

AN
ADDRESS,

DELIVERED IN UTICA,

Before the Sunday School Societies,

ON THE

FIFTY-FIRST ANNIVERSARY

OF

AMERICAN INDEPENDENCE,

BY

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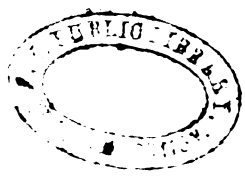
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MR. AIKIN'S ADDRESS.

THIS day being the Jubilee of our nation, reminds us of events deeply interesting to the friends of freedom, that cost the tears and blood of many thousands of our citizens. It would be ungrateful in us, their children, to enjoy the dear bought blessing, and yet forget the benefactors.— Reason seems to dictate the propriety of retaining some memorial of their toils and bloodshed; and I know not how we can better do it, than to observe in a suitable manner, this birth-day of our independence. That it should be observed in some way, appears to be the general impression. To make it a season of riot and dissipation, as it has been, is repulsive to the feelings of all good citizens, many of whom choose not to celebrate at all, rather than thus pervert and abuse the blessing which we pretend to value.

A reformation on this subject is scarcely to be expected among that class of community who, for fifty years, have been accustomed to hear nothing on this day but the roar of cannon, and see nothing but feasting, festivity, and dissipation. It is time, however, to direct the attention of our youth to a method of observing the occasion, that shall better comport with the dignity of an enlightened Republic, and with our characters as rational and accountable beings; and it is with pleasure that I witness so many of

this interesting class before me, assembled under the banner of Sabbath Schools, to celebrate this anniversary.

Next to the church of the first-born, there is no institution in our country which I love to contemplate more than Sabbath Schools; and there is none of greater moral extent and power. They are salutary, diffusive, and potent as the rays of the sun; and, like the fibres of the heart, are interwoven with all the vitals of our religion and liberty. And as to their consequences on the unborn millions which are to people this great and growing Republic, there is no such thing as calculation or conjecture.

Providence has placed us in a land of vast extent, rich in resource, and rapidly increasing in population. Here, also, is a spirit of enterprise unequalled in any other portion of the globe. What is not this spirit doing? You see the wilderness falling before it, and becoming a fruitful field. You see villages and cities rising as if by enchantment. You see our canvass spread on every ocean, and our produce exported to every clime. You see canals opening in every direction, and these, and our rivers and coasts, covered with boats and steam-boats. What an influx of population from other countries, and what a tide of emigration is rolling westward! And yet such is the extent of our territory, that this rapid increase of population is scarcely noticed. There is scope enough for all this enterprise, were it increased a thousand fold. And it will increase. Such is the impetus given to it—such is the genius of our citizens, that it must increase. The time will surely come, when this extensive land shall be filled with inhabitants, and this spirit of improvement not rest until it shall want objects upon which to expend its energies.

Now, consider what must be the result, if religious instruction does not keep pace with this enterprise of our nation. In that case, it needs no spirit of prophecy to

foresee that our prosperity must prove our ruin. The energies of a nation never lie dormant, even when she has arrived at the pinnacle of glory; and unless directed by morality and religion, and under their control, they will be employed in inventing pleasures and luxuries. These will multiply, and as they multiply, so will ignorance and vice, which will lead on to civil wars, anarchy, and ruin.

To avoid this common fate of nations, there is no other way but to instruct our children in the principles and duties of religion. Such instruction must be transmitted from one generation to another. The public welfare requires it. The happiness of unborn millions requires it. Intelligence and virtue must form the basis of every government that is destined long to exist. Intelligence alone is not sufficient. You may make a people learned, but unless they are virtuous, they can neither be safe, nor great, nor happy; and they cannot be virtuous without religion. Without receiving and practising the principles of the Bible, there is not a virtuous nation on earth, nor ever has been.

These remarks, though applicable to all governments, forcibly apply to Republics. Greece and Rome owe their downfall to the influx of ignorance and vice; and this must be the inevitable fate of every Republic, when a considerable portion of the people are fit only to be the tools and vassals of some aspiring demagogue, who has wealth to bribe, or eloquence to sway.

The form of our government places the poor, the illiterate, and the vicious, on a level with the rich, the learned, and the virtuous, in the election of officers to stations of trust and honor. I do not mention this as a defect, but as a reason why all who are to possess influence, direct or indirect, in concerns that affect our interest as a nation, should be educated in morals and religion, and thus be qualified to enjoy the privileges, and exercise the rights,

that belong to them as citizens. To accomplish this grand end, no better system could be devised than that of the Sabbath School. It begins at the foundation, and by laying this deep and strong, prepares the way for a superstructure that cannot easily be demolished. It aims to form a character, not upon the maxims of men, but upon the principles of the Bible; and these, being inculcated when the mind is receiving its first impressions, "grow with its growth," and ripen into a manhood of dignity and usefulness. By such a course of instruction, bad principles are checked in their bud, and a blow is struck at the root of all vicious habits, which, if suffered to strengthen and mature, would fit subjects without number for the prison and the gallows.

