

**THE TRUE USES OF AMERICAN
REVOLUTIONARY HISTORY. AN ORATION
DELIVERED BEFORE THE AUTHORITIES OF THE
CITY OF BOSTON, ON MONDAY, THE FIFTH OF
JULY, 1841, BEING THE DAY SET APART FOR
THE CELEBRATION OF THE SIXTY-FIFTH
ANNIVERSARY OF AMERICAN INDEPENDENCE**

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The true uses of American revolutionary history. An oration delivered before the authorities of the city of Boston, on Monday, the fifth of July, 1841, being the day set apart for the celebration of the sixty-fifth anniversary of American independence by George Ticknor Curtis

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GEORGE TICKNOR CURTIS

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BY GEORGE TICKNOR CURTIS.

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ORATION.

THE age for declamation upon the American Revolution has passed away. Five and sixty years have come and gone, since our ancestors made themselves free by a Declaration, followed by a seven years' war to establish its propositions and realize its theories. On each successive anniversary of the day when that paper protest became the act of the American people, all over the land—in city and town and village, the growing millions have been wont to listen to its great truths, to discussion of its principles, its doctrines and the doings of its after-day of strife and sacrifice and blood and triumph and final peace. The whole American mind, for more than half a century, with its native intensity and enthusiasm, has turned itself, periodically, to the associated recollections of this day; and has availed itself of all that they can bestow in the way of public speech.—Could we, indeed, divest ourselves of all

that repetition has thus effected upon the mind, and invest the moral day with a new interest, making it like nature's day, which dawns successively just like the preceeding, but is yet ever novel and fresh to the craving sense of novelty, its topics might not pall upon the wearied ear. But this is now impossible. We cannot

Roam the same old shore at will,
In the fond faith that we are children still.

And perhaps this exhaustion of the topic, for the purposes of public address, is owing in part to its very nature. There are indeed depths in the soul of man, which may be sounded constantly and forever, and they will still give forth the response of intense emotion and undying interest. But the topics which can thus from age to age never exhaust or be exhausted, do not concern the temporal interests of his being. They belong not to history—not to the doings of his ancestors in field or senate—not to the revolutions of government—not even to the great ideal of Liberty, which the struggling patriot, of all ages, worships amid chains and beneath the very heel of despotism. They are of interests, which stretch far away from the concerns of his political to the realms of his spiritual existence; and perhaps these

are the only topics, which, from age to age, can, in the way of stated public address, claim and excite the untired attention of mankind.

There are other subjects and other occasions of oratory, which admit of the highest interest, and the result of which lives after them. These however are the occasions, when the immediate and momentous interests of the present time demand and create high excitement. The orations of Demosthenes have come down to us and to all civilized men, not merely because they are clothed in that indestructible tongue, which has been styled "shrine of the genius of the old world," but mainly because a real business and purpose in hand, to be effected by speech, gave that speech a winged energy that has wafted it over the space of ages, and now wakes in the modern breast a living sympathy with those whose affairs were the occasion of its utterance. Such were the occasions of all the great remnants of oratory that have come to us from any age or tongue. Such are the great uses of public speech. When, in the Market-Place, the Senate, or the Forum, crowds are hanging upon those words which are to make or mar great interests; when some great politic doctrine is to be laid as a corner stone deep in the foundations of a state, then it is, that the divine fac-

ulty which is in man may so utter itself, that the utterance shall live—live in the event which it creates. First creating, and then becoming part and substance of the event itself, it shall be known to all coming time, to which the knowledge of that event shall reach.

But of that lower department of oratory, devoted to the mere purposes of eulogium and declamation, little that is substantial can be predicated, among any people, and it soon reaches its utmost results. Hence, also it is, in part, that the commemoration of this day, by public addresses, loses its interest as society becomes more cultivated.

We are not met, however, to read lectures upon rhetoric. But I notice these things, in passing, as leading naturally and appropriately to the topic about to be spoken of. There is a decline in the interest with which the public ear listens to these addresses. But because I notice and remind you of this, let me not be supposed—do not suppose yourselves—to be wanting in true American feeling, or a due share of patriotism. Who can ever feel, of and on this day, in any other than a spirit of deep gratitude to the God of Nations, that in the wisdom of his Providence, he permitted the meridian of a mid-summer's sun to blaze down upon that immortal

instrument, which the brave and great dared to enact in the face of day, and then to publish to the world? Who can fail to exult, to praise, to bless, that he has caused such momentous consequences to human happiness to flow from that single act; that he prospered the work of those courageous men; that he suffered them to escape the risks and reap the glory, and then to go down to honored graves, leaving their histories embalmed in the affections of a nation, as, of old, the Kings of Egypt went to the stately chambers of their pyramid, and there lie, in their mortal preservation, for the reverential visits of many thousand years.

We have done all that we can well do, with this mode of treating our history and commemorating its events. Yet, do I propose to forget the past? Would I cut loose from the great sheet-anchor of our destiny, and send the political and social system to drift over the wide waters of a boundless future, or on the turbulent waves of the present, careless of the great dead, their principles, their deeds, their renown, their example, their splendid illustration of the great truths of man's political and social state? Ah no—midst the hot haste and din of the present,

“The voices of the dead
Sound like the distant torrent's fall.”