

**AN ORATION ON THE LIFE AND
CHARACTER OF JOHN QUINCY
ADAMS: DELIVERED BEFORE THE
CITIZENS OF CINCINNATI ON THE
TWENTY-SECOND OF MARCH, 1848**

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TIMOTHY WALKER

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AN ORATION
ON THE
LIFE AND CHARACTER
OF
JOHN QUINCY ADAMS:

DELLIVERED BEFORE THE CITIZENS OF CINCINNATI,

On the twenty-second day of March, 1848.

BY TIMOTHY WALKER.

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1848.

ORATION.

I ENTER, fellow citizens, upon the performance of the part assigned to me in these solemnities, with a painful consciousness of my inability to give utterance to what all of us feel to be due to the occasion. I have found it impossible to put my own conceptions into words. How then can I hope to give adequate expression to yours? For what is the event we thus commemorate?

The angel of Death, ever hovering over these regions of mortality, to execute his dread commission from the Almighty Throne, has struck down the most aged, the most venerable, and the most illustrious of our public servants, JOHN QUINCY ADAMS. *Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.* This inexorable fiat, pronounced upon all the human race, has taken him from among the living. So far as such a man can die, he died on the morning of the 23d of February last. To him, in his last sublime and solemn words, *that was the end of earth, and he was content!* His work was done, his audit closed, and the balance struck for time and for eternity. *Blessed are the dead that die in the Lord; for they rest from their labors, and their works do follow them!* Yes, that weather-beaten, toil-worn frame now rests from its labors, in the last long repose; while the ever living soul, fraught with riches of wisdom seldom acquired on earth, has winged its flight to the Father of Spirits.

But why are we therefore met here together? What is this man's death to us? Was he of our kindred? No. Few of us, perchance, had ever spoken to him. With none, probably, had he consanguinity. Nor is it simply because another man has died—another drop been taken from the great ocean of existence; for death, as Hamlet says, is *common*—the most common as well as certain of all events. Oftener than our own pulse throbs, the pulse of some other mortal, somewhere on the globe, ceases to throb. Every second of time bears witness to the extinction of some human life. What

then is a single unit in this mighty sum? More are born than die; and the procession of the generations goes on increasing.

What then is this particular death to us? Did it occur prematurely? No. The deceased was in his eighty-first year—far past the ordinary goal. The shock of corn was fully ripe for the harvest. It was time for such a man to die. He had fulfilled his great mission, and was waiting for his recall.

And the place—who would have wished such a man to die elsewhere? He fell in the nation's capitol, at his post of duty, in the very act, probably, of rising to make some motion. As the great Chatham fell, so he fell—surrounded by his peers, if peers he had—say rather, surrounded by the nation's representatives. He fell then in the place where such a man should fall—where, it is said, he had expressed a wish to fall. The veteran warrior died on his battle field.

The manner too—what else could have been desired? No dwelling decrepitude—no lingering agony—no gradual sinking into a second childhood. The giant oak was struck down at once by a bolt from heaven. None had to gaze upon a slowly crumbling ruin. None will remember him as a worn out imbecile. He was all himself, while conscious of being. He died then as he might well have prayed to die. And, whether we look to the time, place, or manner, we may borrow the language of an ancient author whom he loved to quote—*Felix non vitæ tantum claritate, sed etiam opportunitate mortis.** Had it been the will of Heaven to impress our rulers, at this momentous crisis in our public affairs—when matters of such grave and solemn import were depending before them—with the deepest possible sense of the awful responsibilities under which they were acting—what event so suitable as this? Their NESTOR struck down in their very presence—their PATRIARCH summoned from their midst before the bar of Jehovah!

The day too was almost the very one to have been wished. There are two days, singled out by Americans from all the year, as hallowed days. On one our National Independence was born, and the elder Adams and Jefferson died; on the other, Washington was born, and the younger Adams did all but die. For although he breathed until the next morning, yet the conscious being was dead. Say then that this birthday of Washington has acquired new sacredness from the death of Adams.

* Fortunate not only in the renown of his life, but also in the circumstances of his death.

