

**ADDRESS ON THE  
CULTURE DEMANDED  
BY THE AGE**

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Address on the Culture Demanded by the Age by Frederic De Peyster

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BY

FREDERIC DE PEYSTER, LL.D.

DELIVERED BEFORE

The Alumni Association of Columbia College.

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## THE CULTURE DEMANDED BY THE AGE.

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BROTHERS OF THE ALUMNI ASSOCIATION  
OF COLUMBIA COLLEGE:—

THERE are few associations so delightful as those which cluster around the venerable mother, from whom our intellectual life is, in so important a sense, derived. These associations carry us back to the freshness and vigor of our youth. They recall the time when life presented itself in anticipation, only as a series of brilliant victories; and when a golden glow suffused the morning sky of our early years. The remembrance of generous friendships, some of them only strengthened by the lapse of time, and others sundered only by the separations of death, touches our hearts, even now, with a strange delight. Nor can we forget, under the influence of these associations, the peculiar charm, which at that time attended the acquisition of certain departments of knowledge. It is indeed the common impression that most young men, in college, are averse to intellectual effort, and acquire knowledge only under the pressure of the severest discipline. This is not the case. There are few who do not have a keen relish for those studies which, under wise instruction, open themselves naturally to

the mind. Especially is this the case with those studies which address themselves in any sense to the imagination. There is scarcely any enjoyment in life comparable to the refined and elevating pleasure, which accompanies these early exercises of the mental powers. All the freshness of this peculiar happiness these associations are powerful to recall; and though each period of life, even on to the extremest age, has its own privileges and its own mission in the adorning and perfecting of character, yet this period, when we were nurtured by this august mother of us all, must, in our recollection of it, ever thrill and animate our hearts. We realize in the happy retrospect the fulfillment of the prophecy, so familiar in our college days—

“Hæc olim meminisse juvabit.”

Of this our venerable *Alma Mater* we may well be proud, and rejoice that we are permitted to number ourselves among her sons. For more than a century she has been the prolific and faithful parent of a progeny of large-hearted and large-minded men. We cannot examine our family record as her *Alumni*, without feeling what a privilege it is to be numbered as brethren with so many of those she is proud to call her sons. I cannot speak of the living, though the thought of them is vivid in my mind. I rejoice in the young men whom she has reared; and who, under the influence of her wise culture, are prepared to discharge the mission to which educated men are called in this wonderful age. I rejoice in the honorable record of so many of her sons now advanced in life, and whose

power of beneficent influence only increases with the diminution of bodily strength. Venerable in years, in learning, and in usefulness, they command the homage of our grateful admiration and love.

It would be impossible to speak, on this occasion, in fitting terms, of the long list of the departed *Alumni* or officers of this our *Alma Mater*. Some recent names there are, that we cannot but recall to mind. The varied acquirements and culture of Renwick, the classic erudition and strongly-marked manliness of Anthon, the liberal and courtly character and bearing of King, and the wide culture and critical taste of McVickar, will ever be remembered in connection with this Institution. The memory of the noble Anthon is embalmed in the biography, happily as ably executed by his worthy successor in the Jay Professorship. May some hand, as skilful, present us with a similar memorial of our late Emeritus professor—McVickar, over whose mortal remains we recently witnessed the last solemn services of the Church, in which he had faithfully ministered for more than a half-century!

Passing back in memory to the youthful days of our now venerable mother, among the distinguished sons whom she then gave to the world, were two of such conspicuous greatness and imperishable national renown, that their names alone would give immortality to any Institution with which they were connected. For how many of the most important principles which have entered into our political organization are we not indebted to Alexander Hamilton! For how much of the spirit of liberty and sympathy with freemen, freedom and progress, are we not indebted to John



Jay! In the struggles which accompanied the establishment of our republican institutions, these sons of Columbia were indeed

"Geminos, duo fulmina belli."

Coming down from the early history of our College to more modern times, another conspicuous Alumnus, prominent among the eminent statesmen of our country, is *De Witt Clinton*. With his national reputation is associated the remembrance of the substantial blessings which his genius, influence, and efforts conferred upon his native State by the system of internal improvements, inaugurated and perfected by him. He has indelibly stamped his name on that successful enterprise which has materially aided in making the City of New York the chief mart of the nation, by intermingling our inland seas with the oceans that encircle the globe; and thereby it has become a more influential link in the stupendous chain which embraces within its fold the commerce of the world.

But to pass from these allusions which, though only of family interest, as it were, are pardonable when the sons of our common mother meet together, it seems to me that the subject which would most naturally suggest itself to the mind, and which it is perhaps the most important to consider on such an occasion, is

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It may be necessary perhaps at the outset to vindicate the idea that our age could possibly require a different culture from those which have preceded it.

That such an idea should present itself at such a time is not to be wondered at. It would be the greatest marvel if it were otherwise. For this is a period in which there is a universal questioning of what has heretofore challenged the belief of mankind. Every form of opinion and of practice is now required to justify its existence. It would be strange indeed if a subject, so fraught with importance to human welfare as culture or education, should escape the ordeal to which everything else is subjected.

But it is not merely inevitable that the prevailing methods of culture should be challenged in this critical age. There are also facts which render it reasonable to suppose that the vastly different conditions of life, in modern times, should make a new system of culture, better adapted to these changed conditions, desirable if not absolutely necessary. The relations of man to nature are entirely different from what they have ever been. These relations are both speculative and practical. The knowledge of nature has been amazingly augmented within a comparatively short period of time. Numerous discoveries, of the most wonderful character, of the principles and laws which govern the universe, have been made; and investigations are now vigorously pushed in regions never thought of a century ago. A man cannot be a truly educated man without knowing something of these new fields and processes of inquiry. But no man can gain even a superficial acquaintance with them, without departing widely from the traditional system of education.

Besides this it is a fact which will hardly be disputed, that the prevailing system grew out of no phi-

osophy of nature and of man; and that the philosophical arguments which are oftentimes urged in their behalf, were an after-thought, and not the considerations out of which grew the method of culture, which has so long maintained its hold on the world. The question, therefore, has very great force, at the present day, whether the large results which we have reached in philosophy should not be made the basis upon which our system of culture should be reared.

These considerations, among many others, have led to a violent assault in our day upon the predominance of the classics and mathematics in our prevalent system of education; and to an exaltation, in comparison, of the various departments of scientific study. The controversy is now going on, more fiercely perhaps than ever. It has already largely modified the present systems. These modifications are likely to be still further increased in the future.

One great difficulty is, that the controversy is generally carried on as if the truth lay wholly upon the one side or the other. Too often the advocates of one view, claim that the only object of culture is mental discipline; while the advocates of the other claim as tenaciously that it is the acquisition of useful knowledge. Accordingly it is asserted on the one side, that the only means of culture, of any great account, is the study of the Mathematics and Classics, and on the other that it is the study of Nature. But more than this, it is claimed on each side that, even if the view of the other, as to the object of culture, should be correct, its own method would be, even then, to be preferred. It is a repetition in principle of the old story of the sus-