

**GEORGE WILLIAM CURTIS: A  
COMMEMORATIVE ADDRESS  
DELIVERED BEFORE THE CENTURY  
ASSOCIATION, NEW YORK.  
DECEMBER 17, 1892, PP. 1-63**

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**PARKE GODWIN**

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# GEORGE WILLIAM CURTIS

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A Commemorative Address

DELIVERED BEFORE  
THE CENTURY ASSOCIATION, NEW YORK

December 17, 1892

BY  
PARKE GODWIN



NEW YORK  
HARPER & BROTHERS PUBLISHERS

1893

"Oh, weep for Adonais, though our tears  
Thaw not the frost that binds so dear a head."

SHELLEY.

"The idea of thy life shall sweetly creep  
Into my study of imagination:  
And every lovely organ of thy life  
Shall come apparelled in more precious habit,  
More moving delicate and full of life,  
Into the eye and prospect of my soul,  
Than when thou liv'st indeed."

SHAKESPEARE.

"Green be the turf above thee,  
Friend of my better days!  
None knew thee but to love thee,  
Nor named thee but to praise."

HALLECK.

5-1-43 F.C.V.  
A.S.E.L. 6



## GEORGE WILLIAM CURTIS

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### GENTLEMEN OF THE CENTURY ASSOCIATION :

We are brought together to-night to do honor to the memory of a fellow-member who had long prized and adorned our association—whom many of you knew, and knew only to admire and love—George William Curtis. He died on the 31st of August last—the closing day of a brilliant summer—at his home near the shore of the sea whose moans are now his requiem.

It is a sorrowful task for me to utter the memorial words you require, because, although somewhat younger than myself, he was one of my earliest as well as latest friends, with whom I was for some time associated in earnest political and literary work, whom I never approached or even thought of without a glow of affection, and whose loss has filled my eyes, as it



has those of many others, with unavailing tears; and yet, so vivid a personality was he to me that, knowing him gone, I cannot, in the phrase of one of our older poets, "make him dead." It is almost impossible for me to think that the manly form so full of activity, and the attractive face always aglow with light and sweetness, are motionless forever; that the voice which music itself attuned to the expression of every noble and tender human sentiment is still, and so still; that the busy brain which forged for us the solid bolts of reason and built the beautiful fabrics of fancy has ceased to work; and that the large, honest, and loving heart will beat no more.

In complying with your request I shall offer you no biography of Mr. Curtis, for which the time allotted to my task would be inadequate, and I can only refer to those leading events of his life which will enable you to appreciate best his character and services as a writer, a speaker, a citizen, and a man.

Mr. Curtis, although a resident of New York since his fifteenth year, was a native of New England. He was born on the 24th of February, 1824—within that decade which saw the first gleams of a permanent American literature

in the writings of Dana, Irving, Bryant, Cooper, Halleck, and the yet unnoted Poe—at Providence, Rhode Island—a State where Roger Williams had early planted the seeds of a true spiritual liberty, and Bishop Berkeley, the friend of Addison, Pope, and Steele, and the founder of an ideal philosophy, had left the traditions of his presence.

His ancestors on both sides were of the Puritan stock—not particularly distinguished as I find, save that his mother's father, James Burrill, Jr., was a Chief Justice of the State and a Senator of the United States, whose last speech and vote were given, a few days before his death, against the territorial extension of slavery.

It was a good stock to spring from—for those grim religionists, who burned witches and Quakers, had in the old world smitten kings to preserve liberty, and in the new, laid the foundations of a democratic empire that now stretches over a continent. That imaginative temperament which peers into the unseen, and gives a mystical predominance to things of the spirit over things of the flesh, often blossoms into the loveliest flowers. Certainly to it we trace nearly all our foremost poets, from him

who, as a boy still, sung our first immortal song amid the snow-drifts of the Hampshire hills, to him, our Quaker Tyrtæus, who the other day put off his singing-ropes to take on a wreath of unfading laurel.

Mr. Curtis's schooling outside of the home, where he was a diligent reader of books, was brief and scanty:\* two years at a public academy, and one of private tuition; but his education was none the less wide-ranging, nutritious, and fruitful. As with nearly all men of genius, it was a self-education and peculiar. After a year's trial of a mercantile pursuit, which proved repulsive, instead of going to college, he hurried, with a brother, to Brook Farm, a small agricultural and educational association, recently gathered near Roxbury, Mass.† It

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\* He attended an academy at Jamaica Plains, near Boston, for two years. His mother died while he was yet a child, and the father married again, and in 1839 removed to New York with his family. His father was cashier of one bank and afterwards president of another, and the lad could easily have gone to college if he had wished.

† The immediate founders were the Rev. George Ripley and his wife, Charles A. Dana, Wm. H. Channing, C. P. Cranch, John S. Dwight, and others; but Theodore Parker, Margaret Fuller, Bronson Alcott, Henry James the elder, Albert Brisbane, Parke Godwin, etc., took a deep interest in its success. All over the country, later, many citizens attentively studied socialism, among whom I may mention one who was afterwards distinguished as a soldier and states-