Are we then met to grieve at such a death as this? Not certainly for the sake of the departed. For we know from his own dying lips that he was content. Through life he had ever "walked attended by the strong siding champion Conscience." Probably no man ever looked back upon so long, so high, and so varied a career, with less to regret in the calm and solemn retrospect. Errors he doubtless had committed, for he was human. But I am one of those, who, upon a careful scrutiny of his life, though often differing from him in opinion, are constrained to believe that his intentions were always honest. And I have often thought, that were I called upon to single out, from all the great men of our day, the one who came nearest to the idea of Horace—*Integer vitæ, scelerisque purus*—describing a man of pure integrity and blameless life—or to that which Macbeth is made to express of Duncan, who "had borne his faculties so meek," and "been so clear in his great office"—or to that which Cardinal Wolsey is made to paint by way of exhortation to Cromwell—

"Be just and fear not;

"Let all the ends thou aim'st at, be thy COUNTRY'S,

"Thy God's, and TRUTH'S: then if thou fall'st, O Cromwell,

"Thou fall'st a blessed martyr!"—

I say, were I called upon to single out the man of our times, who most nearly realized these ideals, I should unhesitatingly pronounce the name of John Quincy Adams.

But this was not the only source of his content. He was more than simply an honest man. He was, in the deepest and highest sense of the word, a Christian—in practice as well as faith a Christian. As the sublime precepts of Christianity had been his guide through life, so its blessed promises became his hope in death. *Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, yet will I fear no evil; for Thou art with me; Thy rod and Thy staff, they comfort me.* Immortality was to him, not a philosophic speculation, but a revealed fact, a glorious certainty. He felt as sure of life beyond the grave, as of life this side of it. What then was death to him? Only the commencement of a higher life—the entrance upon an immediate communion with kindred spirits of all ages and climes—an introduction to those great and good men of the past, whom until now he knew only by their undying renown, as benefactors of their race, handed down by history for perpetual examples—but, most of all, an admission to the awful presence of his Father, and our Father, his God, and our God!

"Nothing is here for tears, nothing to wail

"Or knock the breast; no weakness, no contempt,

"Dispraise or blame; nothing but well and fair,

"And what may quiet us in a death so noble."

Shall we then mourn the loss which our country has sustained? Such is not my feeling. From the first announcement until now, the predominant emotion of my bosom has been, profound gratitude to Heaven for giving us such a man, and sparing him so long. I lose my regret that he is dead, in my deep joy that he has lived: and this I believe to be the general sentiment of his countrymen. Now, for the first time, does the priceless value of such a man begin to be appreciated. During the latter part of his life, he probably had as few enemies as any great man ever had. But in politics, party spirit perversely tinges every thing with its own hues. No eminent statesman can be without zealous opponents, as well as partizans. The one detract, as much as the other exaggerate; and the truth is but dimly seen, if seen at all, through this turbid medium. But death disperses the mist, dispels the clouds; and through the clear atmosphere which surrounds their memory, the dead are seen truly, as they could not be while living. Already has this been most beautifully exemplified in the case of Mr. Adams. The most glowing and heart-felt eulogies, in both Houses of Congress, came from those who had been his most determined political opponents. Party animosities were all forgotten; the politician was merged in the higher character of the man; and the warm sympathies of every generous heart gushed forth from nature's purest fountains. O this bitter party spirit! It should be the cause of infinite good, by the strict espionage it exercises over our public servants, in order to counterbalance the immense evil it occasions, by smothering (thank God, not extinguishing!) the noblest emotions of magnanimity and generosity. But death breaks down these party barriers; dissolves this incrustation which has hardened round the heart; and in the eye of man, as in the eye of God, the just on earth become perfect in Heaven.

This occasion, then, is not one of mourning, for the sake either of the dead or the living; but rather one for the expression of fervent gratitude, and chastened joy, for the precious example of such a life and death—for the lessons of true wisdom it is designed to teach,—and for the devout and lofty aspirations which it should excite. In this spirit let it be improved by us.

The history of the life of Mr. Adams is so closely interwoven with that of his country—for in fact the one was nearly coeval with the other—that any thing like a biography from me would be a work of supererogation. Nevertheless we must glance at some of the more prominent points, in order to comprehend the full dimensions of such

a man, and delineate at least the outlines of his remarkable character.

