

**ORATION ON THE LIFE  
AND CHARACTER OF GEN.  
GEORGE H. THOMAS**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649306930

Oration on the Life and Character of Gen. George H. Thomas by James A. Garfield

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Cover @ 2017

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**JAMES A. GARFIELD**

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GEORGE H. THOMAS**



ORATION

ON THE

LIFE AND CHARACTER

OF

GEN. GEORGE H. THOMAS

DELIVERED BEFORE THE

Society of the Army of the Cumberland

BY

*Abram*  
GEN. JAMES A. GARFIELD

AT THE

FOURTH ANNUAL REUNION

CLEVELAND, NOVEMBER 25, 1870



CINCINNATI  
Robert Clarke & Co

1871

9 April, 1892.

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# ORATION.

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THE LIFE AND CHARACTER OF

## *GENERAL GEORGE H. THOMAS.*

COMRADES OF THE ARMY OF THE CUMBERLAND:

In obedience to your order, I arise to discharge, as best I may, the most honorable and the most difficult duty which it was possible for you to assign me. You have required me to exhibit, in fitting terms, the character and career of *GEORGE H. THOMAS*.

I approach the theme with the deepest reverence, but with the painful consciousness of my inability to do it even approximate justice.

There are now living not less than two hundred thousand men who served under the eye of *GENERAL THOMAS*; who saw him in sunshine and storm—on the march, in the fight, and on the field when the victory had been won. Enshrined in the hearts of all these, are enduring images and most precious memories of their commander and friend. Who shall collect and unite into one worthy picture, the bold outlines, the innumerable lights and shadows which make up the life and character of our great leader? Who shall condense into a

single hour, the record of a life which forms so large a chapter of the nation's history, and whose fame fills and overfills a hemisphere? No line can be omitted, no false stroke made, no imperfect sketching done, which you, his soldiers, will not instantly detect and deplore. I know that each of you here present, sees him in memory at this moment, as we often saw in life; erect and strong, like a tower of solid masonry; his broad, square shoulders and massive head; his abundant hair and full beard of light brown, sprinkled with silver; his broad forehead, full face, and features that would appear colossal, but for their perfect harmony of proportion; his clear complexion, with just enough color to assure you of robust health and a well-regulated life; his face lighted up by an eye which was cold gray to his enemies, but warm, deep blue to his friends; not a man of iron, but of live oak. His attitude, form and features all assured you of inflexible firmness, of inexpugnable strength; while his welcoming smile set every feature aglow with a kindness that won your manliest affection. If thus in memory you see his form and features, even more vividly do you remember the qualities of his mind and heart. His body was the fitting type of his intellect and character; and you saw both his intellect and character tried, again and again, in the fiery furnace of war, and by other tests not less searching. Thus, Comrades, you see him; and your memories supply a thousand details, which complete and adorn the picture. I beg you, therefore, to supply the deficiency of my work from these living prototypes in your own hearts.

No human life can be measured by an absolute standard. In this world, all is relative. Character itself is the result of innumerable influences, from without and from within, which act unceasingly through life. Who shall estimate the effect of those latent forces enfolded in the spirit of a new-born



child—forces that may date back centuries and find their origin in the life, and thought, and deeds of remote ancestors—forces, the germs of which, enveloped in the awful mystery of life, have been transmitted silently from generation to generation, and never perish! All cherishing nature, provident and unforgetting, gathers up all these fragments, that nothing may be lost, but that all may ultimately reappear in new combinations. Each new life is thus the “heir of all the ages,” the possessor of qualities which only the events of life can unfold. The problems to be solved in the study of human life and character are therefore these: Given the character of a man, and the conditions of life around him, what will be his career? Or, given his career and surroundings, what was his character? Or, given his character and career, of what kind were his surroundings? The relation of these three factors to each other is severely logical. From them is deduced all genuine history. Character is the chief element, for it is both a result and a cause—a result of influences and a cause of results.

Each of these elements in the career of GENERAL THOMAS throws light on the others; for throughout his life, whether we consider causes or results, there appears a harmony of proportion, both logical and beautiful, which can spring only from a genuine soul, true to itself, and, therefore, false to none.

From the meager materials at our command, it appears that he was of Welsh descent on his father's side; though his ancestors resided for some time in England before they crossed the sea. Both physically and intellectually, GENERAL THOMAS bore unmistakable marks of that sturdy Cumbrian character which, for four centuries, defied the conquering arms of Rome, and which preserves to this day, in a small corner of Great Britain, a language, literature, and body of traditions all its

own. On his mother's side he was of French origin; she having descended from the Rochelles, a Huguenot family that fled from the oppression of Louis XIV., to find an asylum in the New World. Few elements ever mingled in our national life that added such purity and brilliancy as that which the religious wars of the sixteenth century sent to us from France; and it would be difficult to form a happier combination than the honest solidity of the Welsh, joined to the genial vivacity of the French.

Both branches of THOMAS' family settled in Southeastern Virginia, in the early days of that colony, and became thoroughly imbued with the American spirit.

His own birthplace and home was in that region of Southampton county, Virginia, which forms the water-shed between the James river and the streams that flow into Albemarle Sound. Southampton, like many of the counties in that region, was named by the colonists in memory of their old English home.

GEORGE HENRY THOMAS was born on the 31st of July 1816. We know but little of his early boyhood, beyond the fact that it was passed in a happy country home, in the society of brothers and sisters, and under the direction of cultivated, parents, who ranked among the most respectable and influential of Virginia farmers. One class of influences is specially worthy of notice. There was much in the surroundings of a young Virginian at that time to make him justly proud of his own State. The glorious part she had borne in the war of independence, and in that noble statesmanship which produced the Constitution and Government of the Republic, was not forgotten by her young men. But much more could be said of Virginia. When THOMAS was eighteen years of age, the Constitution of the United States had been in force forty-five years; and during that period Virginia had held the Presi-

dency thirty-two years, had filled the office of Secretary of State for more than twenty years, and had given to the Nation its greatest Chief Justice for thirty-four years.

These honorable evidences of leadership gave peculiar significance and popularity to the doctrine of a great Virginia statesman, embodied in the now sadly-famous resolutions of 1798, in which Virginia put forth the theory that the National Constitution was a compact between the several States, and that each State, in its own sovereign right, was the final judge of any violation of the Constitution, and also of the measure and mode of redress. During the first quarter of this century, Virginia did not see that the inevitable logic of this theory was, first, Nullification, and finally Secession. She saw in it only a safeguard against possible aggression on the part of the National Government or her sister States. It was gratifying to the pride of her citizens, to look upon their proud State as a virgin queen, foremost in founding a great republic, and nobly supporting it by her sovereign will. We shall never do full justice to the conduct of Virginians in the late war without making full allowance for the influence of these resolutions of 1798.

When THOMAS had reached the age of twenty, and had made some progress in the study of the law, his family secured him an appointment as cadet at the Military Academy at West Point. He entered in 1836; and, after a thorough and solid rather than a brilliant course, he graduated in 1840, ranking twelfth in a class of forty-two members, among whom were SHERMAN, EWELL, JORDAN, GETTY, HERBERT, KINGSBURY, VAN VLIET, and others, who afterward attained celebrity. As a cadet, he was distinguished for what BACON has called "round-about common sense" rather than for genius, and for the possession of an honest, sturdy nature that accomplished what-