Dickinson College Archives & Special Collections

http://archives.dickinson.edu/

Documents Online

Title: "The Past," by Henry Augustus Muhlenberg

Format: Commencement Oration

Date: July 9, 1840

Location: Orations-1840-M952p

Contact:

Archives & Special Collections Waidner-Spahr Library Dickinson College P.O. Box 1773 Carlisle, PA 17013

717-245-1399

archives@dickinson.edu

"The Past"

by

Henry auf. Muli len beif

June / 1840.

Reading Pa

60

How is I ever has been a rational being How after year has rolled by - eentury has been added to century - get despite of his almost Godlike powers he has made but small advance in happineds. The breator has bestowed upon him his Tea-bon magnificent in sway ver all the Earth - his judge-ment granted for the wisest purposes - his memory, the best gift of the brumipotent, that which brings him into communion with the sages + master minds of the brined Past o gives him where with to rule the spirits of his fellow men, get with all there ands he has parted in the object of his search. From where a other this arrival? How can it be remedied? These are grove and momentous questions.

The Past. the Resent of the Fections - in these twee words all human history & human hopes are embraced. To a vicative constituted like man, the admonitions of the one, the energies of the other of the dreams of as perations of the third cannot be without interest. Get how different are they in themselves - how distinct the mental powers which the ophere of each required. To a partie temperament - one which loves to awell and the flowery boners of the Past or revel uncontrolled in wild delight amid the flowers out. cipations & vivid dreams of the new - bading future to such a one the dule, the actual tresent is as elong to the soul. The eold Present whose all of wor that falls to mortal lot is prominent - where evils that in the distance durined as mought as-Jume there true proportions & swell to mountains in the Travellois path to fame - more this our all man's

lot would indeed be misery. Its greeks are do fresh of porgrant that the hanglety spirit beneds be med the the strike like a bruized of broken and. The bickerings, the strike, the callons mess of man's heart to all the fentler emotions of his bosom, implanted by his bountor to orften his rugged nature, are caposed to view. The primeral curse is heavy upon all things around, & Poverty of dock Distress are there with all their demon attributes. Heavy indeed would be the burther, hopeless the thorale

"But Pleaven that opreadeth our all its blue espe Platte given as memory, hatte given us hope." The germs of existence.

The future - the never-facting future! with all the florions observed & acolert as pirations of joyous youth - its a seemle
in which Imaginations holds I way Impresme - as when
the young Eaglet opening the dull earth, rules aloft on
board out wing, a sailing majestically amid the floating clouds
that deek the argure blue of Menren, whip his upward
counter to the centre of life & light itself, so the delighted
spirit leaving the cold heartless present, posses into the
bright puture & there abides revelling in blids that maught
can equal or alloy. In the words of the Bard:-

"The Future!" an there hath the operat its home du its distance is written the florious "to come":

The Great ones of Courte lived but half for their day.

The prove was their after - the four off their way."

But how soever delightful the untrodden paths & mary windings of the plonous "to come " may be, the readoning faculties of man have more intimate connexion with the Past. From there is perious a soums a mother bearing, &

her sad lessons come to the amestment listener, pregnant with instruction. Nor are the bruen peelings of mais nature removed from the influence of the Past.

Twas said of old "Tis distance lends enchantment to the view " " in whatever as peet we view man's intellectual powers the truth of this position emunt be snaken. From whence ander that strange beeling which plings over the sovious of even the wrongs of the Part, a hallowed mouth, which imparts a tender sorting calm to all embraced beareath ets ample folds? From whence this continual longing after the non seeming tranquil hours of the Past? The youth speaks of with regret of childhood's years - he of maturer age kight after the pleasant hours of the opting time of life - & again the grayhavred grand sire mourns his lot & wones again & again for the years that are past never to return he beeling is implanted in our bosom without some object nor is this an exception. again there are many heart rending greefs which ball to the lot of more, so poignant that at the time mature's powers are taked to their atterment to bear up under the occumulated but then. But time passed - the grief is partially alonged & when in after times we survey the vost week, the lapse of years has melloued the wrote seemethe pigantie ruin is still there, but its most painful beatures are hidden from view by the fresh green verdire of the beautiful evy. Who would bethe in the fountains of Lettre? In the language of the Bond:

"Heaven's own sweetest mercy is not to forget."

