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HISTORICAL ALABAMA.

ADDRESS OF

Hon. Thomas H. Clark,

BEFORE

THE LITERARY SOCIETIES

OF

A. and M. College.

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HISTORICAL ALABAMA.

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Young Gentlemen of the Websterian and Wirt Literary Societies ; Ladies and Gentlemen :

I want to talk with you this evening about historical Alabama. I want to say something about the new method that obtains in the treatment of problems of the past and the bearing of this method upon the history of our own state. I want to add a word on the collection and preservation of materials which will elucidate that history, and a further word upon the importance to ourselves of a more exact knowledge of the past of our people.

I have chosen this subject, mainly, because I believe there is urgent need that it should be agitated by every lover of the State, and agitated until, if possible, the public mind is aroused to the importance of at least making an effectual beginning toward saving for future generations of Alabamians, the records of the lives of their ancestors.

I have chosen it, too, because personal studies covering a number of years have brought home to me the regrettable neglect of opportunities everywhere in the State to preserve historical material. I have chosen to speak here and now upon this topic, not alone because this place, for years has been one of the cultured centers of Alabama, nor not alone because we have here a school that is a beacon light of progress throughout the South, but for a further reason, appealing strongly to the speaker, that you have assembled here the finest collection of books in the State, and have thus, in demonstrating your right to a foremost place in intellectual leadership, furnished the best of reasons why a plea for Alabama's history should be made before you.

The students of history among you are familiar with the changes wrought in that science by the multiplied agencies of

what is vaguely known as modern thought. The doctrine of evolution, in particular, dissociated as it is at present from necessary connection with any special theory of human descent, has regenerated the mind of man. Under the guidance of this law, historical students have addressed themselves to making a complete review of the past. They have called to their aid workers in every branch of learning and experiment. They have deepened and broadened the fine saying of Terence that he considered nothing human foreign to his sympathies, by proclaiming that nothing on earth should be foreign to theirs. All life on the planet, all matter, organic or inorganic, has been scrutinized to see if added light can be shed upon the destiny of man. They have, indeed, found tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, sermons in stones.

The immediate result of this far spreading activity among students of every kind upon history itself has been to abolish epochs and ages, and to restore to every part of the great human story its rightful share of interest. The Middle Ages, for example, so long neglected, as covered by an impenetrable veil, are found to be fruitful years in which were rooted some of the most beneficent of modern institutions: while the most striking features of that time are themselves traced in their origins to a more remote past. The inevitable result of the new method has been to exalt peoples above monarchies, the triumphs of peace above the triumphs of war, to find in the quiet homes of quiet citizens, the deeper springs whence flow the manifold influences that shape and control national life. This effort to correlate all the facts of the social order has had a damaging effect upon the reputations of many of our famous historians. Confining ourselves to a few familiar names of the first rank, it has left Hume, the historian, stranded, his power of clear statement having failed to relieve the baldness of his prejudices and his lack of insight into the real problems before him. Macaulay, the master of the most brilliant narrative style in our literature, finds his authority sapped by the ceaseless accumulation of facts, that serving as their own commentary, prove him to have reasoned with small power upon the causes of the events he describes. Gibbon, too, who has left a monumental history for all ages, who tramped through time with the steadiness of a Roman legion,

finds his accuracy unimpeached, only to be judged to lack the key, the moderns have, pigmies though they be, compared to such a giant in the new method of approach through all phenomena, in a method that finds precisely why, at any given time a particular institution proved acceptable to a large body of men, justifying the faith of its believers by supplying a need of the epoch and working beneficently then, though it might seem totally unsuited to the conditions of the present. Carlyle, again, that cave of the winds, has already reached the stage where his fame fills the earth, and he is not read. He will assuredly find the man on horseback but a poor passport to the favor of a posterity who will believe even less than we do in the power of the individual citizen to raise up and bless millions of his fellow men. His disciple and biographer, Froude, in his inaugural address the other day at Oxford, where by any odd chance of English politics, he has succeeded Edward A. Freeman, proclaimed anew the impossibility of history and once more announced the man on horseback as the maker of events. In the light of the actual researches made by the brilliant galaxy of the new school, his defense of Carlyle's view of history, sounded as if he told of

Old, unhappy, far off things,
And battles long ago.

