

JAMES R. LOWELL

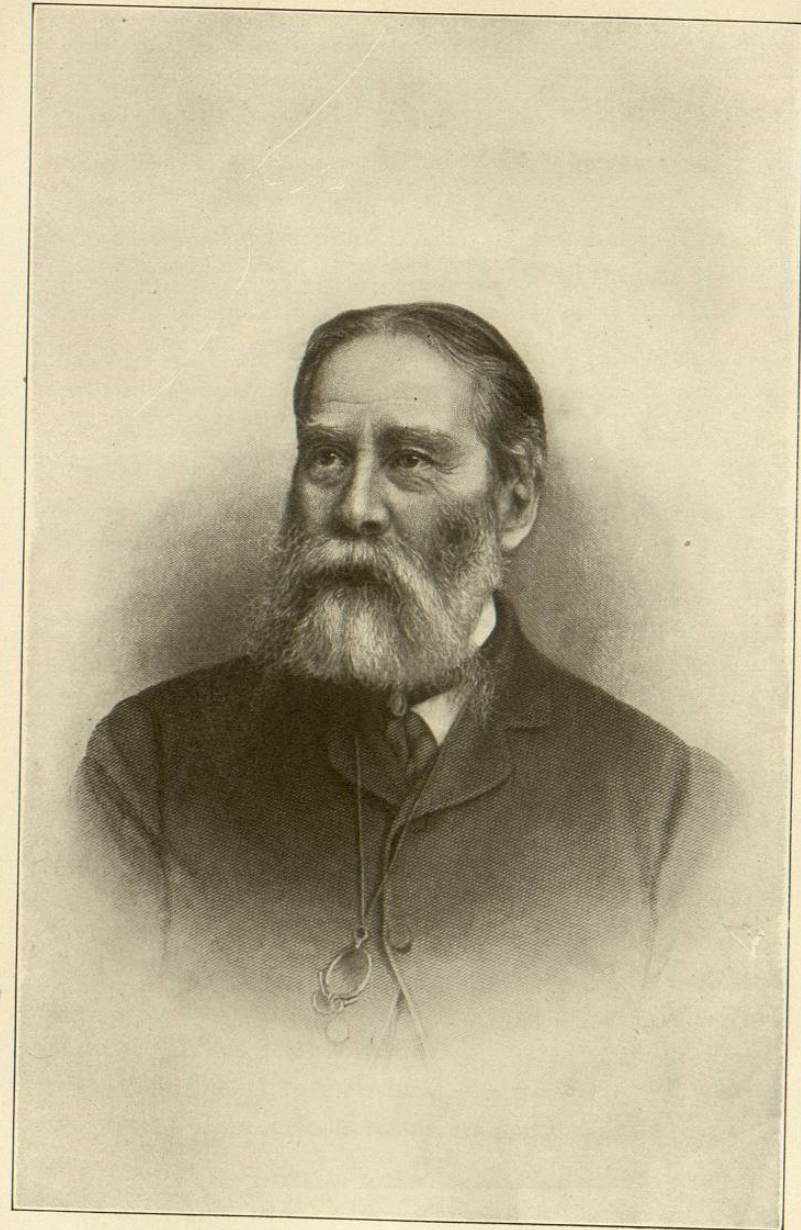
JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL, a distinguished American poet, essayist, scholarly man of letters, and diplomat, was born at Cambridge, Mass., Feb. 22, 1819, and died there Aug. 12, 1891. In 1838, he graduated from Harvard and three years later issued a volume of his early poems, entitled "A Year's Life," which showed facility in versification, but with little promise of genius. In 1846, at the outbreak of the Mexican War, he published a poem in the Yankee dialect bristling with sarcasm and overflowing with pungent humor, in which he denounced the upholders of slavery. This was "The Biglow Papers," which more than anything else of his, contributed to his fame. He threw himself heart and soul into the anti-slavery movement and wielded a great influence by his wit and caustic verse. His "Fable for Critics" pictured in dashing verse in a series of clever sketches many of his contemporaries. In 1855, after a lengthy residence in Europe, he succeeded Longfellow as professor of modern languages at Harvard. At the same time he edited the "Atlantic Monthly," and from 1863 until 1867 he was associate editor of the "North American Review." In 1865, he produced his "Commemoration Ode," which many critics deem the finest poem so far produced in America. His other volumes of verse include "The Vision of Sir Launfal," a story of the Holy Grail; "The Cathedral," and "Heartsease and Rue." In 1877, he was appointed United States Minister to Spain, and three years later became minister to the Court of St. James, London, where he remained until 1885, winning vast popularity by his geniality and tact. Among his prose works are "My Study Windows" and "Among My Books," "Democracy," a volume of his addresses in England, and "A Life of Hawthorne" (1890).