John Quincy Adams was born at Braintree, now Quincy, Massachusetts, on the 11th of July, 1767, just on the eve of the great struggle for Independence. The first sounds he heard were of resistance to TYRANNY; the first ideas he formed were of the sacredness of LIBERTY. The RIGHTS OF MAN formed the fireside theme of his parents; and such parents!—truly a matchless pair! But on them I must not dwell, further than to say, that if the elements of a lofty character could be hereditary, the son would have inherited them by a double descent: for his father was not greater among the men of that day, than was his mother among the women. Both were pre-eminent in an age of greatness. Fortunate child, to have received his first lessons from such teachers. Fortunate parents, to have had such a child to teach! And rare as fortunate! The instance of the elder and younger Pitt at once occurs to us; but where shall we find another parallel? In what other tomb do the ashes of such a father and son sleep side by side?

From the age of eleven to that of eighteen, the son was, for the most part, abroad with his father, in his successive missions to France, Holland, and England, where he enjoyed the benefit of the best schools in Europe, and was a close and devoted student. While only fourteen, he was Private Secretary to Francis Dana, our Minister to Russia—a case of precocious ability almost without example. In all these places, his position necessarily brought him into acquaintance with all the great men of the day; and in London, he had the inestimable advantage, at that impressible age, of listening to some of the most splendid efforts of Pitt, Fox, Burke, and Sheridan. These seven years were emphatically his forming period. To no youth, perhaps, did it ever occur, to have such rich and various opportunities for a complete and thorough education, as he now enjoyed. And he made the most of them, and then and there laid the foundation of a *scholarship* so nearly universal, that, in regard to the wonderful diversity of his erudition, it may well be doubted whether, at the time of his death, the world contained his superior. Without enlarging upon this topic, I would, once for all, point your attention to the prodigious depth and variety of his learning, as one of the most unique features in his character—so very little of the vast field of knowledge did he leave unexplored.

And now, at the age of eighteen, he returns from Europe, a finished man in all but years. Entering an advanced class in Harvard

University, he was graduated at twenty, with distinguished honors. This was in the memorable year 1787—the year of the formation of our national Constitution, and almost the very day of the enactment of that celebrated Ordinance, which formed the first law of this North Western Territory. Think of this fact; for what in the history of the world's progress is like it? John Quincy Adams was a college graduate before the Federal Constitution was finished, and while the State of Ohio was an unbroken wilderness!—that State, which, in 1843, when he for the first time saw it, at the age of seventy-six, made his journey through it more than a Roman ovation—so deep was the veneration, and so fervent the love of its two millions of inhabitants for the patriot sage. Of that visit Mr. Adams has often since spoken, as one of the most gratifying events of his life. He had once urged Congress in vain to build “a light-house of the skies;” for there were Constitutional scruples. He came here to lay the corner stone of one—the first in the world erected on private subscription—against which there could be no Constitutional scruples. From the desk where I now speak, he delivered his last formal Discourse.* And *Mount Adams*,—so called for him—a name now thrice hallowed by his death, looking down upon this fair city at its base, will keep his name in the perpetual remembrance of our citizens to the latest posterity—

Claram et venerabile nomen gentibus,
Et multum nostras quod proderat urbi. †

The next seven years, from the age of twenty to twenty-seven, were devoted to the study, and, to a very limited extent, the practice of law. His preceptor was the late Chief Justice Parsons, then at the head of the Massachusetts bar, and afterwards regarded by the profession as the American Coke. And such was the opinion of his acquirements in jurisprudence, made in this short period, that in 1811, while in Russia, he received from Madison an appoint-

* How strikingly applicable to himself are the concluding words of that last Discourse:

“Man issues from the hand of his Maker a frail and imperfect being. His life begins in helpless infancy, and closes with the clouds of the valley. Evil, physical, moral, and intellectual, beset his path from the cradle to the grave, and warn him that his condition here on earth is a state of probation to fit him for a fairer and better world. Still, in wending his toilsome way, every step in the progress of improvement in his condition, approximates him to the boundary where sorrow and grief are unknown, and where his spirit finds that which was denied him on earth. In pursuit of happiness, were his hands to be manacled and tied? How absurd this question must appear to you! Yet read the history of your race and see!”

† A name renowned and venerable among the nations, and which has greatly benefited our city.