Bishop Stubbs, Freeman, Green, Gardiner and Lecky, to mention no others among recent English historians, and Winsor, Schouler, Henry Adams, the incomparable Alexander Johnston, Woodrow Wilson and Minister Taylor, of our State, among the Americans have demonstrated what the new method can do in bringing one to an intelligent comprehension of the past with its great social and political problems. History has been termed one long pleading for liberty; certainly English history has been such a pleading and the notable story as told by the scholars I have named of the contributions of English speaking races on both sides of the Atlantic to this dearest of all causes, can but animate and inspire. Runnymede, Naseby and the Boyne, we are made by them to hail as American victories for American principles, just as the elder branch of our race must recognize Saratoga and Yorktown as English victories for English principles.

What is of more especial interest to the Southern student is the new light, thrown by these investigations, upon the great

institutional struggle of the new world that marked the downfall of slavery. There is a certain cant common in discussions of our late war that prompts men on different sides to pay courtly compliments to each other, as if the polite concession carried the observer any way toward a true view of the great conflict. The truth is, the Northern man has been prone to consider the war too exclusively, as waged to perpetuate slavery, while the Southerner has entrenched himself behind the strict letter of the organic law as interpreted in history and by the Supreme Court, and has denied that he fought for slavery's life. It is in the spirit of these two views, that we hear an occasional call, a cry rather, an alarm against the North being proved wrong and the south right, or the South wrong and the North right. There is, I believe, a serious effort now on foot among certain distinguished survivors of the war to have a history prepared that shall demonstrate one particular section to have been in the right. The God of history must smile at the proposal. He gives out no briefs. His highest commendation is won when unglossed facts are set forth. He knows that the judgment and conscience of any large body of men will never go far wrong, when they have to consider a plain ordering of facts, unmingled with the bias of advocates. Happily the apparent need for a sectional history grows less and less, as the facts in the controversy are more and more illuminated by the researches of the present generation of historians. The late Alexander Johnston, in whose most untimely death American literature suffered a grievous loss, did more perhaps than any other one student to place our history upon a philosophical plane. His work has been taken up ably by Woodrow Wilson, Albert Bushnell Hart and others, with the result that there is emerging from the passion and the bitterness that has characterized the greater portion of our history as a Union, intelligibility of its all, intelligibility that must precede any perfect unification of sentiment.

Workers like these, and fortunately there are hundreds of them throughout the press and in the class room engaged in a like work, are restoring the South to the Union in a far more lasting way than by the bonds of law. They are at the same time restoring the union to the South, if one may so speak, by enabling the defenders of the Union to enter into, to com-

prehend, it not to sympathize with, the deeply impelling causes that plunged the South into war.

What I have said in this imperatively brief way will serve to indicate the speaker's point of view in dealing with historical Alabama. The whole of ancient history has been rewritten in the last fifty years ; all of modern history in the last thirty years. What has been doing in Alabama during this time? What have her own people done to secure the just judgment of the world and their own children upon their achievements in the past?

