
Alexander Smith Atkinson
1815-1894



An Appreciation

Valedictory Address of Alexander Smith Atkinson Upon His Graduation from the University of Georgia in 1839

So great is the influence which association exerts over the human intellect that many have been induced to believe that man is the mere creature of circumstance, and that all the attributes of his mind, all the peculiarities of his character and all his sentiments of morality are but the effect of climate and education. But this hypothesis, whatever claims it may have to truth, when considered in relation to the degraded and barbarous nations of earth, can never be applied to the cultivated intellect.

The mind, while bound in the fetters of ignorance and doomed to grovel in the gloomy walks of superstition, may in truth assume an aspect as foul and disgusting as the objects around it; but, permit it once to burst these unseemly shackles, and, towering high above this dreary gloom to receive the bright gleam of truth from the pure fountain of knowledge, it will present an aspect as untarnished as the mirror of reason. The beautiful bird of Paradise, while caged and fettered by the rude hand of the fowler, may indeed have its plumage soiled and its pinions ruffled; but if perchance it escape from this unnatural confinement and wing its way to its appropriate home, its splendors will be renewed and it will reflect a hue as pure and as bright as the realms of ether in which it floats. So the mind, when cultivated and enlightened, becomes free to reason and to act, yet it still retains a capacity for receiving impressions from objects of both dense and immoral sentiments, which neither time nor distance can ever erase. And these impressions are confined, not to things which are grand and magnificent, but often to objects of the most trivial kind.

The crook which has been the support of the shepherd from the days of his boyhood, his assistant in climbing the tedious hills, in crossing the sloughy valleys, amidst the snow-storms of winter and the burning blasts of summer, and which still continues to support his trembling arm, when age has arched his form and silvered his locks, has by its many kind offices and the many pleasing associations connected with it, become almost as much endeared to him as his own limbs; and

an attempt to tear his arm from its socket would be scarcely more repugnant to his feelings than the endeavor to deprive him of this much valued treasure. The poor dog, mustered and brought up in the midst of children, that has protected their dwelling from depredation during many a stormy night, and frisked and sported around them on the sunny fields by day, becomes the object of as great gratitude as the noblest benefactor. When old age has crept upon him, these children are still his friends, his right dear friends, and they love to nurse and comfort him. After his trembling limbs can no longer support him, staggering to and fro he trips and falls, and with many a mournful yell expires, then

“The tears, the copious tears, which o'er his
grave are shed
Are more sincere than e'er bedewed a mon-
arch's bed”.

And have you in like manner never experienced the pleasing effect of associations

“While sporting on yon sunny field afar
Where gamboled you so oft in days of youth?
Have those old rocks which lie in heaps around
Ne'er filled your mind with dreams that long
hours last
And o'er their mossy heads a beauty cast?”

But if association manifests itself in trivial matters like this, it is not less apparent in those things which more seriously affect human happiness. 'Tis this principle which reconciles man to his lot in life, be it what it may. 'Tis this which links the patriot to his country, and nerves his arm in the battlefield when his last star of hope has sunk behind the lurid cloud of despair. 'Tis this which impresses on the youthful mind those indelible traits which but increase with the advancement of age and direct its course either for good or evil, for happiness or misery, even to the end of its existence. Many portions of earth would now be uninhabited were it not for the links of association, but, by these, man is bound eternally to the home of his birth. When persecuted and forced to leave it, no matter what may be the recompense offered in return, it can never repay him.

The swarthy son of Africa, when torn from the sandy and

sterile land of his nativity and borne to more genial climes, whether bond or free, is equally dissatisfied. He sees no beauty in your flowery fields, he hears no music in the warbling birds, and in vain does the balmy breeze of a milder clime attempt to soothe his throbbing brow. These are not scenes congenial to his feelings. The boundless waste, rolling mountains of sand undulating in the distance, and valleys where the stinted shrubbery scarcely vegetates are the objects for which his homesick soul in anguish pants. These are the scenes which first burst upon the vision of his childhood, and, however rude they may appear to us, are intimately connected with the dearest recollections of life.

In the recently acquired territory within our own borders, when our agents sought to drive the Red Man from his long inhabited possessions, when they told him he must bear himself from hence and transport his effects to the wilds of the West, that there he could live far more happily than here, that there ever-verdant, boundless prairies awaited his flocks, and there the forest teemed with inexhaustible stores of fruit and game, what was his reply? With a voice of thunder he answered, "I will not go. What though the West be clothed in smiling spring, what though its prairies be the fairest ever traversed by the foot of the bounding deer, what if millions of game crowd about their borders, what are these to me? Here is my home and here is my country, here is the land where my fathers lived and died and here, too, are the green groves in whose shades they were buried, and from these I will never depart while there is a nerve in my arm to fight."

True was he to his word and firm to his purpose, for though his wigwams were burned to ashes over his head, though his fields were laid waste around him, and though he and his children were driven into the wild desert to subsist on roots and acorns and were hunted like foxes and wolves from hedge to hedge, he wouldst not go. All the inducements which could tempt his avarice or ease could not bribe him, all the force that could be sent against him could not bribe him. So long as his red right arm could raise a sword he clung around the groves of his fathers.

