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Title: "American Literature," by Henry H. Pfeiffer

Format: Commencement Oration

Date: July 13, 1854

Location: Orations-1854-P526a

Contact:

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American Literature

All civilized nations have made great exertions at some period of their history, to discover the origin of their literature, and have rejoiced at every successful effort to trace up, and open the fountains from which the streams of knowledge have issued, to gladden successive generations. The farthest east, the birth-place of science and letters, has been overhung with clouds for centuries, and if for a moment the eye of genius has attempted to pierce them, it succeeded for a moment only, and the splendid vision it unfolded, was soon covered again with a thicker mantle. In all ages, too, there has been a disposition to know much of former times; the persons, manners, minds and modes of thinking of those former days, are sought after by us, and no subject delights us more, than a history of their intellectual treasures. Even Greece, so dear to us by many sweet associations, would lose half our admiration and reverence, were we to separate from the fearless unconquerable spirits of Marathon and Thermopylae, the genius which shines forth in every page of the writings of a Socrates, and the eloquence which even now falls from the mate lips of a Demosthenes. And if there is anything

which can administer pure delight, or elicit our warmest gratitude, it is when we turn the historic page, and trace in every line, the invaluable legacy which expiring Greece has left to posterity. But when we have contemplated the encouragement and princely patronage which Grecian Literature received, and then turn our thoughts back to our own poor Republican land, to our frugal treasury, and the caution with which it is dispensed; to our modest fortunes, and the thrift with which they are hoarded; to our scanty public libraries, and the plain brick walls within which they are deposited; we are apt to form gloomy auguries of the advancement of our own budding literature. We have, however, no reason to fear. Like our country which sprang as it were from the depths of the ocean, where she had been buried for ages, our literature will raise sublimely, and after the lapse of centuries will stand forth a wonder to man. But this is hereafter to be accomplished, for as yet, no Homer or Virgil, Shakespeare or Milton has appeared, unrivalled in song, above our literary horizon. Time has not inscribed upon the sepulchre of the dead, any nobler names in eloquence than Demosthenes or Cicero. The stream of a century has swept by the works of Locke and Newton, yet they still stand alone unapproached, in unapproachable majesty. Still I repeat it, we have no

reason to blush at what we are, and what we have been. What are our attainments in literature, in comparison with other nations of our own age? Have we not fine scholars, accomplished divines and skillful physicians? Have we not jurists who might excite generous rivalry in Westminster Hall? Have we not Statesmen who would stand side by side with those of the old world, in foresight, in political wisdom, in effective debate? Have we not historians who have told with fidelity and force, of our deeds and our sufferings? Have we not Mathematicians, who may claim kindred with the distinguished of Europe? Have we not critics and poets, whose compositions add lustre to the age? Yes there are such among us. But they stand as light-houses along the coast of our literature, shining with a cheering brightness, it is true, but like angels visits "few and far between." Here and there a Clay, a Calhoun or a Webster, has sprung into life, and stand forth a bright and shining example of what American Genius may become under a proper cultivation of the intellect of her children. On the youth of America, then, devolves the ennobling, yet difficult task of uplifting her to that lofty station which nature and nature's God have reserved for her, and for her alone. In that high romance, if romance it be, in which the great minds of antiquity sketched the future of ages to come, they pictured to themselves a region beyond

the ocean, a land of equal laws and happy men. The primitive poets beheld in it the islands of the West, the sage of the Academy placed in it the lost Atlantis; and even the sterner spirit of Seneca could discern a fairer abode of humanity in regions then unknown. Yes? here is the land which they pictured to themselves in such glowing colors; here the land "flowing with milk and honey;" and by us must these fair visions be realized; by us must be fulfilled the promises which burst from the longing hearts of the champions of truth. Here a mighty work is to be accomplished, or never, by the race of mortals. The man who looks with tenderness on the sufferings of good men of former times, the descendant of the Pilgrims who cherishes the memory of his forefathers, the patriot who feels an honest glow at the majesty of the system of which he is a member, the scholar who beholds with rapture the long-sealed book of unprejudiced truth, dispensed to all; these are they by whom these auspicious are to be accomplished. It is by the intellect of the country that the mighty mass is to be inspired; that its parts are to communicate and sympathize, its bright progress to be adorned with becoming refinements, its strong sense uttered, its character reflected, its feeling conveyed to its own children, to other regions and to after ages.

Commencement
Speech

Henry Hamilton Pfeiffer
Of the class of 1853-54
Of Dickinson College

Commencement Oration of Henry Hamilton Pfeiffer, Class of 1854
Transcribed by Tristan Deveney, May 2008
Edited by Sarah-Hazel Jennings, June 2008

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