ORATION AT THE 250TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE FOUNDING OF HARVARD COLLEGE

DELIVERED AT CAMBRIDGE, NOVEMBER 8, 1886

IT seems an odd anomaly that while respect for age and deference to its opinions have diminished, and are still sensibly diminishing among us, the relish of antiquity should be more pungent and the value set upon things merely because they are old should be greater in America than anywhere else. It is merely a sentimental relish, for ours is a new country in more senses than one, and like children when

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they are fancying themselves this or that, we have to play very hard in order to believe that we are old.

But we like the game none the worse and multiply our anniversaries with honest zeal, as if we increased our centuries by the number of events we could congratulate ourselves on having happened a hundred years ago. There is something of instinct in this, and it is a wholesome instinct if it serve to quicken our consciousness of the forces that are gathered by duration and continuity; if it teach us that, ride fast and far as we may, we carry the past on our crupper, as immovably seated there as the black care of the Roman poet. The generations of men are braided inextricably together, and the very trick of our gait may be countless generations older than we. . . .

Are we to suppose that these memories were less dear and gracious to the Puritan scholars at whose instigation this college was founded than to that other Puritan who sang in the dim religious light, the long-drawn aisles and fretted vaults, which these memories recalled? Doubtless all these things were present to their minds, but they were ready to forego them all for the sake of that truth whereof, as Milton says of himself, they were members incorporate.

The pitiful contrast which they must have felt between the carven sanctuaries of learning they had left behind and the wattled fold they were rearing here on the edge of the wilderness is to me more than tenderly—it is almost sublimely—pathetic. When I think of their unpliant strength of purpose, their fidelity to their ideal, their faith in God and in themselves, I am inclined to say, with Donne, that

“We are scarce our fathers' shadows cast at noon.”

Our past is well-nigh desolate of æsthetic stimulus. We

have none, or next to none, of these aids to the imagination, of these coigns of vantage for the tendrils of memory or affection. Not one of our older buildings is venerable or will ever become so. Time refuses to console them. They all look as though they meant business and nothing more. And it is precisely because this college meant business—business of the gravest import—and did that business as thoroughly as it might with no means that were not niggardly, except an abundant purpose to do its best, it is precisely for this that we have gathered to-day. We come back hither from the experiences of a richer life as the son who has prospered returns to the household of his youth, to find in its very homeliness a pulse, if not of deeper, certainly of fonder emotion than any splendor could stir. "Dear old mother," we say, "How charming you are in your plain cap and the drab silk that has been turned again since we saw you! You were constantly forced to remind us that you could not afford to give us this and that which some other boys had, but your discipline and diet were wholesome, and you sent us forth into the world with the sound constitutions and healthy appetites that are bred of simple fare."

It is good for us to commemorate this homespun past of ours; good in these days of reckless and swaggering prosperity, to remind ourselves how poor our fathers were, and that we celebrate them because for themselves and their children they chose wisdom and understanding and the things that are of God rather than any other riches. This is our Founders' Day, and we are come together to do honor to them all. First, to the Commonwealth, which laid our cornerstone; next, to the gentle and godly youth from whom we took our name—himself scarce more than a name—and with them to the countless throng of benefactors, rich and poor,

who have built us up to what we are. We cannot do it better than in the familiar words:

"Let us now praise famous men and our fathers that begat us. The Lord hath wrought great glory by them through his great power from the beginning. Leaders of the people by their counsels, and, by their knowledge of learning, meet for the people; wise and eloquent in their instructions. There be of them that have left a name behind them that their praises might be reported. And some there be which have no memorial, who are perished as though they had never been. But these were merciful men whose righteousness hath not been forgotten. With their seed shall continually remain a good inheritance. Their seed standeth fast and their children for their sakes."

