

**THE LIFE, CHARACTER AND
WRITINGS OF
WILLIAM CULLEN BRYANT**

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The Life, Character and Writings of William Cullen Bryant by George William Curtis

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GEORGE WILLIAM CURTIS

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THE
LIFE, CHARACTER AND WRITINGS
OF
WILLIAM CULLEN BRYANT.

A COMMEMORATIVE ADDRESS
DELIVERED BEFORE THE
NEW YORK HISTORICAL SOCIETY,

AT THE ACADEMY OF MUSIC, DECEMBER 30, 1898.

BY
GEORGE WILLIAM CURTIS.



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THE NEW YORK HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

TO VIRU
AIRROTILAO

WILLIAM CULLEN BRYANT.

UNIV. OF CALIFORNIA

THIS great and distinguished assembly is in itself an imposing tribute to the memory of an illustrious man. But even more impressive than this presence of genius and distinction, of character and intelligence, is the absence of one citizen—that venerable figure which had come to represent in this community all the civic graces and virtues, and from whose temperate lips on every occasion of literary and patriotic commemoration, of political emergency or of public appeal, we have been accustomed to hear the fitting words of counsel, of encouragement, of consolation. When Cooper died, the restless city paused to hear Bryant's words of praise and friendship. When Irving followed Cooper, all hearts turned to Bryant, and it was before this society and in this place that he told the story

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of Irving's life. Now Bryant has followed Cooper and Irving, the last of that early triumvirate of American literature, not less renowned than the great triumvirate of American politics, and he whose life began before the century leaves behind but one of his early literary contemporaries. The venerable poet Dana, friend of Bryant's youth, at an age prolonged beyond fourscore and ten—

“An old age, serene and bright,
And lovely as a Lapland night”—

the editor who published *Thanatopsis* sixty-one years ago, has seen its author join the innumerable caravan and lie down to pleasant dreams. But a thousand eloquent and reverent voices of the press and the pulpit, of the college and the club, of orator and poet, from the sea-coast to the prairies, have spoken for him who spoke for all. There was no eminent American upon whom the judgment of his countrymen would be more immediate and unanimous. The broad and simple outline of his character and career had become universally familiar like a mountain

or the sea, and in speaking of him I but repeat the thought of every American, and register a judgment already pronounced. A patriarch of our literature, and in a permanent sense the oldest of our poets, a scholar familiar with many languages and literatures, finely sensitive to the influence of nature, and familiar with trees and birds and flowers, he was especially fitted, it might be thought, for scholarly seclusion and the delights of the strict literary life. But he who melodiously marked the solitary way of the water-fowl through the rosy depth of the glowing heaven, and on the lonely New England hills,

“Rock-ribbed and ancient as the sun,”

saw in the river and valley, in forest and ocean, only the solemn decoration of man's tomb—the serious, musing country-boy felt also the magic of human sympathy, the impulse of his country, the political genius of his race, and the poet became distinctively an American and a public political leader. In the active American life of this century he bore his full part, never quailing, never doubt-

ing, giving and taking blows; stern often, reserved, unsparing, but panoplied ever in an armor which no fabled Homeric hero wore, beyond the art of Vulcan to forge or the dark waters of the Styx to charm, the impenetrable armor of moral principle. Time as it passed chastened the ardor of the partisan, without relaxing the vital interest of the citizen in public affairs. His lofty personality rose above the clamor of selfish ambition, and in his life he reconciled, both in fact and to the popular imagination, the seeming incompatibility of literary taste and accomplishment, and superiority with constant political activity. So rises the shining dome of Mont Blanc above the clustering forests and the roaring streams, and on its towering sides the growths of various climates and of different zones, in due order, meet and mingle. It is by no official title, by no mere literary fame, by no signal or single service or work; no marvelous Lear or Transfiguration, no stroke of state craft calling to political life a new world to redress the balance of the old, no resounding Austerlitz or triumphant Trafalgar, that Bryant is

commemorated. There may have been, in his long life-time, genius more affluent and creative, greater renown, abilities more commanding, careers more dazzling and romantic; but no man, no American, living or dead, has more truly and amply illustrated the scope and the fidelity of Republican citizenship.

Something of this is explained by the time and place of his birth, and the influences that moulded his childhood. At the close of the last century, his father, Peter Bryant, a physician, and the son of a physician, followed the family of his future wife from Bridgewater, in Massachusetts, westward across the Connecticut river, and up into the Hampshire hills to Cummington, where the first pioneer had built his cabin scarcely thirty years before, and there, in 1794, Bryant was born. Western Massachusetts is a high hill country, with secluded green valleys—a farming and grazing region, but every little stream turns a mill, and along the water-courses the air hums with the music of a various industry. The great hills are still largely covered with woods that shelter the solitary pastures and