You have observed, doubtless, in the ordinary manual of the schools, whether Southern or Northern in origin, that Alabama rarely obtains more than two mentions. In the index of such a volume you find "Alabama admitted, 1819 ; seceded, 1861." Admission, secession ; these words tell the whole story as known to the world at large. It is our own fault that this is so. By a strange anomaly, nearly all our most serious serious historical labor has been devoted to periods, to people and incidents that have had little direct influence upon the real life of Alabama. Our writing has been largely episodical. Pickett himself abandoned his pen just as he reached the beginning of our story as a State. Meck busied himself with Indian life and De Soto's expedition. I do not care to attempt to depreciate the importance of a knowledge of Indian life, but I would insist the subject is of more importance to the ethnologist than to the historian. The Indians highest significance to us is in the effect his presence here had upon the manners and customs of our own forefathers. As for DeSoto we could well wish the expedition of that Spanish free-booter with its accompaniments of savage atrocity, had been led elsewhere than through Alabama, if the time that has been spent in fixing his route over our soil had been used to preserve for us something of the real history of the people of our commonwealth. The course of the first immigrant wagon that entered Alabama from the North or the East, with its occupants and the utensils they brought, has far truer significance to us than everything DeSoto did within our borders. We must get back to the idea of finding what made us that which we are. Whence came our customs, our institutions, our laws?

Let us, if we can, follow our immigrant forefather as he enters the wilds of Alabama, with sturdy sons perhaps, who shall remain while the father returns to bring the mother and younger children the next year. Let us observe them making their first clearing, where corn is to be planted, that marvelous grain that would seem not fortuitously to have been placed here to aid in the speedy civilization of a new world. Let us see, when they have found the convenient spring, what manner of home will be built against the winter, how the logs will be hewn, how fitted together, how the puncheons will be laid, if they choose puncheons rather than the bare earth as a floor ; how the chimney will be constructed, if a chimney shall be required, and how the window. We must observe, too, what the furniture is that is brought with the family, when the family comes, the beds, the chairs, the tables ; we must know its scantiness and its simplicity, we must see intimately and near at hand the almost squalid conditions of frontier life, if we would learn out of what has grown the fire-side of to-day, and especially if we would know the prodigious labors of the women who presided over these early homes. We must then follow our immigrant into the world in his relations with the neighbors, whose campfires he saw blazing everywhere in the woods, as he returned to his cabin and his clearing. We shall follow him in the first efforts toward association, in clearing new ground, in advancing seed corn saved from the previous crop, in felling trees and hewing them out for the home of the new-comer ; in their joint plans of protection against the Indians, in their dealings with these ; in their joint pursuit of the chase ; in the slow steps by which religion and its offices, the teacher and his work are provided for until the law itself reaches forth to claim its sway and we are face to face with one of the thousands of frontier communities that together have astonished the world by the quickness with which they have subdued a continent. We should then take one step forward, to find our nascent commonwealth, dependent yet upon the general government, but growing so rapidly as to amaze even a race of immigrants and prepared in a few short years to put on the garments of statehood. With admission into the Union, as we shall see, the smaller eddies of a territorial life are drawn into the more powerful currents of the larger life

around, just then becoming national in scope. Alabama entered in the midst of the agitation accompanying the Missouri compromise. This was the agitation that startled Jefferson like a fire-bell at night and that continued in various forms until the Union was almost sundered thereby.

The political excitement that largely characterized the first four decades of our history as a state has obscured for us the social processes of the time until it will now be difficult to recover and appraise them. It remains a reproach to us that the most notable of these, slavery, has never been described from our standpoint on an extensive and accurate scale. Speaking more particularly of Alabama, apart from many other influences at work in the formation of the character of her people between 1819 and 1861, slavery was a most potential factor and as such deserves a careful and candid treatment at the hands of some one of her sons. We have in the several works of Frederick Law Olmsted an unfriendly but powerful picture, the most striking, in fact in any literature of the intimate, social and economic life of a people. It is out of the question now that an equally faithful, but friendly picture can be made, for Olmsted wrote with his eye on the object, but very much could be done with the aid of Olmsted himself by the cautious use of DeBow's Review, and such a volume as the "Memoirs of a Southern Planter," by Susan Dabney Smedes, and more especially by the aid of hundreds of men and women, happily still amongst us, who vividly recall the latter years of slavery. The student of slavery in this State will find an interest in noting the changes in opinion by which Alabama, that at one time enacted a law forbidding the importation of slaves from other States, comes at last to stand along side of South Carolina in the ardor with which the institution of slavery was defended. He will note, too, the effect of slavery upon the movement of population, upon the economy of the soil, upon the slave and upon the master. The poor white trash who have not been honored by us with any notice whatever except in the repetition of the sneer of the slave who believed himself their superior, would merit separate treatment, for we have in that class a striking product of the slave system. Not the least wonderful feature of that social order was the mistress of the slave. One can hardly dare to