To make neatness, economy, and industry, an inseparable part of religion, is no small object of the Sabbath School. The children are reminded that the finest ornament is a "meek and quiet spirit;" that cleanliness in rags is more lovely and attractive than filth in scarlet; that to be frugal and industrious are christian duties, and the only way in which to be rich and happy. These are lessons too seldom taught in the dwellings of the wealthy; and among a class of the poor, quite the reverse is inculcated, both by precept and example. And yet how important are these virtues to constitute a useful citizen! It is owing to the want of them that so many come to poverty, and others never rise above it. Accustomed to spend all they earn, whether it be little or much, they have nothing in reserve for seasons of sickness and distress; and when these seasons arrive, necessity compels them either to suffer, or throw themselves upon the charity of the public. Not a few, by their indolence and extravagance, become disheartened, and to drown cares and melancholy anticipations, they resort to the dram-shop, where soon credit and character are gone, and themselves and families in-

involved in hopeless ruin. O! how many interesting children,

“Whose hands the rod of empire might have sway’d,
Or waked to ecstasy the living lyre;”

are thus, by the prodigality of parents, buried in oblivion and wretchedness. Brought up themselves, strangers to economy and industry, they educate their children in the same way;—their sons to squander away time and health, with a segar in the one hand and a glass in the other, at places of fashionable resort, and their daughters to sit idle in the drawing-room, or lounge the streets, dressed in a style of fashion which neither their own pride nor their father’s purse is able to sustain.

Now, this course of conduct, which entails upon families and communities so much beggary and wo, arises from the want of that early instruction in regard to economy and industry, which, along with other moral duties, is inculcated and enforced in the Sabbath School. Seeds must be sown in the spring. Frugal and industrious habits must be formed in early life, if we expect to witness them in manhood; and these combined are the sure index to national prosperity and happiness. To a young Republic like ours, they are more valuable than an overflowing treasury—more powerful than fleets and armies.

But there is another point of view in which I wish to present this institution, as closely connected with the interest and destiny of our country. It teaches a just estimation of character, property, and life. Why is it that reputation is held in no higher value with multitudes who throw it away in the abodes of vice and dissipation? Why is it that many do not hesitate to forfeit their credit, and over-reach and defraud their neighbors, provided they can gain a little the advantage in trade? Why is it that some care no more for the property and life-blood of their fellows, than for the insect on which they tread, if they can but obtain

the object of their gratification? It is because they are lost to a sense of moral obligation. The connecting link of responsibility in their minds, that binds them over to the judgment, is broken, and they think to squander with impunity the good gifts of Providence, and even life itself. Let loose such persons upon community, and you let loose so many tigers. Your dwellings, your merchandize, your lives are in danger. Will the law of the land restrain them? In the hope of some way escaping its penalty, they will venture to commit the most fearful deeds of darkness. But now, bring before their eyes the great and terrible God; the claims and sanctions of his law; and point them to the bar of his eternal justice:—Here is a law—a tribunal, which they cannot escape; and in view of it, they will at least stand and tremble.

It is difficult, however, to impress upon the mind of an old transgressor, a sense of moral obligation that shall have a deep and lasting influence. It must be done in early life, when the mind is tender, and susceptible of fine impressions. Reference in all its duties must be made to the law of God, as the rule of human conduct, and the test of the final judgment. By this course of instruction, the mind of a child is carried at once to the highest authority, and is stored with motives to obedience the most grand and commanding. A character formed upon such principles will respect itself, and duly estimate the property and possessions of others; and they are principles which will avail more to preserve the peace and order of society, than all the laws and penalties that were ever enacted. In this respect the influence of the Sabbath School is already seen to be great. In England, Ireland, Wales, and wherever it has been instituted and conducted with energy, there is a visible and surprising reformation in morals, particularly among the lower orders of community. Capital crimes are far less frequent; the ranks

of prisons begin to be thinned; and habits of industry and temperance begin to appear among classes that have hitherto been the nuisance of society. In this country the same effects are visible, especially in our large towns and cities, where the Sunday School has been in operation for several years. May we not hope, therefore, that the time is not far distant, when the vast sums of money now expended in the erection and support of prisons and penitentiaries, will be converted to internal improvements, to the promotion of the arts and sciences, and to the spread of the Gospel?

