

**ORATION ON THE CENTENNIAL  
ANNIVERSARY OF THE  
DECLARATION OF  
INDEPENDENCE, PP.1-51 (NOT  
COMPLETE)**

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Oration on the Centennial Anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, pp.1-51 (not complete) by Robert C. Winthrop

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**ROBERT C. WINTHROP**

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ORATION  
ON THE  
CENTENNIAL ANNIVERSARY

OF THE  
**Declaration of Independence,**

DELIVERED IN THE MUSIC HALL, AT THE REQUEST OF  
THE CITY GOVERNMENT,

BOSTON, 4 JULY, 1876.

BY  
ROBERT C. WINTHROP.

BOSTON:  
PRESS OF JOHN WILSON AND SON.  
1876.



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## ORATION.

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AGAIN and again, Mr. Mayor and Fellow Citizens, in years gone by, considerations or circumstances of some sort, public or private, — I know not what, — have prevented my acceptance of most kind and flattering invitations to deliver the Oration in this my native city on the Fourth of July. On one of those occasions, long, long ago, I am said to have playfully replied to the Mayor of that period, that, if I lived to witness this Centennial Anniversary, I would not refuse any service which might be required of me. That pledge has been recalled by others, if not remembered by myself, and by the grace of God I am here to-day to fulfil it. I have come at last, in obedience to your call, to add my name to the distinguished roll of those who have discharged this service in unbroken succession since the year 1783, when the date of a glorious act of patriots was substituted for that of a dastardly deed of hirelings, — the 4th of July for the 5th of March, — as a day of annual celebration by the people of Boston.

In rising to redeem the promise thus inconsiderately given, I may be pardoned for not forgetting, at the outset, who presided over the Executive Council of Massachusetts when the Declaration, which has just been read, was first formally and solemnly proclaimed to the people, from the balcony of yonder Old State House, on the 18th of July, 1776; \* and whose privilege it was,

\* James Bowdoin.

Re-classed  
May 1900

amid the shoutings of the assembled multitude, the ringing of the bells, the salutes of the surrounding forts, and the firing of thirteen volleys from thirteen successive divisions of the Continental regiments, drawn up "in correspondence with the number of the American States United," to invoke "Stability and Perpetuity to American Independence! God save our American States!"

That invocation was not in vain. That wish, that prayer, has been graciously granted. We are here this day to thank God for it. We do thank God for it with all our hearts, and ascribe to Him all the glory. And it would be unnatural if I did not feel a more than common satisfaction, that the privilege of giving expression to your emotions of joy and gratitude, at this hour, should have been assigned to the oldest living descendant of him by whom that invocation was uttered, and that prayer breathed up to Heaven.

And if, indeed, in addition to this, — as you, Mr. Mayor, so kindly urged in originally inviting me, — the name I bear may serve in any sort as a link between the earliest settlement of New England, two centuries and a half ago, and the grand culmination of that settlement in this Centennial Epoch of American Independence, all the less may I be at liberty to express any thing of the compunction or regret, which I cannot but sincerely feel, that so responsible and difficult a task had not been imposed upon some more sufficient, or certainly upon some younger, man.

Yet what can I say? What can any one say, here or elsewhere, to-day, which shall either satisfy the expectations of others, or meet his own sense of the demands of such an occasion? For myself, certainly, the longer I have contemplated it, — the more deeply I have reflected on it, — so much the more hopeless I have become of finding myself able to give any adequate expression to its full significance, its real sublimity and grandeur. A hundred-fold more than when John Adams wrote to his wife it would be so for ever, it is an occasion for "shows, games, sports; guns, bells, bonfires, and illuminations, from one end of the continent to the other." Oventions, rather than orations, are the order of such a day as this. Emotions like those



which ought to fill, and which do fill, all our hearts, call for the swelling tones of a multitude, the cheers of a mighty crowd, and refuse to be uttered by any single human voice. The strongest phrases seem feeble and powerless; the best results of historical research have the dryness of chaff and husks, and the richest flowers of rhetoric the drowsiness of "poppy or mandragora," in presence of the simplest statement of the grand consummation we are here to celebrate:—A Century of Self-Government Completed! A hundred years of Free Republican Institutions realized and rounded out! An era of Popular Liberty, continued and prolonged from generation to generation, until to-day it assumes its full proportions, and asserts its rightful place, among the Ages!

It is a theme from which an Everett, a Choate, or even a Webster, might have shrunk. But those voices, alas! were long ago hushed. It is a theme on which any one, living or dead, might have been glad to follow the precedent of those few incomparable sentences at Gettysburg, on the 19th of November, 1863, and forbear from all attempt at extended discourse. It is not for me, however, to copy that unique original,—nor yet to shelter myself under an example, which I should in vain aspire to equal.

