

**REMARKS ON THE LIFE
AND WRITINGS
OF DANIEL WEBSTER, OF
MASSACHUSETTS**

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Remarks on the Life and Writings of Daniel Webster, of Massachusetts by George Ticknor

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GEORGE TICKNOR

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OF

DANIEL WEBSTER,

OF MASSACHUSETTS.

Techmer, George

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The following remarks are taken (with some additions) from the eighteenth number of the American Quarterly Review.

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REMARKS, &c.

It has often enough been objected to books written and published in the United States, that they want a national air, tone, and temper. Unhappily, too, the complaint has not unfrequently been well founded; but the volume of Mr. Webster's Works is a striking exception to all such remarks. It consists of a collection of his Addresses, Speeches in Congress, and Forensic Arguments, printed chiefly from pamphlets, already well known; and it is marked throughout, to an uncommon degree, with the best characteristics of a generous nationality. No one, indeed, can open it, without perceiving that, whatever it contains, must have been the work of one born and educated among our free institutions,—of one formed in their spirit, and animated and sustained by their genius and power. The subjects discussed, and the interests maintained in it, are entirely American; and many of them are so important, that they are already become prominent parts of our history. As we turn over its pages, therefore, and see how completely Mr. Webster has identified himself with the great institutions of the country, and how they, in their turn, have inspired and called forth the greatest efforts of his uncommon mind, we feel as if the sources of his strength, and the mystery by which it controls us, were, in a considerable degree, interpreted. We feel that, like the fabulous giant of antiquity, he gathers his power from the very earth that produced him; and our sympathy and interest, therefore, are excited, not less by the principle on which it so much depends, than by the subjects and occasions on which it is so strikingly put forth. We understand better than we did before, not only why we have been drawn to him, but why the attraction that carried us along, was at once so cogent and so natural.

When, however, such a man appears before the nation, the period of his youth and training is necessarily gone by. It is only as a distinguished member of the General Government,—probably in one of the two Houses of Congress, that he first comes, as it were, into the presence of the great mass of his countrymen. But, before he can arrive there, he has, in the vast majority of cases, reached the full stature of his strength, and developed all the prominent peculiarities of his character. Much, therefore, of what is most interesting in relation to him,—much of what goes to make up his individuality and momentum, and without which, neither his elevation nor his conduct can be fully understood or estimated, is known only in the circle of his private friends, or, at most, in that section of the country from which he derives his origin. In this way, we are ignorant of a great deal it concerns us to know about many of our distinguished statesmen; but about none, probably, are we more relatively ignorant than about Mr. Webster, who is eminently one of those persons, whose professional and political career cannot be tolerably understood, unless

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we have some acquaintance with the circumstances of his origin, and of his early history, taken in connexion with his whole public life. We were, therefore, disappointed, on opening the volume of his works, not to find prefixed to it a full biographical notice of him. We were, indeed, so much disappointed and felt so fully persuaded, that neither the contents of the volume itself, nor the sources of its author's power, nor his position before the nation, could be properly comprehended without it, that we determined at once to prepare such notices of his life, as we might be able to collect under unfavorable circumstances. We only regret that our efforts have not been more successful,—and that our notices, therefore, are few and imperfect.

Mr. Webster was born in Salisbury, a farming town of New-Hampshire, at the head of the Merrimack, in 1782. His father, always a farmer, was a man of a strongly marked and vigorous character,—full of decision, integrity, firmness, and good sense. He served under Lord Amherst, in the French war, that ended in 1763; and, in the war of the Revolution, he commanded a company chiefly composed of his own towns-people and friends, who gladly fought under his leading nearly every campaign, and at whose head he was found, in the battle of Bennington, at the White Plains, and at West-Point, when Arnold's treason was discovered. He died about the year 1806; and, at the time of his death, had filled, for many years, the office of Judge of the Court of Common Pleas, for the state of New-Hampshire.

But, during the early part of Mr. Webster's life, the place of his birth, now the centre of a flourishing and happy population, was on the frontiers of civilization. His father had been one of the very first settlers, and had even pushed further into the wilderness than the rest; so that the smoke sent up amidst the solitude of the forest, from the humble dwelling in which Mr. Webster was himself born, marked, for some time, the ultimate limit of New-England adventure at the North. Undoubtedly, in any other country, the sufferings, privations, and discouragements inevitable in such a life, would have precluded all thought of intellectual culture. But, in New-England, ever since the first free-school was established amidst the woods that covered the peninsula of Boston, in 1636, the school-master has been found on the border line between savage and civilized life, often indeed with an ax to open his own path, but always looked up to with respect, and always carrying with him a valuable and preponderating influence.