This 250th anniversary of our college is not remarkable as commemorating any venerable length of days. There is hardly a country in Europe that cannot show us universities that were older than ours now is when ours was but a grammar school with Eaton as master. Bologna, Paris, Oxford were already famous schools when Dante visited them six hundred years ago. We are ancient, it is true, on our own continent, ancient even as compared with several German universities more renowned than we. It is not, then, primarily the longevity of our alma mater upon which we are gathered here to congratulate her and each other.

Kant says, somewhere, that as the record of human transactions accumulate, the memory of man will have room only for those of supreme cosmopolitical importance. Can we claim for the birthday we are keeping a significance of so wide a bearing and so long a reach? If we may not do that, we may at least affirm, confidently, that the event it records and emphasizes is second in real import to none that has happened in this western hemisphere. The material growth of the colonies would have brought about their political

separation from the mother country in the fulness of time, without that stain of blood which unhappily keeps its own memory green so long.

But the founding of the first English college here was what saved New England from becoming a mere geographical expression. It did more, for it ensured, and I believe was meant to ensure, our intellectual independence of the Old World. That independence has been long in coming, but it will come at last; and are not the names of the chiefest of those who have hastened its coming written on the roll of Harvard College?

I think this foundation of ours a quite unexampled thing. Surely never were the bases of such a structure as this has become, and was meant to be, laid by a community of men so poor, in circumstances so unprecedented, and under what seemed such sullen and averted stars. The colony was in danger of an Indian war, was in the throes of that Antinomian controversy which threatened its very existence, yet the leaders of opinion on both sides were united in the resolve that sound learning and an educated clergy should never cease from among them or their descendants in the Commonwealth they were building up.

In the midst of such fears and such tumults Harvard College was born; and not Marina herself had a more blustering birth or a more chiding nativity. The prevision of those men must have been as clear as their faith was steadfast. Well they knew and had laid to heart the wise man's precept, "Take fast hold of instruction; let her not go, for she is thy life."

There can be little question that the action of the general court received its impulse and direction from the clergy, men of eminent qualities and of well-deserved authority. Among

the Massachusetts Bay colonists the proportion of ministers trained at Oxford and Cambridge was surprisingly large, and if we may trust the evidence of contemporary secular literature, such men as Higginson, Cotton, Wilson, Norton, Shephard, Buikley, Davenport, to mention no more, were in learning, intelligence, and general accomplishment far above the average parson of the country and the church from which their consciences had driven them out.

The presence and influence of such men were of inestimable consequence to the fortunes of the colony. If they were narrow, it was as the sword of righteousness was narrow. If they had but one idea it was as the leader of a forlorn hope had but one and can have no other—namely, to do the duty that is laid on him and ask no questions.

Our Puritan ancestors have been misrepresented and maligned by persons without imagination enough to make themselves contemporary with, and therefore able to understand, the men whose memories they strive to blacken. That happy breed of men who both in church and state led our first emigration were children of the most splendid intellectual epoch that England has ever known. They were the coevals of a generation which passed on, in scarcely a diminished radiance, the torch of life kindled in great Eliza's golden days. Out of the new learning, the new ferment, alike religious and national, and the new discoveries with their suggestion of boundless possibility, the alembic of that age had distilled a potent elixir either inspiring or intoxicating, as the mind that imbibed it was strong or weak.

Are we to suppose that the lips of the founders of New England alone were unwetted by a drop of that stimulating draught? That Milton was the only Puritan that had read Shakespeare and Ben Johnson and Beaumont and Fletcher?

I do not believe it, whoever may. Communities as well as men have a right to be judged by their best. We are justified in taking the elder Winthrop as a type of the leading emigrants, and the more we know him the more we learn to reverence his great qualities, whether of mind or character. The posterity of those earnest and single-minded men may have thrown the creed of their fathers into the waste basket, but their fidelity to it and to the duties they believed it to involve is the most precious and potent drop in their transmitted blood. It is especially noteworthy that they did not make a strait-waistcoat of this creed for their new college. The more I meditate upon them the more I am inclined to pardon the enthusiasm of our old historian when he said that God had sifted three kingdoms to plant New England.

The Massachusetts Bay colony itself also was then, and since, without a parallel. It was established by a commercial company whose members combined in themselves the two by no means incongruous elements, enthusiasm and business sagacity, the earthy ingredient, as in dynamite, holding in check its explosive partner, which yet could and did explode on sufficient concussion. They meant that their venture should be gainful, but at the same time believed that nothing could be longer profitable for the body wherein the soul found not also her advantage. They feared God, and kept their powder dry because they feared him, and meant that others should.

