

# A TRIBUTE TO JOHN RANDOLPH

From a Discourse delivered before Randolph-Macon College and printed as Lecture  
I in 'The Science of Governments.'

GENTLEMEN: The power of the people is from God; and that his blessing attends its discreet and righteous exercise, is proved by the prosperity and happiness, and the advance of science and art and intellectual improvement which ever attend it. But think, I pray you, whether this fact does not betoken an ultimate purpose, the final accomplishment of which may belong to a remote generation, and to which our short time on earth should be devoted in subordination to his will? If this purpose is the perfection of man in all that civilization can

achieve, and if political freedom is God's chosen means for accomplishing this, how heavy is the condemnation of those, who, being called to work together with him, to this great end, profane their high function, by using it to accomplish the petty purposes of the day, suggested by their own evil passions! What place should ambition have in the heart of him who is born to this illustrious destiny? Can worldly honor and distinction, and the breath of man, add anything to the glory of him who acts well his part in such a work as this? Is it the leader's truncheon, is it the ruler's sceptre, that distinguishes the name of Washington, and secures him the foremost place among those whose memory shall never die? Is it not rather, that God was in all his thoughts; that in all things he devoted himself to the high purposes of the master of the world, and acted as one called to do *his maker's* will, and not *his own*? He *did* his maker's will, and *here* we see the results. He effected his maker's purpose, and in the fruits of his labors we find an intimation what that purpose is. With what humble thankfulness and earnest zeal should we devote ourselves to the farther advancement of that gracious design, which, by the agency of free government, and the instrumentality of beings so insignificant as ourselves, has made this wilderness to blossom as the rose, and will never cease, till the whole earth is full of the knowledge of God, and of that freedom which they who serve in spirit, and in truth are destined to enjoy?

Gentlemen, if there be any truth in the ideas I have laid before you, I owe the knowledge of that truth to one of those illustrious men, whose names you have consecrated by adopting them as the designation of your institution. You have engraven the name of Randolph on the shrine here erected to literature, to science and to God. What offering so fit for that altar; what offering so proper for me to lay upon it, as this poor attempt to embody and preserve something of the teachings of that deep sagacity and profound wisdom which distinguished him, and which he labored to impart to me. Love to the brother—gratitude to the benefactor—even these sentiments should be subordinate to my veneration for the man, from whose eloquent lips I have learned more than from all my own experience and reflection, and from all the men with whom I have ever conversed, and from all the books I have

ever read. How so well can I manifest these sentiments, how so fitly express my gratitude for the honor done to his memory by you, as by availing myself of this occasion, to bring to your ears a faint echo of the words I have from him? Where so properly could I offer an exhortation to the study of political philosophy as a branch of academic education, as in a temple of science on which is inscribed the name of one whose life was devoted to that study? I speak after him, when I say, that to understand the constitution and laws of our country, in their letter and in their spirit; to explore the philosophy of our institutions, and to qualify ourselves to act well our several parts, as sovereign citizens of Virginia, is the great temporal duty which we owe to God and to man. To God; for in that we accomplish the earthly end of our being; to our fathers:—for it is the only fit expression of our gratitude for blessings transmitted to us: to our children:—because we should not impair the inheritance we have ourselves received. Thus, and thus only can we fulfil our duties as members of that great partnership, which not only unites together the present generation, but which connects the living with the dead, and with those who are yet to be born; and in which man is elevated to a sort of fellowship with the Creator himself.

I deeply feel how unequal I am to the task I have endeavored to perform; and I feel it the more sensibly, because, in the very act, I am reminded of him, who, above all men, was best fitted for it. His was the mind to understand; his was the faculty to expound; his was the eloquence to excite. His was the marvellous gift, to

Put so much of his soul into his words,  
That others followed, wheresoe'er he called:  
And, by the inspiration of his voice,  
Cowards, made bold, performed the tasks of valour,  
And sloth leaped up, and from his sluggish limbs  
Shook off the leaden fetters.

He lived for Virginia. She was his country. She was his world. And though a step-son's portion was his lot; though his best endeavors to serve her were sometimes repaid with neglect and reproach; yet never did his faith waver: never did his zeal falter: never did his love cool: never did the feverish

impatience of his fiery spirit rebel against her. In his darkest hour, it was his pride to know, that he had never merited, however he incurred her displeasure, and to bear meekly all the scoffs with which she sometimes requited his endeavors to serve her. To rival the marvellous endowments with which Heaven distinguished him is not perhaps for any of us. But to emulate his example, in devoting ourselves to our country, according to the measure of our capacity, is what we all may do. To that effort I would incite the youth of Virginia; and, that they may make it profitably to her, and honorably to themselves, I would urge them to devote themselves, in early life, to those studies which alone can qualify them to act worthily their parts as SOVEREIGN CITIZENS OF THIS ILLUSTRIOUS COMMONWEALTH.