It is to this characteristic trait of New-England policy, that we owe the first development of Mr. Webster's powers, and the original determination of his whole course in life; for, unless the school had sought him in the forest, his father's means would not have been sufficient to send him down into the settlements to seek the school. The first upward step, therefore, would have been wanting; and it is not at all probable, that any subsequent exertions on his own part, would have enabled him to retrieve it. The value of such a benefit cannot, indeed, be measured; but it

seems to have been his good fortune to be able in part, at least, to repay it; for no man has explained with such simplicity and force as he has explained them, the very principles and foundations on which the free-schools of New-England rest, or shown, with such a feeling of their importance and value, how truly the free institutions of our country must be built on the education of all. We allude now to his remarks in the Convention of Massachusetts, where, speaking of the support of schools, he says:—

“ In this particular we may be allowed to claim a merit of a very high and peculiar character. This commonwealth, with other of the New-England states, early adopted, and has constantly maintained the principle, that it is the undoubted right, and the bounden duty of government, to provide for the instruction of all youth. That which is elsewhere left to chance, or to charity, we secure by law. For the purpose of public instruction, we hold every man subject to taxation, in proportion to his property, and we look not to the question, whether he, himself, have or have not children to be benefited by the education for which he pays. We regard it as a wise and liberal system of policy, by which property, and life, and the peace of society are secured. We seek to prevent, in some measure, the extension of the penal code, by inspiring a salutary and conservative principle of virtue, and of knowledge, in an early age. We hope to excite a feeling of respectability, and of sense of character, by enlarging the capacity, and increasing the sphere of intellectual enjoyment. By general instruction, we seek, as far as possible, to purify the whole moral atmosphere; to keep good sentiments uppermost, and to turn the strong current of feeling and opinion, as well as the censures of the law, and the denunciations of religion, against immorality and crime. We hope for a security, beyond the law, and above the law, in the prevalence of enlightened and well principled moral sentiment. We hope to continue and to prolong the time, when, in the villages and farm-houses of New-England, there may be undisturbed sleep, within unbarred doors. And knowing that our government rests directly on the public will, that we may preserve it, we endeavor to give a safe and proper direction to the public will. We do not, indeed, expect all men to be philosophers, or statesmen; but we confidently trust, and our expectation of the duration of our system of government rests on that trust, that by the diffusion of general knowledge, and good and virtuous sentiments, the political fabric may be secure, as well against open violence and overthrow, as against the slow but sure undermining of licentiousness.” pages 209, 210.

“ I rejoice, Sir, that every man in this community may call all property his own, so far as he has occasion for it, to furnish for himself and his children the blessings of religious instruction and the elements of knowledge. This celestial, and this earthly light, he is entitled to by the fundamental laws. It is every poor man's undoubted birth-right, it is the great blessing which this constitution has secured to him, it is his solace in life, and it may well be his consolation in death, that his country stands pledged, by the faith which it has plighted to all its citizens, to protect his children from ignorance, barbarism, and vice.” p. 211.

How Mr. Webster's education was advanced immediately after he left these primary schools, is, we believe, not known. It was, however, with great sacrifices on the part of his family, and severe struggles on his own. At last, when he was fifteen or sixteen years old, after a very imperfect preparation, he was entered at Dartmouth College; at least, so we infer, for he was graduated there in 1801. What were his principal or favorite pursuits during the three or four years of his academic life, we do not know. We remember, however, to have met formerly one of his classmates, who spoke with the liveliest interest of the generous and delightful spirit he showed among his earliest friends and competitors, in the midst of whom, he manifested, from the first, aspirations entirely beyond his condition, and, when the first year was passed, developed faculties which left all rivalry far

behind him. Indeed, it is known, in many ways, that, by those who were acquainted with him at this period of his life, he was already regarded as a marked man; and that, to the more sagacious of them, the honors of his subsequent career have not been unexpected.

Immediately after leaving college, he began the study of the law in the place of his nativity, with Mr. Thompson, soon afterwards a member of Congress; a gentleman who, from the elevation of his own character, was able to comprehend that of his pupil, and contribute to unfold its powers. But the *res angusta domi* pressed hard upon him. He was compelled to exert himself for his own support; and his professional studies were frequently interrupted and impaired by pursuits, which ended only in obtaining what was needful for his mere subsistence.