The may have been bule of woe - prief may have followed grief - as a whole life may have been a sleene of the darkest floor, yet who would bury the whole Past in

the fountain of oblivion? home! donk as like many have been ever to anon gleans of bright ethernal light flach through the stay illuming the whole track. There are recollections in every one's bosom which are ineffaceable - the memory of which know as ample compensation for all of use which man can here endure

But there is another view of this subject worting of notice. The lessons of experience by writer to finde our steps in the mazy butwore, are to be derived alone from the Past. Ywas said by one of the master minds of laster "The Past is the time mirror of the Future". haught else can lead us aright. The states man, the Philosopher, the Philosopher through pikt - all would they trace the secret oponings of man's actions must consult the records of the burned Past.

The works of the Sages - the deeds of the heroes of Parthe afford material which no reational mind can contemplate introut interest. 140 of maledon - the son of the thunder don't ing dove - like a perry meter dashed from its celestial sphere its pragments deathering ruin & desolation around appeared upon laste of the whole universe trembled. hations saw of in amazement deemed the son of ammon in truth had come. The hardy Greecon submitted to his sway - his pure trazen elad legions rolled like a rurer of blood upon the adiatil plans overwhelming all that sought to stay their bearful course. The luxurous Person, appring lited at the dread ful torrent evented on policant to the conqueror as he passed. The hardy Sey thran, direlling in the Temotest ever fined of lanth, whose veret deserts trackless as the becau wave had thus par defied the supremaey of more forget boldey for his buildone - that powerleds gen which mought on Earth can equal - but the decree had pone forthe one too beheld the conquerors houghty bounds float in triumph on the land. But did that longueror, whose deeds had ranked him 'on ong the Goods rather than men, lujory the best gift of the orner potent, happeneds? When he helded the joyons waves of became dash justly on the beach, of then in unche elect fuedone return to the bosom of the deep, he me fit that there were no more worlds to conquer! I'll lived - he triumphed of he did in mistry! Get men is the lot of all on lante. The mighty boush get the grass springs up, the trees blossom of the flowers of the field put forthe their lovelineds as if they had not been

The immortal works of the bayes of autiquity one incontrovertible proofs of the position that in the Part is the true mirror of the putwer. The most exalted prime ples are there brought forward of this tamed with the eloquence which a best or Plate alone possessed - prince ples which work but a simil endowed by its exector with all the powers of similar could have conceived of similar less trum promitly sustained. Those leage of human nature which is the formalation of all tourwhole, is there present, from which primeiples are deduced which if more had more strictly obeyed, he would have made for present and more strictly obeyed, he would have made for present and anees to he primes - the prand object of viviture - than he has done.

again in chiecdation of the same principle behold the Eternal bity:

- "That sat upon her seven heles

And from her turone of hearty ruled the world"

I'le thate were the philosophy of history correctly under stood about he a warring to all nations. The trose - one triumpohed.

all nations, from the isles of becau, even unto the ends of the laster did homage unto her. The wind blen not that had not bounded in triumph her lagle - bounds . Her over legions every where as writed her dupremacy - bartrage crossed her patte o where is ohe now? "Delenda est bartuago" ment forthe & now, her towers in their pride which, mocked the lofty ouch of heaven, are leveled in the dust - the wild heart of the desert makes his lain upon her desolated hearths & the solitary bition hoots mountabley brom the alters of her Gods. But pride luxury a susmule erept into her councils & civil was with all its train of evils followed Then the figuritie empire worked to its down fall. The Bonbarrains were gathering on her portiers & the mild Goddels of leonard for sook her councils a unifed her blight to heaven. Then came the "peomige of God" who haid that where his warrier stied had set his hoof, no blade of living grass eler prem, I the plains of Italy were ravaged with fore & sword. attila then appeared & Rome fell - fell more from her own weatures. than from the for o non the is

"The mobe of nations! there she stands buildless & eventless in her voiceless wer "

do there no lesson in this? Was it the more course of nature? Or did it arise from events which are indissolubly connected in the progress of every state? If so, it behaves man to inquire note there can sed o profiting by the records of the Past avoid the cross into which they fell, for this above can the preatest amount of happeness be been red, -

Seme. 1840.