Nor let it be forgotten that the Sunday School, designed originally and chiefly for the poor, elevates and refines a sinking mass of character, that would otherwise corrupt the whole body politic. Children that have little or no instruction in common schools, many of whom are under the direct influence of a poisonous example at home, are here brought once a week within the precincts of this christian asylum, and taught their duty to God and man, with all the persuasive eloquence of affection that can flow from a teacher's heart, as he contemplates his little charge, who are soon to be upon the stage of action, and soon to pass off either into eternal joy or wo. Nor do they labor in vain. Would delicacy permit, I should here like to advert to facts, and point you to some individuals, who, from the abodes of wretchedness and vice, have ascended to stations of honor and usefulness in our country, through the medium, and under the fostering care of the Sunday School. I would point you to some, who, a few years since, were heirs only to poverty and crime, that are now redeemed from both, and to whose eloquence at the bar and in the pulpit, astonished thousands listen with rapture. But besides these suns, you may see countless stars sparkling in the moral heavens, which, under God, owe their existence and lustre to this

institution. Indeed, it is impossible to calculate their benign effects upon the poorer class of community; and does not this class exert a powerful influence in our country? Does not the vote of a poor man at your polls count as much as the vote of a rich man? Is not his example in the sphere in which he moves, whether good or bad, equally contagious and influential? Dismiss, then, your Sunday Schools; withhold from this interesting and important class of citizens religious instruction—and in vain will you try to fill your halls of legislation with honest and intelligent men. In vain will you cry, O, my country, my country! when you see the reins of government in the hands of an unprincipled mob, who care neither for law nor religion.

I have been surprised to see the apathy of our enlightened statesmen upon the subject of Sunday Schools. I have been surprised that they seem to look upon them only as a religious institution, when it is so plain that their political energy must very soon, if it increases with the ratio it has for fifteen years past, totally regenerate our legislatures, and the very hall of Congress. In some cases, however, it is well that this blind apathy exists; for instead of it might have been opposition. But it is now too late to oppose. It has been wisely ordered by Providence that this little rivulet should flow silently along, almost unheeded by enemies, until it has now acquired the strength and majesty of the ocean, and bids defiance to the gates of hell.

The system of Sunday Schools proposes to place the prosperity of our country on a community of intelligent and virtuous citizens. Very different is the basis that supports the trembling and tottering monarchies of Europe. While there, learning and property are almost hereditary, and restricted to comparatively few, a cloud of ignorance covers the mass of population, which is so pregnant with rebellion and crime, as can only be held in check by the

bayonet and the sword. To support this system of ignorance and intolerance, one taxation must follow another, until the people, robbed, oppressed, and enslaved, by a few, have become restless and revengeful in their chains, and nothing is wanting but a little more knowledge of the rights of man, and some daring spirit will wrap the continent in flames, not to be extinguished, till the shout is heard from every vale and mountain, Europe, Asia, Africa—like America—are free! That knowledge begins to circulate: the genius of liberty has already crossed the Atlantic, and begins to point her arrow of death at the dynasties of Europe. If the course of Providence be not speedily changed, the final catastrophe must be awful. But convulsions may shake the world:—America has nothing to fear, if she will only bring up her sons and daughters in the principles of science and religion. In making her citizens intelligent and moral, they can govern themselves and yet be governed. The road to honor and wealth being equally open to all, all are equally concerned in the public welfare. Moral and enlightened children, trained up in the path of religion, are so many bulwarks of our nation, and so many pledges of the perpetuity and augmentation of our national prosperity.

Go forward, then, friends of the Sunday School! Your cause is the cause of freedom as well as religion. Let the selfish and blustering politician look upon your modest efforts with indifference or contempt. Your efforts shall tell upon the growing interests of our nation, and write your names upon the grateful hearts of posterity in letters richer than gold, when his false patriotism and political intrigue shall sink with his body to the grave, and his memory shall rot.

A word to this interesting groupe of children.

What a sight! What would the confederated sovereigns of Europe say, were they to see it? My dear children, do

you know that you are the sons and daughters of freemen! Have you read the story of the Revolution? and do you remember how the people of this land—a little band of brothers, more than fifty years ago, threw off their chains, and blew the trump of liberty which shook the world? I should like to tell you of the mighty struggle; of the armies led on to battle by the immortal WASHINGTON—let his name be dear to the children of America—and of the victory given by the God of heaven. But you must read for yourselves. Be grateful that you can read. This is one of the blessings of freedom. Love your country, and pray for her prosperity. Improve faithfully your privileges; they are the purchase of blood. To you we look as the hope of our country and the church. Soon you are to take the place of your fathers, and direct the affairs of this great Republic. You are a favored generation—a royal priesthood of sons and daughters, whom, I doubt not, the God of heaven is training up for a scene of usefulness which the world has never witnessed. Lay fast hold of instruction; and with the Bible—this lamp of heaven, in your hands, go forward, and bless the Lord, that to you is given the high honor of belonging to the Sabbath School.