

**AN ORATION PRONOUNCED
BEFORE THE CONNECTICUT
ALPHA OF THE PHI BETA KAPPA
AT YALE COLLEGE, NEW HAVEN,
AUGUST 15, 1849**

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An Oration Pronounced Before the Connecticut Alpha of the Phi Beta Kappa at Yale College,
New Haven, August 15, 1849 by Ashbel Smith

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ASHBEL SMITH

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New Haven, August 15, 1849.

By HON. ASHBEL SMITH,
OF TEXAS.

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O R A T I O N .

Gentlemen of the Society—Fellow Citizens,

I PRESENT myself before you, coming from the remotest state of the Union; and though it will not long remain the most distant, nevertheless the region whence I hail, is of all the territories now constituting this great republic, the most unlike in climate and physical conditions generally to the old thirteen states. And whatever may be thought of the policy of enlarging the borders of our country, it is the manifest destiny of the Anglo-Saxon, to swarm even beyond our present limits, and to extend institutions distinctively American, over regions still more diverse in natural character, than those incorporated within a few years into the American Union. Notwithstanding the recent settlement of the United States, the free American population both of the North and South, is eminently homogeneous. The pioneers who are subduing the western and south-western wilds, peopling those vast solitudes, bearing onward with marvelous speed, the banner of true civilization to the Pacific Ocean and the islands of the great seas, and securing every step of their progress by fortresses of the school-house, the printing press and pulpit; these pioneers, I say, are sprung from the hardy loins of the old Atlantic states, and impress at once their distinctive character on any emigrants that may join them from other parts

of the world. They naturally retain, and will of course do so for a generation or two, the habits of thought and physical action derived from their fathers. But their descendants who shall in future time dwell in the mild regions of the lower Rio Grande, will be subject to a climate and to natural influences, widely different from those which prevail in the land of their fathers. Casting our eyes over the nations of the earth, along with a general uniformity in the great outlines of person and traits of character, we perceive no small diversity in their minuter features. These diversities it is customary to attribute to climate and physical influences; man in his corporeal and mental nature is commonly regarded as being easily molded under the operation of the four elements of ancient philosophy. Standing in my own state of Texas, surrounded by descendants of the pilgrims of Plymouth and of the settlers of Jamestown, I mused on what would be the effect of that warm and genial climate on the descendants in future generations of my fellow citizens then around me. Will they retain the iron frames and strong nerves, the clear heads and bold hearts of their forefathers? Rising upwards from this inquiry and embracing a broader field in my comprehension, I contemplated *the permanent and unchangeable identity of the human race*. This is not a matter of uninteresting curiosity. The most interesting inquiry which can employ our thoughts, regarded merely as a question of speculative philosophy, is undoubtedly the future condition of man, when the grave shall have closed over him the scenes of this world; but next after this in interest and closely connected with it, is

the inquiry into the natural history of man since the first period of his existence on this globe to the present time. The permanent sameness of the human race, indeed, seems indissolubly bound up with our belief in immortality in the life to come. Has man always been what he now is? We live amidst incessant and perceptible changes of every thing around us. Natural history tells us that races of animals which formerly inhabited the earth are now extinct; that of others some species are lost and their places supplied by species of different sizes, powers, and habits. Has the race of man in his physical powers, his form and dimensions, or in his moral and intellectual nature, undergone any change since his creation? Is he larger or smaller, stronger or weaker, is the race improved, has it degenerated, are his moral dispositions or intellectual powers changed? Are the soldiers of Buena Vista and of the valley of Mexico of the same size and physical mould as were the heroes who begirt and captured Troy? Were the builders of the pyramids, more than thirty centuries ago, or they who fought at Marathon more than twenty centuries since, on the old continent, altogether like the race on this new continent, who build railroads and fought at Bunker Hill and New Orleans, middle sized men, five feet six or eight inches high? Were the priests of Egypt where learning was a mystery, of the same port and general capacity as the honored professors who open wide the doors of knowledge, in the venerable institution where we are now assembled?

In writings of all ages which have been preserved, we find sometimes the direct assertion that the human

race has undergone marked changes, and more frequently allusions to them as admitted facts. Poets have commonly represented the changes to the disadvantage of our race. Homer, describing the feats of one of his heroes in hurling stones or rather rocks, says they were of a size which not twice ten men of his degenerate days could have lifted from the earth. Virgil who copied Homer pretty closely, other poets and troubadours have expressed a like opinion. Pliny observes of the human height, that the whole race of mankind is daily becoming smaller. And in our own day, Sir Walter Scott, has represented his heroes as surpassing in prowess and physical force the men of our time. We have always been taught to regard Edmund Ironsides and Richard Cœur de Lion, with their stalwart companions in heavy armor, wielding their ponderous battle-axes and two handed swords, as possessing a force which would shame the light armed soldier of modern warfare. The Indians too, as Mr. Jefferson relates of the Shawnees, have their traditions of a former race superior to the present. But why refer to the distant—are there not in this house septuagenarians who will stoutly maintain to my face, that the comrades of their youth were more athletic than the effeminate youngsters of this day?

“ αἰνῶσι δ' ἄν οὐκ εἶς

Τῶν, αἳ νῦν βροτοὶ εἰσὶν ἐπιχθόνιοι, μαχέονται.”

Is this opinion correct?

On the other hand, some ingenious philosophers have held quite the contrary opinion, to wit, that the human race since its creation has been gradually im-

proving and developing itself both in its intellectual powers and in its physical organization. Lord Monboddo, a man of great erudition, in a ponderous quarto, enters into long argument with copious citation of various facts to prove that the human race commenced in the monkey tribe, from which it was slowly evolved, developed and perfected into its present form and powers. J. J. Rousseau, seems to have held nearly the same opinion. M. de Maillet, many years since French consul in Egypt, published speculations on our origin, &c., under the title of Interviews with an Indian Philosopher, in which he aims to show that all animals, and man with the rest, originated in the sea. And quite recently a work of much scientific pretension and written in elaborate style, entitled Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation, endeavors to prove that man was not originally created by a simple act of God, but has been a result of a successive development of animal life, commencing with its very lowest forms and proceeding by a regular gradation of efforts, until he has been elaborated into man as we now behold him; and the author boldly conjectures that the present is not a permanent type of our race, but that a new man or being far superior in his physical structure, and of higher mental capacities, may be expected to succeed to, and supplant here the present biped, and that all this will be effected by the continued operation of laws of nature long since established. These may appear to be, and indeed are extreme opinions, and to some may seem not worthy of serious consideration, notwithstanding the array of pretended facts and science wherewith they have been sustained. Is this