Menoring Pa.

pone forthe of he too beheld the longueror's houghty bounder float in triumph our the land. But did that longueror, whose deeds had ranked him 'on ong the Gods rather than men, lujoy the best gift of the orning that, happeneds? Mun he hereld the joyons waves of becam dash juilly on the beach, of then in unchecked burdone outurn to the bosom of the deep, he mept that there were no more worlds to everywer! I've lived - he triumphed of he died in mistry! Get buch is the lot of all on lante. The mighty perish yet the grass springs up, the true blossom of the flowers of the prices springs up, the true blossom of the flowers of the

The immortal works of the bages of autiquity one incontrovertible proofs of the position that in the Part is the true mirror of the putwer. The most exalted primeiples are there brought forward & sustained with the eloquence which a best or Plate alone possessed - primeiples which work but a sund endouced by its eventor with all the powers of sund could have conceived of sunch less trium promitly sustained. Much leave of human nature which is the formation of all tourveledge, is there present, from which primeiples are deduced which is their primeiples are deduced which is the prime and he was made for present advances to he primess - the grand object of viviture - than he has done.

again in elucidation of the same principle behold the Etamal bity:

- "That sat upon her seven hiles

And from her turone of beauty ruled the world"

I'le bate were the philosophy of history correctly under stood onould be a warring to all nations. The rose - the triumphed.

Commencement Oration of Henry Augustus Muhlenberg, Class of 1840
Transcribed by Tristan Deveney, May 2008
Edited by Sarah-Hazel Jennings, June 2008

"The Past"

Man is & ever has been a rational being. Year after year has rolled by – century has been added to century – yet despite of his almost Godlike powers he has made but small advance in happiness. The Creator has bestowed upon his reason magnificent in sway oe'r all the Earth – his judgement granted for the wisest purposes – his memory, the best gift of the omnipotent, that which brings him into communion with the sages & master minds of the buried Past & gives him wherewith to rule the spirits of his fellow men, yet with all these aids he has failed in the object of his search. From whence doth this arise? How can it be remedied? These are grave and momentous questions.

The Past, the Present & the Future – in these three words all human history & human hopes are embraced. To a creature constituted like man, the admonitions of the one, the energies of the other, & the dreams & aspirations of the third cannot be without interest. Yet how different are they in themselves – how distinct the mental powers which the sphere of each required. to a poetic temperament – one which loves to dwell amid the flowery bowers of the Past or revel uncontrolled in wild delight amid the glorious anticipations & vivid dreams of the never-fading future – to such a one the dull, the actual Present is as clay to the soul. The cold Present where all of woe that falls to mortal lot is prominent – where evil that in the distance seemed as naught assume their true proportions & swell to mountains in the Traveller's path to fame – were this all man's

lot would indeed be misery. Its griefs are so fresh & poignant that the haughty spirit bends beneath the storm like a bruized & broken reed. The bickerings, the strife, the callousness of man's heart to all the gentler emotions of his bosom, implanted by his Creator to soften his rugged nature, are exposed to men. The primeval curse is heavy upon all things, around, & Poverty & dark Distress are there with all their demon attributes. Heavy indeed would be the burthen, hopeless the thrall

"But Heaven that spreadeth oer all its blue [cope?] Hath given us memory, hath given us hope."

the gems of existence.

The future – the never-fading future! with all the glorious dreams & ancient aspirations of joyous youth – 'tis a scene in which Imaginations holds sway supreme – as when the young Eaglet spurning the dull earth, rises aloft on buoyant wing, & sailing majestically amid the floating clouds that deck the azure blue of Heaven, wings his upward course to the centre of life & light itself, so the delighted spirit leaving the cold heartless present, passes into the bright future & there abides revelling in bliss that naught can equal or allay. In the words of the Bard: --

"The Future! ah there hath the spirit its home In its distance is written the glorious "to come": The Great ones of the Earth lived but half for their day The grave was their alter – the far off their way." But howsoever delightful the untrodden paths & mazy windings of the glorious "to come" may be, the reasoning faculties of man have more intimate connexion with the Past. From thence Experience assumes a nobler bearing, &

her sad lessons come to the awestruck listener, pregnant with instruction. nor are the finer feelings of man's nature removed from the influence of the Past.

'Twas said of old "Tis distance lends enchantment to the view" & in whatever aspect we view man's intellectual powers the truth of this position cannot be shaken. From whence arises that strange feeling which flings over the sorrows & even the wrongs of the Past, a hallowed mantle, which imparts a tender soothing clam to all embraced beneath its ample folds? From whence this continual longing after the now seeming tranquil hours of the Past? The youth speaks of with regret of childhood's years – we of maturer age might after the pleasant hours of the springtime of life -- & again the grey-haired grandsire mourns his lot & wishes again & again for the years that are past never to return. No feeling is implanted in our bosom without some object nor is this an exception. Again there are many heartrending griefs which fall to the lot of man, so poignant that at the time nature's powers are taxed to their uttermost to bear up under the accumulated burthen. But time passed – his grief is partially assuaged & when in after times we survey the vast wreck, the lapse of years has mellowed the whole scene – the gigantic ruin is still there, but its most painful features are hidden from view by the fresh green verdine of the beautiful ivy. Who would bathe in the foundations of [Letue?]? In the language of the Bard:

"Heaven's own sweetest mercy is not to forget."

