

## DE WITT CLINTON

**D**E WITT CLINTON, an American lawyer and statesman, was born at Little Britain, Orange Co., N. Y., March 2, 1769, and died at Albany, N. Y., Feb. 11, 1828. He was the son of General James Clinton, and was educated at Columbia College and admitted to the Bar in 1788. Entering upon public life as an anti-Federalist, and after serving in both houses of the State legislature, he became a United States Senator from New York in 1802. He was one of the most popular men in New York City and served as its mayor, with two brief intermissions, during the years 1803 and 1815. Clinton was opposed to the second war with England, and was nominated for the presidency in 1812 by the Republican members of the New York legislature, but was defeated. In 1815, he presented to the legislature a memorial ably urging the construction of the Erie Canal, the bill for which was passed in 1817. The promotion of this enterprise, in spite of the opposition of those who deemed the scheme visionary, constitutes his title to remembrance. Clinton was governor of New York from 1817 to 1823, and was again chosen governor in 1825, signaling his terms of office by constant efforts for general education and the advancement of science. When the Erie Canal was formally opened, in 1825, the governor was conveyed in a barge along its length, with great state and ceremony, and amid the rejoicings of the thousands of people gathered on its banks. His published writings include "Memoir on the Antiquities of Western New York" (1818); "Letters on the Natural History and Internal Resources of New York" (1822); "Speeches to the Legislature" (1823), besides a number of literary and historical addresses. His personal appearance is described as being "tall and well-formed, of majestic presence, and dignified manners."

### PHI BETA KAPPA ADDRESS

DELIVERED AT SCHENECTADY, JULY 22, 1823

**M**R. PRESIDENT AND GENTLEMEN OF THE SOCIETY,—In accepting the honor of your renewed invitations to appear at this place, I have not been insensible of your kind preference; and when you were pleased to intimate that the deep interest of science in exhibitions of this nature might be promoted by my co-operation I considered it my imperative duty to yield a cheerful compliance.

When I endeavor to enforce those considerations which ought to operate upon us generally as men, and particularly

(318)

as Americans, to attend to the cultivation of knowledge, you will not, I am persuaded, expect that I shall act the holiday orator or attempt an ambitious parade, an ostentatious display, or a gaudy exhibition, which would neither suit the character of the society, the disposition of the speaker, the solemnity of the place, or the importance of the occasion.

What I say shall come strictly within the purview of the institution, shall be comprised in the language of unvarnished truth, and shall be directed with an exclusive view to advance the interests of literature. I shall not step aside to embellish or to dazzle, to cull a flower or to collect a gem. Truth, like beauty, needs not the aid of ornament, and the cause of knowledge requires no factitious assistance, for it stands on its own merits, supporting and supported by the primary interests of society, and deriving its effulgent light from the radiations of heaven.

Man without cultivation differs but little from the animals which resemble him in form. His ideas would be few and glimmering, and his meaning would be conveyed by signs or by confused sounds. His food would be the acorn or locust, his habitation the cave, his pillow the rock, his bed the leaves of the forest, his clothes the skins of wild beasts.

Destitute of accommodations he would roam at large seeking for food and evincing in all his actions that the state of untutored nature is a state of war. If we cast our eyes over the pages of history, or view the existing state of the world, we will find that this description is not exaggerated or overcharged. Many nations are in a condition still more deplorable and debased, sunk to the level of brutes, and neither in the appearance of their bodies or in the character of their minds bearing a resemblance to civilized humanity. Others are somewhat more advanced, and begin to feel the



dayspring from on high, while those that have been acclimated to virtue and naturalized to intelligence have passed through a severe course of experiments and a long ordeal of sufferings.

Almost all the calamities of man, except the physical evils which are inherent in his nature, are in a great measure to be imputed to erroneous views of religion or bad systems of government; and these cannot be co-existent for any considerable time with an extensive diffusion of knowledge. Either the predominance of intelligence will destroy the government, or the government will destroy it. Either it will extirpate superstition and enthusiasm, or they will contaminate its purity and prostrate its usefulness. Knowledge is the cause as well as the effect of good government. . . .

