with the respects of the Author

ORATION

DELIVERED BEFORE THE

BEAUFORT VOLUNTEER ARTILLERY,

ON JULY 4TH, 1850.

BY

WILLIAM HENRY TRESCOT.

LESTON:
OF WALKER AND JAMES,
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CHARLESTON:
STEAM-POWER PRESS OF WALKER AND JAMES,
No. 101, East-Bay.
1850.

Beaufort. 5th of July, 1850.

Wm. H. Trescot, Esq.

Dear Sir: We were appointed a Committee of the Beaufort Volunteer Artillery to request of you a copy of your Oration for publication.

Respectfully yours,

JNO. M. BAKER,
T. A. BELL,
E. B. MEANS,
T. O. BARNWELL. } *Committee.*

Beaufort, S. C. July 6th, 1850.

To Messrs. J. M. Baker, T. A. Bell,

E. B. Means, T. O. Barnwell—Committee.

Gentlemen: Enclosed I send you the MS. of the Speech, as you desire, and take the same opportunity to express my acknowledgment of the compliment which that request conveys.

With respect,

WM. HENRY TRESCOT.

ORATION.

FAMILIAR, as we are, with the presence of nature, few realize that what appears so constant is but one perpetual change. Dawn and twilight brighten and fade—seasons come and go—vegetation blooms and dies—the mysterious tides ebb and flow—but all the while old currents are widening—new soils are forming—climates are changing—old lands disappear—new lands rise to light, and at the interval of centuries, the scientific observer notes that a great change has been effected. So it is in the political world—administrations change—diplomatists plot and plan—great battles are fought; but all the while opinions are altering—commerce is changing its course—productions are varying—old States shrink away—new States grow into power, and again at the interval of centuries the student of history sees that a great revolution has been accomplished. And although there are in the political, as in the natural world, abrupt and terrible departures from this constant and gradual progress; yet, the general order of Providence by a sure and almost imperceptible change works out its great modifications without apprehension or disturbance. Situated thus in the midst of changes to which we are, ourselves, involuntary contributors, it is impossible for any human mind to compass the scope of the world's history. Indeed, to us, all history can be but a half-read play, the events and characters of which are beyond our criticism as they will be beyond our knowledge, until the closing of life's drama—that solemn tragedy, of which the theatre is earth, mankind the actors, and the audience—God. And the fact that it is thus impossible to guide our conduct with a view to positive results in the future, proves that we have long placed an exaggerated estimate on the influence of individual intellect in the history of the world. Political

foresight is the vainest of human pretensions, and it may safely be asserted that in the history of the world, during its most active period, there is no record of a solitary permanent achievement by the political intellects of the times. And it may further be added that all the great political results of the world's history have been developed in the past without the aid of, and often in contradiction to, the cabinet wisdom of the nations. Look at two of the most important of modern events, the growth of the English colonial system and the formation of the Federal Union. Examine the former particularly. To what political intellect is it due? Who conceived and executed this grand creation? Yet, look back upon the past, and you can trace the great plan there. You can see the first timid ship stealing into unknown seas—the first hesitating barter between the curious native and the cunning white—the first factory founded—the first fort built—the first war waged, and then the vessels multiply into fleets—the guns of the single fort are re-echoed from fortress to fortress—solitary factories have spread into gorgeous cities, and England owns another empire. The same process may be traced in the growth of the Union, and here are two great political results which have been effected, not by the exercise of a few pre-eminent intellects, but by the steady action of national instinct, not endeavoring to provide for the future, but accepting and accomplishing the consequences of the past. If, then, we cannot act for the future, we are yet furnished with a test to determine the character of those political changes to which we may be parties, and the past, if it does not aid us to prophesy, at least enables us to interpret the present. The tests by which to judge the character of any great political change may be stated briefly and generally. 1st. That when accomplished it is seen to be the necessary consequence of past events, which, when interpreted by it, fall into the symmetry of a well ordered plan; and 2d. That it is not the work of a few superior intellects, moulding public opinion into conformity with political theories; but that it is the action of a strong national sentiment. And here it may be expected that, in accordance with the established usage of the day, I should seek to illustrate these conditions

in the history of the American Union and infer from their application, a long and glorious future; but, fellow-citizens circumstances warn us with fearful emphasis—

> Trust no future, however pleasant;
> Let the dead past bury its dead,
> Act—act in the living present,
> Heart within and God o'er head.

