

**THE SCHOLAR IN A REPUBLIC:  
ADDRESS AT THE CENTENNIAL  
ANNIVERSARY OF THE PHI BETA  
KAPPA OF HARVARD COLLEGE.  
JUNE 30, 1881**

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The Scholar in a Republic: Address at the Centennial Anniversary of the Phi Beta Kappa of Harvard College. June 30, 1881 by Wendell Phillips

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**WENDELL PHILLIPS**

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from Wendell Phillips

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"Though a linguist should pride himself to have all the tongues that Babel cleft the world into, yet, if he had not studied the solid things in them, as well as the words and lexicons, he were nothing so much to be esteemed a learned man as any yeoman competently wise in his mother dialect only." — MILTON.

"I cannot but think as Aristotle (lib. 8) did of Thales and Anaxagoras, that they may be learned but not wise, or wise but not prudent, when they are ignorant of such things as are profitable to them. For suppose they know the wonders of nature and the subtleties of metaphysics and operations mathematical, yet they cannot be prudent who spend themselves wholly upon unprofitable and ineffective contemplation." — JEREMY TAYLOR.

"The people, sir, are not always right."

"The people, Mr. Grey, are not often wrong."

DISBAELI'S "Violan Grey."

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## THE SCHOLAR IN A REPUBLIC.

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MR. PRESIDENT AND BROTHERS OF THE P. B. K.

A HUNDRED years ago our society was planted — a slip from the older root — in Virginia. The parent seed, tradition says, was French, — part of that conspiracy for free speech whose leaders prated democracy in the *salons*, while they carefully held on to the flesh-pots of society by crouching low to kings and their mistresses, and whose final object of assault was Christianity itself. Voltaire gave the watchword, —

“Crush the wretch.”  
“*Écrasez l'infame.*”

No matter how much or how little truth there may be in the tradition: no matter what was the origin or what was the object of our society; if it had any special one, both are long since forgotten. We stand now simply a representative of free, brave, American scholarship. I emphasize *American* scholarship.

In one of those glowing, and as yet unequalled pictures which Everett drew for us, here and elsewhere, of Revolutionary scenes, I remember his saying, that the independence we then won, if taken in its literal and narrow sense, was of no interest and little value; but, construed in the fulness of its real meaning, it bound us to a distinctive American character and purpose, to a keen sense of large responsibility, and to a



generous self-devotion. It is under the shadow of such unquestioned authority that I use the term "American scholarship."

Our society was, no doubt, to some extent, a protest against the sombre theology of New England, where, a hundred years ago, the atmosphere was black with sermons, and where religious speculation beat uselessly against the narrowest limits.

The first generation of Puritans—though Lowell does let Cromwell call them "a small colony of pinched fanatics"—included some men, indeed not a few, worthy to walk close to Roger Williams and Sir Harry Vane, the two men deepest in thought and bravest in speech of all who spoke English in their day, and equal to any in practical statesmanship. Sir Harry Vane—in my judgment the noblest human being who ever walked the streets of yonder city—I do not forget Franklin or Sam Adams, Washington or Fayette, Garrison or John Brown. But Vane dwells an arrow's flight above them all, and his touch consecrated the continent to measureless toleration of opinion and entire equality of rights. We are told we can find in Plato "all the intellectual life of Europe for two thousand years:" so you can find in Vane the pure gold of two hundred and fifty years of American civilization, with no particle of its dross. Plato would have welcomed him to the Academy, and Fénelon kneeled with him at the altar. He made Somers and John Marshall possible; like Carnot, he organized victory; and Milton pales before him in the stainlessness of his record. He stands among English statesmen pre-eminently the representative, in practice and in theory, of serene faith in the safety of trusting truth wholly to her own defence. For other men we walk backward, and throw over their memories the mantle of charity and excuse, saying rev-

erently, "Remember the temptation and the age." But Vane's ermine has no stain; no act of his needs explanation or apology; and in thought he stands abreast of the age, — like pure intellect, belongs to all time.

Carlyle said, in years when his words were worth heeding, "Young men, close your Byron and open your Goethe." If my counsel had weight in these halls, I should say, "Young men, close your John Winthrop and Washington, your Jefferson and Webster, and open Sir Harry Vane." It was the generation that knew Vane who gave to our Alma Mater for a seal the simple pledge, — *Veritas*.

But the narrowness and poverty of colonial life soon starved out this element. Harvard was re-dedicated *Christo et Ecclesie*; and, up to the middle of the last century, free thought in religion meant Charles Chauncy and the Brattle-street Church protest, while free thought hardly existed anywhere else. But a single generation changed all this. A hundred years ago there were pulpits that led the popular movement; while outside of religion and of what called itself literature, industry and a jealous sense of personal freedom obeyed, in their rapid growth, the law of their natures. English common sense and those municipal institutions born of the common law, and which had saved and sheltered it, grew inevitably too large for the eggshell of English dependence, and allowed it to drop off as naturally as the chick does when she is ready. There was no change of law, — nothing that could properly be called revolution, — only noiseless growth, the seed bursting into flower, infancy becoming manhood. It was life, in its omnipotence, rending whatever dead matter confined it. So have I seen the tiny weeds of a luxuriant Italian spring upheave the colossal foundations of the Cæsars' palace, and leave it a mass of ruins.

But when the veil was withdrawn, what stood revealed astonished the world. It showed the undreamt power, the serene strength, of simple manhood, free from the burden and restraint of absurd institutions in church and state. The grandeur of this new Western constellation gave courage to Europe, resulting in the French Revolution, the greatest, the most unmixed, the most unstained and wholly perfect blessing Europe has had in modern times, unless we may possibly except the Reformation.

What precise effect that giant wave had when it struck our shore we can only guess. History is, for the most part, an idle amusement, the day-dream of pedants and triflers. The details of events, the actors' motives, and their relation to each other, are buried with them. How impossible to learn the exact truth of what took place yesterday under your next neighbor's roof! Yet we complacently argue and speculate about matters a thousand miles off, and a thousand years ago, as if we knew them. When I was a scholar here, my favorite study was history. The world and affairs have shown me that one-half of history is loose conjecture, and much of the rest is the writer's opinion.<sup>1</sup> But most men see facts, not with their eyes, but with their prejudices. Any one familiar with courts will testify how rare it is for an honest man to give a perfectly correct account of a transaction. We are tempted to see facts as we think they ought to be, or wish they were. And yet journals are the favorite original sources of history. Tremble, my good friend, if your sixpenny neighbor keeps a journal. "It adds a new terror to death." You shall go down to your children not in your fair lineaments and proportions, but with the smirks, elbows, and angles

<sup>1</sup> "Read me any thing but history, for history must be false." — SIR ROBERT WALPOLE.