Let us then be vigilant and active in the great and holy cause of knowledge. The field of glory stretches before you in wide expanse. Untrodden heights and unknown lands surround you. Waste not, however, your energies on subjects of a frivolous nature, of useless curiosity, or impracticable attainment. Books have been multiplied to designate the writer of Junius—the Man in the Iron Mask has exercised the inquisitorial attention of Europe—and perpetual motion, the philosopher's stone, and the immortal elixir, have destroyed the lives and fortunes of thousands.

Genuine philosophy has sometimes its aberrations, and, like the Spartan king or Roman emperor, mingles in the amusements of children. The sceptre of science is too often surrounded by toys and baubles, and even Linnæus condescended to amuse his fancy with the creation of vegetable dials and oriental pearls. Innovation without improvement, and experiments without discoveries, are the rocks on which ingenuity is too often shipwrecked.

"*Omne ignotum pro magnifico*,"<sup>1</sup> said the profound historian of Rome.<sup>2</sup> Wonder is the child of ignorance, and vanity the offspring of imbecility. Let us be astonished at nothing but our own apathy, and cease to be vain even of our virtues. The fragrance of the humble lily of the valley, and of the retiring eglantine of the woods, is more grateful to genuine taste than the expressed odor of the queen of flowers, or the most costly products of the chemical alembic.

In our literary pursuits let us equally reject a blind credulity that believes every fable, and a universal pyrrhonism that repudiates all truths—a canine appetite, which devours everything, however light, and digests nothing, however alimentary—and a fastidious taste, which delights not in the nutritious viand, but seeks its gratification in the aromatic desert.

The waters of ancient learning ought to be drunk at the fountain head in preference to the streams. We are too prone to rely on references, quotations, abridgments and translations. The consequence is, that the meaning of the original frequently reaches us in a perverted or erroneous shape; its ethereal spirit evaporates by a change of conveyance, and we lose our acquaintance with the learned languages.

A fault equally common and more humiliating is an idolatrous veneration for the literary men of Europe. This intellectual vassalage has been visited by high-toned arrogance and malignant vituperation. Harmless indeed is the calumny, and it recoils from the object like the javelin thrown by the feeble hand of old Priam; but it ought to combine with other inducements to encourage a vernacular literature

<sup>1</sup>"Everything unknown is exaggerated." <sup>2</sup>Tacitus.  
Vol. 4—21



and to cause us to bestow our patronage upon more meritorious works of our own country.

We have writers of genius and erudition who form a respectable profession. Some have ascended the empyreal heights of poesy and have gathered the laurel wreaths of genius; others have trodden the enchanted ground of fictitious narrative and have been honored by the tears of beauty and the smiles of virtue. While several have unfolded the principles of science, literature, philosophy, jurisprudence, and theology, and have exalted the intellectual glory of America, let us cherish the hope that some at least will devote their faculties to improve those arts and sciences on which the substantial interests of our country so greatly depend.

I refer particularly to agriculture, civil engineering, and naval architecture. Let us also trust that some vigorous minds will apply their powers to the illustration of our history. It has been said, with more point than truth, that the annals of modern colonies afford but two memorable events—the foundation, and the separation from the parent country.

If this observation had been so qualified as to refer to those occurrences as the most memorable, not as the only memorable events, it would undoubtedly have been correct. The colonial history of New York, although imperfectly executed and brought down only to 1732, is fertile of instruction and replete with interest. The translations of the erudite Vanderkemp, and the collections of the Historical Society of New York, have furnished the most ample materials; and whenever it is given to the world by a master-hand it will be a complete refutation of the remark which I have quoted. Is it too much to say that we have no good history of the United States, and that the best account of our independence is written by Botta, an Italian?

At this moment a respectable mechanic of the city of London is collecting materials for writing our history. He is favorably noticed by distinguished members of Parliament; and although his mind has not been disciplined by a liberal education, yet its productions display vigorous and cultivated powers. Let this stimulate us to similar and animated exertions, and let not our writers despair of ultimate success, even if their efforts are attended with partial failures.