hope, whatever may be our compensations, that newer times can preserve for us the energy, the executive ability the sovereign graces, the exalted character that marked so many of the women who aided in the management of our great slave estates.

There would yet remain in any adequate treatment of historical Alabama to tell of the share taken by our State in the war. The consummate valor of her soldiers, along with that of her sister Southern States, has given the grey-jacketed Confederate a secure place in the annals of the world. The historian watchful of the true course of events, would continue to seek in the homes and the fields for the phenomena which should indicate what the future was to be. Even the excesses of the reconstruction era would not blind him to what was going on during that period on ten thousand hillsides and in ten thousand valleys, as the slow work of recuperation from slavery and war was being carried forward. And at present the history of Alabama is to be found less in the noise and clamor of politics, than, in the quiet work, for instance, of an institution like this, where the youth of the State are trained and sent forth to aid in its mighty development.

I have said enough, I trust, to awaken in you, if it needed awakening, a sense of the higher value of our State's history when considered apart from stories and theories more or less legendary in character.

What can be said to enforce the importance of preserving the records that remain of this real life of our people?

In Brewer and Garrett we have a quantity of biographical material that will be found of priceless value to him who seriously attempts to cast the history of Alabama in a literary form. Mr. Hodgson's "Cradle of the Confederacy," is more and more resorted to by students for the light it throws upon the genesis of the secession idea, and Alabama's contribution to that idea. We have also a few county histories—Riley's Conecuh, Ball's Clarke and Blue's Montgomery, that embody a great deal of interesting material, while town histories of Eufaula, Montgomery, Marion and Demopolis furnish forth many valuable facts. Individuals, too, here and there, like Dr. Wyman of the State University, Dr. Riley of Howard College, Mr. Owen of Bessemer and Mr. Wm. Garrott Brown,

Archivist of Harvard College Library, are doing admirable work in privately collecting material for future use, while dailies like the Advertiser, The Age-Herald and The Register and weeklies like the Grove Hill Democrat, the Troy Messenger, The Greenville Advocate and others are doing excellent service in calling out contributions from their readers upon various points in State history.

There ought to be no abatement in this good work, and yet, withal, the situation calls for more systematic effort. We can hardly dare hope to see an organization in each county devoted to the collection of historical material, to the preservation of all relics bearing upon the past history of the county. But is it too much to expect that the State itself should intervene in its own highest interest, its own self-respect in fact, and make provision for a State Historical Society? The sum annually required for the maintenance of such an organization would be a trifle compared to the lasting benefits such a body would confer. It would be the first duty of the State Historical Society to repair as far as possible the mistakes of the past by collecting and preserving everything possible that illustrates the present. It should purchase annually, or semi-annually, by way of beginning, bound volumes of every daily paper published in Alabama and bound volumes of a dozen or more representative weeklies. To these should be added some half dozen dailies published elsewhere in the Union. The society could then undertake the collection of materials, now wasting, files of old newspapers, complete or broken, manuscripts like that of Pickett's uncompleted and unpublished history of the Southwest, or the Stiggins manuscript, now unaccountably in the possession of a gentlemen in Madison, Wis.; the correspondence whenever it can be found and secured of distinguished men like King, Bagby, Lewis, Yancey and Houston; memoirs, diaries, official records of religious and social organizations, and conversations with old citizens. The mere existence of such a society with a permanent home and supported by the State would induce many who would not otherwise part with historical material, to give or to sell to it, assured as they would be that their generosity had taken the fittest possible form. It would of course be one of the main features in the work of such a society to in-

cite its members to make special researches on given topics, to pry into dusty archives—I am happy to hear Governor Jones has projected the publication of a selection from those of the State—to explore the recesses of every Court of Probate, to go through the old acts of the Legislature, the journals of both Houses, the Supreme Court reports, the records of Congress, unflinching, unrelenting, to seek everywhere for facts to illustrate the life of our people.