Circumstances connected with his condition and wants at this time, led him to Boston, and carried him, when there, into the office of Mr. Gore. This was, undoubtedly, one of the deciding circumstances of his life. Mr. Gore was a lawyer of eminence, and a *gentleman*, in the loftiest and most generous meaning of the word. His history was already connected with that of the country. He had been appointed district attorney of the United States for Massachusetts, by Washington; he had served in England as our commissioner under Jay's treaty; and he was afterwards governor of his native state, and its senator in Congress. His whole character, private, political, and professional, from its elevation, purity, and dignity, was singularly fitted to influence a young man of quick and generous feelings, who already perceived within himself the impulse of talents and the stirrings of an ambition whose direction was yet to be determined. Mr. Webster felt, that it was well for him to be there; and Mr. Gore obtained an influence over his young mind, which the peculiarly kind and frank manners of the instructor permitted early to ripen into an intimacy and friendship that were interrupted only by death.

Mr. Webster finished the study of his profession in Boston, and was there admitted to the bar in 1805;—Mr. Gore, who presented him, venturing, at the time, to make a prediction to the court respecting his pupil's future eminence, which has been hardly more than fulfilled by all his present fame. At first, he began the practice of his profession in Boscawen, a small village adjacent to the place of his birth; but in 1807, he removed to Portsmouth, where, no doubt, he thought he was establishing himself for life.

As a young lawyer, about to lay the foundations for future success, his position could, perhaps, hardly have been rendered more fortunate and happy than it was now in Portsmouth. He rose rapidly in general regard, and was, therefore, almost at once, ranked with the first in his profession in his native state. Of course, his associations and intercourse were with the first minds. And, happily for one like him, the presiding judge of the highest tribunal in New-Hampshire was then Mr. Smith, afterwards governor of the state, whose native clearness of perception, acuteness, and

power, united to faithful and accurate learning in his profession, and the soundest and most practical wisdom in the fulfilment of his duties on the bench, and in his intercourse with the bar, gave him naturally and necessarily great influence over its younger members. Mr. Webster, as the most prominent among them, came much in contact with him, and profited much from his sagacious foresight and wise and discriminating kindness. He came, too, still more in contact with Mr. Mason, afterwards a senator in Congress, and then and still the leading counsel in New-Hampshire. Mr. Mason was his senior by several years, but there was no other adversary capable of encountering him: and the intellect with which Mr. Webster was thus called to contend on equal terms was one of the highest order, of ample resources, and of the quickest penetration; whose original reach, firm grasp, and unsparing logic, left no safety to an adversary, but in a vigor, readiness, and skill, which could never be taken unprepared or at disadvantage. It was a severe school; but there is little reason to doubt, Mr. Webster owes to its stern and rigid discipline much of that intellectual training and power, which render him, in his turn, so formidable an adversary. He owes to it, also, notwithstanding their uniform and daily opposition in court, the no less uniform personal friendship of Mr. Mason in private life.

It was in the midst, however, of this period, both of discipline and success as a lawyer, in New-Hampshire, that he entered public life. In the government of his native state, we believe, he never took office of any kind; and his first political place, therefore, was in the thirteenth Congress of the United States. He was chosen in 1812, soon after the declaration of war; and as he was then but thirty years old, he must have been one of the youngest members of that important Congress. His position there was difficult, and he felt it to be so. He was opposed to the policy of the war; he represented a state earnestly opposed to it; and he had always, especially in the eloquent and powerful memorial from the great popular meeting in Rockingham, expressed himself fully and frankly on the whole subject. But he was now called into the councils of the government, which was carrying on the war itself. He felt it to be his duty, therefore, to make no factious opposition to the measures essential to maintain the dignity and honor of the country; to make no opposition for opposition's sake; though, at the same time, he felt it to be no less his duty, to take good heed that neither the constitution, nor the essential interests of the nation, were endangered or sacrificed—*no quid detrimenti respublica accipiat*. This, indeed, seems to have been his motto up to the time of the peace; and his tone in relation to it is always manly, bold, and decisive. When Mr. Monroe's bill for a sort of conscription was introduced, he joined with Mr. Eppes, and other friends of the administration, in defeating a project, which, except in a moment of great anxiety and excitement, would probably have found no defenders. But when, on the other hand, the bill for "encouraging