in these relations, as it is made to serve the rhetorical aims and aspirations of members, to provide material for debate, and to minister knowledge, instruction and amusement to members who seek it with those objects in view. All this is well, but it is only incidental to the function of a great national library. That function is to foster and conserve the literary growth of the country, to preserve copies and records of American books, and to guard the rights of literary property in the United States. All the traditions of the country support this view of the case. May there not be wanting the eloquence of a Choate, a Webster, an Everett, a Sumner, or a Garfield, who still find their living counterpart in some scholarly man who is a member of either House. And we may confidently hope that such a man will yet come forward, and with the easy mastery of genius and scholarship