Experience certainly brightens the vista of futurity; but they must expect that their fate will be determined sooner or later by intrinsic merit. Those writings that emit no effulgence and communicate no information will fall still-born from the press and plunge at once into the abyss of obscurity. Others again will dazzle as they glide rapidly over the literary horizon and be seen no more. Some, after basking in the meridian sunshine, will gradually undergo a temporary eclipse; but time will dispense justice and restore their original splendor.

“So sinks the day-star in the ocean’s bed,  
And yet anon repairs his drooping head,  
And tricks his beams, and with new-spangled ore,  
Flames in the forehead of the morning sky.”<sup>1</sup>

A fortunate few are always in the full blaze of sublime glory. They are the phoenixes of the age, the elect of genius, and the favorites of nature and of heaven.

There is nothing “under heaven’s wide hollowness”<sup>2</sup> which does not furnish aliment for the mind. All that we observe by the organs of sense, and all that we perceive by the operations of the understanding—all that we contemplate in retrospect, at the present, or in the future, may be compounded or decomposed in the intellectual laboratory, for beneficial purposes.

<sup>1</sup> Milton. <sup>2</sup> Spenser.



The active mind is always vigilant, always observing. The original images which are created by a vivid imagination, the useful ideas which are called up by memory, and the vigorous advances of the reasoning power into the regions of disquisition and investigation, furnish full employment for the most powerful mind; and after it is fully stored with all the productions of knowledge, then the intellect has to employ its most important functions in digesting and arranging the vast and splendid materials. And if there be anything in this world which can administer pure delight, it is when we summon our intellectual resources, rally our mental powers, and proceed to the investigation of a subject distinguished for its importance and complexity, and its influence on the destinies of man.

If science were to assume a visible form, like the fabled muses of the ancient mythology, all men would be ready to exclaim with the poet —

—“ her angel's face,  
As the great eye of heaven shined bright,  
And made a sunshine in a shady place;  
Did never mortal eye behold such heavenly grace.”

But, alas! it is a blessing not without its alloy. Its sedentary occupations and its severe exercises of the mind impair the health, and hypochondria, the Promethean vulture of the student, poisons for a time all the sources of enjoyment. Add to this the tortures of hope deferred and of expectation disappointed. After nights without sleep, and days without repose, in the pursuit of a favorite investigation; after tasking the mind and stretching all its faculties to the utmost extent of exertion,—when the golden vision of approaching fame dazzles the eye in the distance, and the hand is extended to taste the fruit and to reap the harvest, the airy castles,

the gorgeous palaces of the imagination, vanish like enchanted ground and disappear like the baseless fabric of a vision.

From such perversities of fortune the sunshine of comfort may, however, be extracted. In the failure of a scientific investigation collateral discoveries of great moment have been made. And as an eminent philosopher<sup>1</sup> has well remarked, “What succeeds, pleaseth more, but what succeeds not, many times informs no less.” And in the worst position the mind is improved, sharpened, expanded, brightened, and strengthened by the processes which it has undergone and the elaborations which it has experienced.

“ We must not then expect  
A perpetual feast of nectar'd sweets  
Where no crude surfeit reigns.”

But we may confidently pronounce that a cornucopia of blessings will attend the diffusion of knowledge — that it will have an electrifying effect on all the sources of individual happiness and public prosperity — that glory will follow in the train of its felicitous cultivation, and that the public esteem, in perennial dispensation, will crown its votaries.

This State enjoys a temperate climate and fruitful soil, and, situate between the Great Lakes on the north and west, and the ocean on the south and east, ought always to be the seat of plenty and salubrity. It requires nothing but the enlightened evolution of its faculties and resources to realize the beau-ideal of perfection: and the co-operation of man with the bounty of Providence will render it a terrestrial paradise. And this must be effected through the agency of intellectual operating on physical exertion.

