

**LEE'S CENTENNIAL. AN ADDRESS;
DELIVERED AT LEXINGTON VIRGINIA,
SATURDAY JANUARY 19,
1907 ON THE INVITATION OF THE
PRESIDENT AND FACULTY OF
WASHINGTON AND LEE UNIVERSITY**

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Lee's Centennial. An Address; Delivered at Lexington Virginia, Saturday January 19, 1907 on the Invitation of the President and Faculty of Washington and Lee University by Charles Francis Adams

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CHARLES FRANCIS ADAMS

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CHARLES · FRANCIS · ADAMS
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LEE'S CENTENNIAL

HAVING occasion once to refer in discussion to certain of the founders of our Massachusetts Commonwealth, I made the assertion that their force "lay in character;" and I added that in saying this I paid, and meant to pay, the highest tribute which in my judgment could be paid to a community or to its typical men. Quite a number of years have passed since I so expressed myself, and in those years I have grown older — materially older; but I now repeat even more confidently than I then uttered them, these other words — "The older I have grown and the more I have studied and seen, the greater in my esteem, as an element of strength in a people, has Character become, and the less in the conduct of human affairs have I thought of mere capacity or even genius. With Character a race will become great, even though as stupid and unassimilating as the Romans; without Character, any race will in the long run prove a failure, though it may number in it individuals having all the brilliancy of the Jews, crowned with the genius of Napoleon." We

are here to-day to commemorate the birth of Robert Edward Lee, — essentially a Man of Character. That he was such all I think recognize; for, having so impressed himself throughout life on his cotemporaries, he stands forth distinctly as a man of character on the page of the historian. Yet it is not easy to put in words exactly what is meant when we agree in attributing character to this man or to that, or withholding it from another; — conceding it, for instance, to Epaminondas, Cato and Wellington, but withholding it from Themistocles, Cæsar or Napoleon. Though we can illustrate what we mean by examples which all will accept, we cannot define. Emerson in his later years (1866) wrote a paper on "Character;" but in it he makes no effort at a definition. "Character," he said, "denotes habitual self-possession, habitual regard to interior and constitutional motives, a balance not to be overset or easily disturbed by outward events and opinion, and by implication points to the source of right motive. We sometimes employ the word to express the strong and consistent will of men of mixed motive; but, when used with emphasis, it points to what no events can change, that is a will built of the reason of things." The more matter-of-fact lexicographer defines Character as "the sum of the inherited and acquired

ethical traits which give to a person his moral individuality." To pursue further the definition of what is generally understood would be wearisome, so I will content myself with quoting this simile from a disciple of Emerson — "The virtues of a superior man are like the wind; the virtues of a common man are like the grass; the grass, when the wind passes over it, bends."

That America has been rich in these men of superior virtues before whom the virtues of the common man have bent, is matter of history. It has also been our making as a community. Such in New England was John Winthrop, whose lofty example still influences the community whose infancy he fathered. Such in New York was John Jay. Such, further south, was John Caldwell Calhoun, essentially a man of exalted character and representative of his community, quite irrespective of his teachings and their outcome. Such unquestionably in Virginia were George Washington and John Marshall; and, more recently, Robert Edward Lee. A stock, of which those three were the consummate flower, by its fruits is known.

Here to commemorate the centennial of the birth of Lee, I do not propose to enter into any eulogium of the man, to recount the well-known events of his career, or to estimate the

final place to be assigned him among great military characters. All this has been sufficiently done by others far better qualified for the task. Eschewing superlatives also, I shall institute no comparisons. One of a community which then looked upon Lee as a renegade from the flag he had sworn to serve, and a traitor to the Nation which had nurtured him, in my subordinate place I directly confronted Lee throughout the larger portion of the War of Secession. During all those years there was not a day in which my heart would not have been gladdened had I heard that his also had been the fate which at Chancellorsville befell his great lieutenant; and yet more glad had it been the fortune of the command in which I served to visit that fate upon him. Forty more years have since gone. Their close finds me here to-day — certainly a much older, and, in my own belief at least, a wiser man. Nay, more! A distinguished representative of Massachusetts, speaking in the Senate of the United States shortly after Lee's death upon the question of a return to Lee's family of the ancestral estate of Arlington, used these words: "Eloquent Senators have already characterized the proposition and the traitor it seeks to commemorate. I am not disposed to speak of General Lee. It is enough to say he stands high in the catalogue of those who

have imbrued their hands in their country's blood. I hand him over to the avenging pen of History." It so chanced that not only am I also from the State of Massachusetts, but, for more than a dozen years, I have been the chosen head of its typical historical society, — the society chartered under the name and seal of the Commonwealth considerably more than a century ago, — the parent of all similar societies. By no means would I on that account seem to ascribe to myself any representative character as respects the employment of History's pen, whether avenging or otherwise;¹ nor do I appear here as representative of the Massachusetts Historical Society: but, a whole generation having passed away since Charles Sumner uttered the words I have quoted, I do, on your invitation, chance to stand here to-day, as I have said, both a Massachusetts man and the head of the Massachusetts Historical Society, to pass judgment upon General Lee. The situation is thus to a degree dramatic.

Though, in what I am about to say I shall

¹ Possibly, and more properly, this attribute might be considered as pertaining rather to James Ford Rhodes, also a member of the Society referred to, and at present a Vice-President of it. Mr. Rhodes' characterization of General Lee, and consequent verdict on the course pursued by him at the time under discussion, can be found on reference to his *History of the United States* (vol. iii, p. 413).

confine myself to a few points only, to them I have given no little study, and on them have much reflected. Let me, however, once for all, and with emphasis, in advance say I am not here to instruct Virginians either in the history of their State or the principles of Constitutional Law; nor do I make any pretence to profundity whether of thought or insight. On the contrary I shall attempt nothing more than the elaboration of what has already been said by others as well as by me, such value or novelty as may belong to my share in the occasion being attributable solely to the point of view of the speaker. In that respect, I submit, the situation is not without novelty; for, so far as I am aware, never until now has one born and nurtured in Massachusetts — a typical bred-in-the-bone Yankee, if you please — addressed at its invitation a Virginian audience, on topics relating to the War of Secession and its foremost Confederate military character.

Coming directly to my subject, my own observation tells me that the charge still most commonly made against Lee in that section of the common country to which I belong and with which I sympathize is that, in plain language, he was false to his flag, — educated at the national academy, an officer of the United States Army, he abjured his allegiance and