And, indeed, Fellow Citizens, some formal words must be spoken here to-day,—trite, familiar, commonplace words, though they may be;—some words of commemoration; some words of congratulation; some words of glory to God, and of acknowledgment to man; some grateful lookings back; some hopeful, trustful, lookings forward,—these, I am sensible, cannot be spared from our great assembly on this Centennial Day. You would not pardon me for omitting them.

But where shall I begin? To what specific subject shall I turn for refuge from the thousand thoughts which come crowding to one's mind and rushing to one's lips, all jealous of postponement, all clamoring for utterance before our Festival shall close, and before this Centennial sun shall set?

The single, simple Act which has made the Fourth of July memorable for ever,—the mere scene of the Declaration,—would of itself and alone supply an ample subject for far more than

the little hour which I may dare to occupy; and, though it has been described a hundred times before, in histories and addresses, and in countless magazines and journals, it imperatively demands something more than a cursory allusion here to-day, and challenges our attention as it never did before, and hardly ever can challenge it again.

Go back with me, then, for a few moments at least, to that great year of our Lord, and that great day of American Liberty. Transport yourselves with me, in imagination, to Philadelphia. It will require but little effort for any of us to do so, for all our hearts are there already. Yes, we are all there,—from the Atlantic to the Pacific, from the Lakes to the Gulf,—we are all there, at this high noon of our Nation's birthday, in that beautiful City of Brotherly Love, rejoicing in all her brilliant displays, and partaking in the full enjoyment of all her pageantry and pride. Certainly, the birthplace and the burial-place of Franklin are in cordial sympathy at this hour; and a common sentiment of congratulation and joy, leaping and vibrating from heart to heart, outstrips even the magic swiftness of magnetic wires. There are no chords of such elastic reach and such electric power as the heartstrings of a mighty Nation, touched and tuned, as all our heartstrings are to-day, to the sense of a common glory,—throbbing and thrilling with a common exultation.

Go with me, then, I say, to Philadelphia;—not to Philadelphia, indeed, as she is at this moment, with all her bravery on, with all her beautiful garments around her, with all the graceful and generous contributions which so many other Cities and other States and other Nations have sent for her adornment,—not forgetting those most graceful, most welcome, most touching contributions, in view of the precise character of the occasion, from Old England herself;—but go with me to Philadelphia, as she was just a hundred years ago. Enter with me her noble Independence Hall, so happily restored and consecrated afresh as the Runnymede of our Nation; and, as we enter it, let us not forget to be grateful that no demands of public convenience or expediency have called for the demolition of that old State House of Pennsylvania. Observe and watch the movements, listen attentively to the words, look steadfastly at the counte-

nances, of the men who compose the little Congress assembled there. Braver, wiser, nobler men have never been gathered and grouped under a single roof, before or since, in any age, on any soil beneath the sun. What are they doing? What are they daring? Who are they, thus to do, and thus to dare?

Single out with me, as you easily will at the first glance, by a presence and a stature not easily overlooked or mistaken, the young, ardent, accomplished Jefferson. He is only just thirty-three years of age. Charming in conversation, ready and full in counsel, he is "slow of tongue," like the great Lawgiver of the Israelites, for any public discussion or formal discourse. But he has brought with him the reputation of wielding what John Adams well called "a masterly pen." And grandly has he justified that reputation. Grandly has he employed that pen already, in drafting a Paper which is at this moment lying on the table, and awaiting its final signature and sanction.

Three weeks before, indeed, — on the previous 7th of June, — his own noble colleague, Richard Henry Lee, had moved the Resolution, whose adoption, on the 2d of July, had virtually settled the whole question. Nothing, certainly, more explicit or emphatic could have been wanted for that Congress itself than that Resolution, setting forth as it did, in language of striking simplicity and brevity and dignity, "That these United Colonies are, and, of right, ought to be, Free and Independent States; that they are absolved from all allegiance to the British crown, and that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain is, and ought to be, totally dissolved."

That Resolution was, indeed, not only comprehensive and conclusive enough for the Congress which adopted it, but, I need not say, it is comprehensive and conclusive enough for us; and I heartily wish, that, in the century to come, its reading might be substituted for that of the longer Declaration which has put the patience of our audiences to so severe a test for so many years past, — though, happily, not to-day.

But the form in which that Resolution was to be announced and proclaimed to the people of the Colonies, and the reasons by which it was to be justified before the world, were at that time of intense interest and of momentous importance. No