A State-supported Historical Society, I am bound to believe would be heartily welcomed and sustained by the enlightened judgment of Alabama. I believe it would profoundly stimulate the study it would be founded to promote and it would save us from the continuing shame under which we now rest, of an almost total blindness to our past.

Do you ask what is the profit of it all? Or worse, perhaps, do you echo Walpole's cynicism, "Read me not history; history is a lie?" It is true we can never recover the past as a whole. We shall blunder in our observations of it and in our inferences about it. We do the same thing with the present, however. And surely that man is best equipped to judge the present who best knows what the past can teach him. There is not a political, an economic, or a social problem now confronting Alabama that would not be easier of solution if the researches I have indicated as proper to be made, had already been made and the results were now in our possession. Let us, I insist, if we can, widely disseminate historical truth among our people, in order that our thoughts and actions shall be marked by the sobriety that should distinguish a just, proud and capable citizenship.

It is not alone either as a guide to conduct that our studies will aid us. We sometimes wonder that literature does not flourish at the South. It can never flourish so long as it is not rooted in the actual conditions of our social order. Our writers, in the main, it would seem, have busied themselves with dialect, or if in poetry they abandon dialect, it is only to offer us a reflection of what has been read and not what has been actually felt or comprehended. There is urgent need among us to recall the sage advice of Goethe to young Germany, "Here or nowhere is your America." The new world of Alabama lies before those of our ambitious young men and

women who would win a name in literature, but they must tell the world, not what they have been hearing about the world itself, but what is daily happening in their own midst. Let but the imagination touch the past of our State or touch the present with the light that never was on sea or land, and I feel sure the great world would gladly attend the story. We shall have a literature when we learn who we are, where we are, what we are doing, when we take our own lives as the deepest of realities to the writer, the nature about us as such a reality and reproduce these in our books. The study of State history is then the first step toward the foundation of a State literature.

Let me add, in conclusion, that the consideration above all others that should weigh with us in this matter is that to know the history of the State is to deepen state pride. No one can be unmindful of the striking change that has come over the relations of the State to the general government of the Union. I have no reference now to the gradual accretion of power in Washington, but to the dwarfing effect upon the individual State of having always before and in full view of sixty-five millions the vast operations of this most powerful of human governments. We who have seen a Governor of South Carolina resign his post to accept an assistant secretaryship of the Treasury, find it difficult to orient ourselves sufficiently to know why John Hancock, as Governor of Massachusetts, disputed for precedence with George Washington, President of the United States, and why John Jay should abandon the Chief Justiceship of the Supreme Court of the United States to offer as a candidate for the Governorship of New York. I like to think of this sturdy pride in one's own State. Would that we had more of it now. Not, indeed, because one would detract from the majesty of the Union, but because as the Union is not more powerful than the States that compose it, its permanence and value will be in exact proportion to the vitality of the several States. To have a nobler Union we must have nobler States and in the interest of the Union as well as of the States, pride in one's State; for us pride in Alabama, should be cherished and deepened by all means that patriot love can command. In a spirit of unaffected devotion to the Union, we might wish for the time when all Alabamians

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should prove in their love for Alabama and her history what the great historian of the ancients said of the Athenians, that their true selves were their minds and these were never so truly their own as when engaged about the welfare of their country.

Let me commend Alabama and Alabama's history to you for love and interest of the same exalted kind.

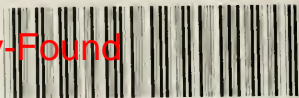
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