

**LITTLE MASTERPIECES:
DANIEL WEBSTER,
REPRESENTATIVE
SPEECHES, PP. 1-182**

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Little Masterpieces: Daniel Webster, Representative Speeches, pp. 1-182 by Bliss Perry

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Don Webster

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DANIEL WEBSTER

REPRESENTATIVE SPEECHES

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10 Mr. K. V.

Introduction

If any justification were needed for including two of Daniel Webster's orations in a series of literary masterpieces, it might be found in the words of one of his younger rivals. In his "Remarks on the Death of Mr. Webster" before the Suffolk Bar, on October 28th, 1852—an eulogy only less graceful and memorable than his more elaborate discourse delivered before the alumni of Dartmouth College the following summer—Rufus Choate paid this tribute to the literary quality of Webster's speeches :

Mr. Choate's speech

" All that he has left, or the larger portion of all, is the record of spoken words. His works, as already collected, extend to many volumes—a library of reason and eloquence, as Gibbon has said of Cicero's—but they are volumes of speeches only or mainly ; and yet who does not rank him as a great American author ? an author as truly expounding, and as characteristically exemplifying, in a pure, genuine, and harmonious English style, the mind, thought, point of view of objects, and essential nationality of his country as any other of our authors, professedly so denominated ? Against the maxim of Mr. Fox, his speeches read well, and yet were good speeches—great speeches—in the deliv-

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ery. For so grave were they, so thoughtful and true, so much the eloquence of reason at last, so strikingly always they contrived to link the immediate topic with other and broader principles, ascending easily to widest generalizations, so happy was the reconciliation of the qualities which engage the attention of hearers, yet reward the perusal of students, so critically did they keep the right side of the line which parts eloquence from rhetoric, and so far do they rise above the penury of mere debate, that the general reason of the country has enshrined them at once, and forever, among our classics."

Webster was forty-four when he pronounced the commemorative discourse upon John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. His Plymouth address in 1820, six years before, had established his fame as an orator, and the Bunker Hill speech of 1825 had confirmed it. The public mind instantly turned to him in the hour of intense American feeling caused by the simultaneous deaths, upon July 4th, 1826—the fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence—of the two most prominent survivors of the Revolutionary struggle. This extraordinary coincidence, and the historical associations suggested by it, stirred the whole country, and the thoughts and emotions of a whole country were never more adequately voiced by any orator than by Webster's eulogy in Faneuil Hall. The speech is best known to-day by two passages, one on the nature of true eloquence, and the

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other an imaginary speech on Independence by John Adams. But its easy narrative style, apt portrayal of character, skilful marshalling of historical events, above all, its fine dignity and fervid patriotism, are equal evidence of Webster's unrivalled fitness for such a task. One would hesitate to say that the speech as a whole is greater than the Plymouth or the Bunker Hill addresses, but at least its place is by their side.

Webster's most celebrated parliamentary effort is no doubt his "Second Speech on Foot's Resolution," popularly known as the "Reply to Hayne." Students of constitutional law may be more attracted to his masterly argument in reply to Calhoun, entitled "The Constitution not a Compact between Sovereign States." His Seventh of March speech in 1850 perhaps affected his personal fortunes more than any other. But as an exhibition of sheer power in debate, the "Reply to Hayne" stands alone.

Like many another speech famous in parliamentary history, its immediate occasion arose almost by accident. On December 29th, 1829, Senator Foot of Connecticut moved a resolution with regard to the sale of public lands. It was resented by Mr. Benton of Missouri, and other Senators, as an attack upon the West and South. Debate proceeded somewhat listlessly, however, until January 19th, when Mr. Hayne of South Carolina, a graceful and brilliant debater, made a long and telling speech directed

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against New England. It was felt that a reply was due from Mr. Webster, who at that time, nevertheless, was engaged in a case before the Supreme Court, and had heard but a portion of Mr. Hayne's speech.

Upon the 20th, accordingly, Webster spoke, defending the East against the charge of hostility to the West. The next day Hayne made a bitter rejoinder, which was not completed, owing to an adjournment of the Senate, until the following Monday, the 25th. The hour was late when Webster rose to reply, and a motion for adjournment prevailed. Upon the succeeding day, Tuesday, January 26th, the debate was resumed, amid circumstances of extreme excitement.

More than one eye-witness of that scene has described it in detail, and the story of the "Great Debate" must not be repeated here. Webster had a threefold aim: to answer Hayne's personal taunts, to vindicate Massachusetts, and to show by a closely reasoned argument that "the Constitution was not a compact between sovereign States." Never was there a greater personal triumph. His consummate skill in rebuttal, the weight and cogency of his logic, the lofty love of country that inspired his wonderful peroration, overmastered both his friends and foes. Such were the peculiar political complications of the moment that the "Reply to Hayne" became far more, besides, than a mere personal triumph.