Life may have been full of woe – grief may have followed grief – as a whole life may have been a scene of the darkest gloom, yet who would bury the whole Past in

the fountain of oblivion? none! dark as life may have been, ever & anon gleams of bright etherial light flash through the sky illuming the whole track. There are recollections in every one's bosom which are ineffaceable – the memory of which serve as ample compensation for all of woe which man can here endure.

But there is another vein of this subject, worthy of notice. The lessons of Experience by which to guide our steps in the mazy future, are to be derived alone from the Past. 'Twas said by one of the master minds of Earth "The Past is the true mirror of the Future". Naught else can lead us aright. The Statesman, the Philosopher, the Philanthropist – all would they trace the secret springs of man's actions must consult the records of the buried Past.

The works of the Sages – the deeds of the heroes of Earth afford material which no rational mind can contemplate without interest. He of Macedon– the son of the thunder darting love – like a fiery meteor dashed from its celestial sphere its fragments scattering ruin & desolation around appeared upon Earth & the whole universe trembled. Nations saw & in amazement deemed the son of Ammon in truth had come. The hardy Grecian submitted to his sway – his fierce brazen clad legions rolled like a river of blood upon the Asiatic plains overwhelming all that sought to stay their fearful course. The luxurious Persian, affrighted at the dreadful torrent crouched suppliant to the conqueror as he passed. The hardy Scythian, dwelling in the remotest confines of Earth, whose vast deserts trackless as the Belau wave had thus far defied the supremacy of man fought boldly for his freedom – that priceless gem which nought on Earth can equal – but the decree had

gone forth & he too beheld the conqueror's haughty manner float in the triumph oer the land. But did that Conqueror, whose deeds had ranked him 'mong the Gods rather than men, enjoy the best gift of the omnipotent, happiness? When he beheld the joyous waves of Belau dash gently on the beach, & then in unchecked freedom return to the bosom of the deep, he wept that there were no more worlds to conquer! He lived – he triumphed & he died in misery! Yet such is the lot of all on Earth. The mighty perish yet the grass springs up, the trees blossom & the flowers of the field put forth their loveliness as if they had not been.

The immortal works of the sages of antiquity are incontrovertible proofs of the position that in the Past is the true mirror of the future. The most exalted principles are there brought forward & sustained with the eloquence which a Demosthenes or Plato alone possessed – principles which were but a mind endowed by its creator with all the powers a mind could have conceived of much less triumphantly sustained. Knowledge of human nature which is the foundation of all knowledge, is there present, from which principles are deduced which if man had more strictly obeyed, he would have made far greater advances to happiness – the proud object of existence – than he has done.

Again in elucidation of the same principle behold the eternal laity:

-- "That sat upon her seven hills

And from her throne of beauty ruled the world"

Her fate were the philosophy of history correctly understood should be a warning to all nations. She rose – she triumphed.

all nations, from the isles of Belau, even unto the ends of the Earth did homage unto her. The wind blew not that had not fanned in triumph her Eagle – banner. Her iron legions every where asserted her supremacy – Carthage crossed her path & where is she now? "Delenda est Carthago" went forth & now, the towers which in their pride mocked the lofty arch of heaven, are leveled in the dust, the wild beast of the desert makes his lair upon her desolated hearths & the solitary bittern hoots mournfuly from the altars of her Gods. But pride luxury & misrule crept into her enemies & civil war with all its train of evils followed Then the gigantic empire [one word illegible – reveled?] to its downfall. The Barbarians were gathering on the frontiers & the mild Goddess of [Leoucord?] forsook her councils & winged her flight to heaven. Then came the "[peonage?] of God" who said that where his warrior steed had set his hoof, no blade of living grass e'er grew. The plains of Italy were ravaged with fire & sword. Attila then appeared & Rome fell – fell more from her own weakness than from the foe & now she is

"The Niobe of nations! There she stands

childless & crownless in her voiceless woe"

Is there no lesson in this? Was it the mere course of nature? Or did it arise from events which are indissolubly connected with the progress of every state? If so, it behooves man to inquire into these causes & profiting by the records of the Past avoid the errors into which they fell, for this alone can the greatest amount of happiness be secured. –

Henry Augustus Muhlenbey Reading Pa