In this grand career of mind, in this potent effort of science, in this illustrious display of patriotism, contributions will flow

<sup>1</sup> Bacon.    <sup>2</sup> Milton.



in from all quarters. The humble mite will be acceptable as well as the golden talent. And the discriminating, perspicacious, and comprehensive eye of intellect will find—

“Tongues in trees; books in the running brooks;  
Sermons in stones; and good in everything.”<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, the very ground on which we stand affords topics for important consideration and useful application. This city was among the earliest seats of European settlement. It was at the head of a great portage, reaching from the termination of the navigable waters of the west to the head waters of the Hudson. It was the great entrepôt of the valuable trade in furs and peltries, and the thoroughfare of commercial adventures, of scientific explorations, and of military expeditions. In 1690 it was destroyed by an irruption of French and Indians — the lives of many of its inhabitants were saved as it were by a special interposition of Providence.

And the sympathizing and pathetic speech of the faithful Mohawks on that melancholy occasion may be ranked among the most splendid effusions of oratory.<sup>2</sup> The alluvial lands of the river, rich as the soil formed by the overflowings of the Nile, were the principal residence of that ferocious and martial race, the true old heads of the Iroquois — a confederacy which carried terror, havoc, and desolation from the Gulf of St. Lawrence to the Gulf of Mexico, and which aspired to universal empire over the savage nations. How astonished would that people be if they could be summoned to life, to witness the flowing of the waters of the west through this place, seeking in a navigable shape a new route to the Atlantic Ocean, carrying on their bosom the congregated products of nature and art, and spreading as they proceed, wealth and prosperity.

All alluvial ground formed by streams emanating from a

<sup>1</sup> Shakespeare.

<sup>2</sup> Colden's "History of the Five Nations."

distance and reinforced in their transit by auxiliary waters must be fertile not only in soil, but abundant in the various productions of the vegetable kingdom. The germs of plants will be transported from remote quarters; and the gorges and ravines, formed in many places by intersecting streams, will not only protect particular spots from the ravages of the plow, but open the treasures of the mineral kingdom by the profound excavations of the water and the transportation of distant fossils. Here, then, is a proper region for interesting discovery. Strange trees now flourish on the banks of the river, many a flower is born to blush unseen, and many a curious production has never undergone scientific scrutiny.

Here has been established a great seminary of education which in less than thirty years has risen to an extraordinary altitude of excellence; which unites the ardor of youthful enthusiasm with the wisdom of experienced longevity and the celebrity of confirmed usefulness; and which, by an able diffusion of the light of knowledge and a dexterous management of the helm of government, has already produced scholars who adorn and illumine the walks of science and literature, the pursuits of professional life, and the councils of our country.

In this vicinity flourished Sir William Johnson, one of the extraordinary characters of our colonial history. He settled near the banks of the Mohawk, and from humble beginnings he acquired great celebrity,—particularly in war,—immense wealth, and the favor of his sovereign. Auspicious events in concurrence with a paramount influence over the Indians, and great energy of character, laid the foundation and erected the superstructure of his fortunes.

In this place lived and died that eminent servant of God, the Rev. Dr. Romeyn, the fragrance of whose virtues is still



cherished in your hearts and felt in your lives. His venerable form, his dignified deportment, his eye beaming goodness, and his voice uttering wisdom, are still fresh in your minds; so impressive is the power of combined virtue and intelligence. Dr. Dwight, the greatest theologian of the age, has pronounced his eulogium; and it remains for biography to perform its functions and to fill up the outlines so ably drawn by one of the most acute observers and profound thinkers which our country has produced.

Finally, whatever may be our thoughts, our words, our writings, or our actions, let them all be subservient to the promotion of science and the prosperity of our country. Pleasure is a shadow, wealth is vanity, and power a pageant; but knowledge is ecstatic in enjoyment, perennial in fame, unlimited in space, and infinite in duration. In the performance of its sacred offices it fears no danger, spares no expense, omits no exertion. It scales the mountain, looks into the volcano, dives into the ocean, perforates the earth, wings its flight into the skies, encircles the globe, explores sea and land, contemplates the distant, examines the minute, comprehends the great, and ascends to the sublime. No place too remote for its grasp; no heavens too exalted for its reach. "Its seat is the bosom of God; its voice the harmony of the world. All things in heaven and earth do it homage, the very least as feeling its care, and the greatest as not exempt from its power. Both angels and men and creatures, of what condition soever, though each in different sort and manner, yet all, with uniform consent, admiring it as the parent of peace and happiness."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hooker.