I think their most remarkable characteristic was their public spirit, and in nothing did they show both that and the wise forecast that gives it its best value more clearly than when they resolved to keep the higher education of youth in their own hands and under their own eye. This they provided for in the college. Eleven years later they established

their system of public schools, where reading and writing should be taught. This they did partly, no doubt, to provide feeders for the more advanced schools, and so for the college, but even more, it may safely be inferred, because they had found that the policy to which their ends, rough-hew them as they might, must be shaped by the conditions under which they were forced to act, could be safe only in the hands of intelligent men, or, at worst, of men to whom they had given a chance to become such.

One is sometimes tempted to think that all learning is as repulsive to ingenuous youth as the multiplication table to Scott's little friend, Marjorie Fleming, though this is due in great part to mechanical methods of teaching.

"I am now going to tell you," she writes, "the horrible and wretched plague that my multiplication table gives me; you can't conceive it; the most devilish thing is eight times eight and seven times seven; it is what nature itself can't endure."

I know that I am approaching treacherous ashes which cover burning coals, but I must on. Is not Greek, nay, even Latin, yet more unendurable than poor Marjorie's task? How many boys have not sympathized with Heine in hating the Romans because they invented Latin grammar? And they were quite right, for we begin the study of languages at the wrong end, at the end which nature does not offer us, and are thoroughly tired of them before we arrive at them, if you will pardon the bull. But is that any reason for not studying them in the right way?

I am familiar with the arguments for making the study of Greek especially a matter of choice or chance. I admit their plausibility and the honesty of those who urge them. I should be willing, also, to admit that the study of the ancient

languages without the hope or the prospect of going on to what they contain would be useful only as a form of intellectual gymnastics. Even so they would be as serviceable as the higher mathematics to most of us. But I think that a wise teacher should adapt his tasks to the highest and not the lowest capacities of the taught.

For those lower, also, they would not be wholly without profit. When there is a tedious sermon, says George Herbert,

"God takes a text, and teacheth patience,"

not the least pregnant of lessons. One of the arguments against the compulsory study of Greek, namely, that it is wiser to give our time to modern languages and modern history than to dead languages and ancient history, involves, I think, a verbal fallacy. Only those languages can properly be called dead in which nothing living has been written. If the classic languages are dead they yet speak to us and with a clearer voice than that of any living tongue.

If their language is dead, yet the literature it enshrines is crammed with life as, perhaps, no other writing except Shakespeare's ever was or will be. It is as contemporary with to-day as with the ears it first enraptured, for it appeals not to the man of then or now, but to the entire round of human nature itself. Men are ephemeral or evanescent, but whatever badge the authentic soul of man has touched with her immortalizing finger, no matter how long ago, is still young and fair as it was to the world's gray father's. Oblivion looks in the face of the Grecian muse only to forget her purpose. Even for the mastering of our own tongue there is no expedient so truthful as translation out of another; how much more when that other is a language at once so precise

and so flexible as the Greek! Greek literature is also the most fruitful comment on our own. Coleridge has told us with what profit he was made to study Shakespeare and Milton in conjunction with the Greek dramatists. It is no sentimental argument for this study that the most justly balanced, the most serene and the most fecundating minds since the revival of learning have been saturated with Greek literature. We know not whither other studies will lead us, especially if dissociated from this; we do not know to what summits, far above our lower region of turmoil, this has led, and what the many-sided outlook thence.

Will such studies make anachronisms of us? Unfit us for the duties and the business of to-day? I can recall no writer more truly modern than Montaigne, who was almost more at home in Athens and Rome than in Paris. Yet he was a thrifty manager of his estate and a most competent mayor of Bordeaux.

I remember passing once in London where demolition for a new thoroughfare was going on. Many houses left standing in the rear of those cleared away bore signs with the inscription "Ancient Lights." This was the protest of their owners against being built out by the new improvements from such glimpse of heaven as their fathers had, without adequate equivalent. I laid the moral to heart.

I am speaking of the college as it has always existed and still exists. In so far as it may be driven to put on the forms of the university—I do not mean the four faculties merely, but in the modern sense—we shall naturally find ourselves compelled to assume the method with the function. Some day we shall offer here a chance, at least, to acquire the *omne scibile*. I shall be glad, as shall we all, when the young American need no longer go abroad for any part of his train-