This! This is patriotism! Not that proud and reckless ambition which would lead the tyrant through the oceans of blood to his throne of glory, but that deep, strong, deathless love of country which is based on the immutable principles of nature and seated firmly in the affections of the heart. Virtue and intelligence, combined with a spirit like this, constitute

the only example of true, devoted patriotism. 'Tis the same principle which bore our ancestors triumphantly through the bloody conflicts of the Revolution, 'tis this which ever and anon sends forth those vivid flashes of the spirit of liberty from the long dejected land of Greece. The memory of their fathers has raised the pulse of heroism high in their veins. And let science once more send her genial rays to their benighted eyes. Let the sublime strains of Homer arouse the spirit of Achilles in the bosom of his long despised posterity. Let the deeds and heroism of Leonidas who clung around his country's rights till the last drop of life's blood ran chill to his heart, arouse them from their legarthy. Let the eloquent and soul-stirring appeals of Demosthenes be once more thundered upon their astounding ears, and like the volcano which has long been sleeping in silence, but boiling beneath and now and then sending forth fitful flashes of fire and smoke, they will burst with terrific fury on the heads of their oppressors, and in their deep and furious floods the galling chains of slavery shall fall asunder, and freedom and intelligence will rear again the standards of liberty and make theirs again the land of soul-stirring deeds and melting melody.

But the most important feature of association and that which particularly affects the happiness of man, is the influence which it exerts over his moral sentiment. When first we awake from the long dreams of the past and in the dawning of our existence take up the march along the solitary and uncertain path of life, the sentiments imbedded from those we love are forever blended with the first joys they create and serve as lamps to guide us to the grave. The little tune which the tender mother first hums in her infant's ear, the moral sentiments which she breathes into its bosom of innocence long before it has been tainted by the contaminating presence of vice, entwine themselves around the tenderest ligaments of the heart and serve to guide it aright in the darkest trials of adversity.

Go to the self-abandoned wretch who by a long series of dissipated habits has erased from his profligate bosom the last vestige of virtue, display to him in vivid colors the unreasonableness of his conduct, set before his mind the most beautiful truths of morality, and philosophize in the most eloquent and pathetic manner on the grandeurs and excellence of an elevated character. He will hear you with stony apathy and all the force of your reasoning, and all the shafts of your arguments, will fall ineffectually at his feet. But recall to his recollection the long-forgotten days of his childhood, the lessons which were

taught by his tender mother in that joyful period of his existence when to his innocent bosom vice and misery were alike unknown. Conduct him to that consecrated spot where he heard the last clod of the valley fall heavily on her remains, and where now the white tomb lies in silence and the waving willow droops in sorrow over her mouldering remains—exhibit these to his view and, if he be human, he must be moved. A thousand recollections that have long been obscured or concealed in the midst of folly, will dart like the lightning from the dark bosom of the cloud and send home to his conscience the thundering voice of conviction.

Each noble aim and hope and feeling that
hath slept
From boyhood to that instant, comes
Fresh on his mind—and—he weeps.

Such are the effects which association exerts over the human heart. If you would have your son become a noble patriot, a distinguished statesman, and a firm and unwavering supporter of the institutions and liberties of his country, diligently impress these sentiments upon his mind in the first moments of his existence. Let these first be inculcated and spread their wholesome influence over his bosom. Let reason as age advances approve of their excellence, and association throw around them its attractive enchantment; and all the sophistry of the deceitful, all the ridicule of the scornful, and all the persecutions of the intolerant cannot remove them.

Firm as the ocean's bosom, his will stands; and, though clouds of misfortune dark and portentous may gather around, through the storms of affliction shall sweep in fury across it and for a moment last and throw it into wild confusion, so soon as these are past more pure than ever it will settle to its level again and move on with its accustomed regularity.

Citizens of Athens:

We have at last arrived at the most painful part of our performance. The hour is at hand when we must bid you a long adieu. And we would feel as if we were doing injustice to ourselves did we not express the deep feelings of gratitude we entertain and the obligations we owe to our much esteemed benefactors. Ushered into your community as strangers, we have been received as friends. You have welcomed us to your firesides and invited us to partake of your comforts. When you have expended your fortunes, when you have had your

choicest entertainment, when you have spread the festal board and exhibited in grand profusion all that could please the eye and gratify the taste, with the hand of hospitality you have received us into your numbers. You have introduced us into the circle of that fair throng, whose purity is like the evening beam, which while it tinges in azure bright the distant cloud, reflects around on meaner objects its cheering lights; whose virtues are like those precious odors, in whose presence we cannot often remain without bearing away some of their fragrance; whose soft and delicate voices breathe but the accents of a divine morality; and whose eyes are like the ancient pools, in whose serene and silent waters heaven is seen.

How happy! How fortunate! When the fountains of knowledge are surrounded by such society. Like waving vines and beautiful clusters of roses they hang about the gushing waters, charming and delighting the eyes of a famished youth as he comes to drink, and casting a cooling shade over the limpid stream. But, friends and most esteemed citizens, these are not the only favors you have shown us. You have animated and encouraged us in all those laudable pursuits which would lead us to happiness and usefulness. Both by example and precept you have taught us to know how smooth and peaceful are the ways of virtue, and in the hours of necessity you have especially exhibited your friendship. You have cheered our despondent spirits in the darkest moments of calamity, and in the hours of sickness and death like fathers and mothers, you have watched over our beds. Yes! when the destroying hand of disease has laid us low, when the agonizing youth was writhing under the scorching fever, and when the father and mother far away were unconscious of the distresses of their son, over his dying bed you shed a pitying tear, and calmed his troubled breast in the hour of desolation. These are attentions, these are favors never to be forgotten; and lasting as these shall be our love to you. We have nothing worthy to offer you in return. From the fullness of our hearts we can but exclaim, "A thousand thanks for your kindness! Tens of thousands of blessings rest upon your heads! Farewell."