And indeed the unqualified eulogy of seventy-four years cannot, to-day, be repeated with truth. Three-quarters of a century have verified the fears of the founders of the Union, and each year has deepened the lines of sectional division—roused into fiercer anger, sectional sentiment, and forced into more fatal conflict sectional issues—until now, when we see the reckless strife of selfish interest—the quick jealousy—the strong antipathies that divide section from section and class from class; the most hopeful believer in the stability of the country must acknowledge that while our forefathers framed a government they failed to create a nation. For what has been the great political triumph of our domestic legislation, since the adoption of the Federal Constitution? Why the passage of the Missouri compromise. It was carried after a struggle of unparalleled excitement, and was accepted by a grateful constituency as the joint victory of wise statesmen and a conservative people. Now, what is the Missouri compromise but a broad declaration, that in the American Union there are two people, differing in institutions, feelings, and in the basis of their political faith—that the government could not legislate for both on the same principles and on the same subject, and therefore that as to certain matters of great political interest, they must, by an imaginary line, be separated. Since that line has been drawn, the practical separation has grown wider and wider, and circumstances have again forced upon us the question—shall it continue? Is there a mode by which it may be obliterated and the two people be made one? or shall this imaginary line become a real boundary, and the two people, bidding each other a friendly but firm farewell, enter upon their future paths as separate and independent nations?

I propose, therefore, to apply to the present times the tests

I have suggested, and to enquire whether they indicate the approach of some grave political change, or simply one of those ordinary party excitements, at once the result and the evidence of active political life. And the first thought that strikes us in our endeavour to apply these principles is this: The history of the world divides itself into certain periods, each embracing some one great political system—these periods divide again into two eras—one in which the principle of the age builds up one great empire—the other in which that same principle developes a double nature which dissolves the unity of the empire into separate nationalities. The empires of ancient and modern times, all repeat the same process, revealing, however, another remarkable principle—that all the great political revolutions have advanced westward. Beginning in Asia, the history of the world developed itself by these alternate aggregations and dissolutions until at the fall of Rome, advancing Westward, it filled up Europe also. Then came the feudal system, building up all Christendom into one empire and dissolving again into separate nations, but completing almost in the moment of its dissolution the discovery of the Americas, and thus advancing still further westward. Then rose the colonial systems of the various European powers followed, finally, by the American Union, which gathering up into one vast commonwealth the people of a continent, and still stretching westward, has reached the Pacific. Thus, although we cannot anticipate our future, we can trace our progress hitherward: see nation after nation rise and fall, the great waves of time rolling the wrecks nearer and nearer to our own shore, until at last acting the same part they have all played, by the extension of our territory to the pacific, we complete a great empire and resting upon the extremest western verge, thus fulfil the circle of Providence. If then, just at this moment, this vast empire should dissolve into separate nations, it would be only the fulfilment of an universal political law—a law, the scope of which we cannot at present comprehend, but which, through the history of the whole world, has acted with unfailing regularity—a law to the action of which we owe our own national exist-

ence, and by which we may, under Providence, give rise to some better and higher state of political being.

Another general principle in the revolutions of history is this: that spring from whatever source, embrace interests however complicated, they have always, in their final settlement, obeyed the geographical requirements of the country in which they have been accomplished. Rivers, and mountains, and climates are more irresistible agents in the world's history than we are willing to admit, and a great geographical division always developes a separate and individual nationality. There is no exception, and the territorial wars which have distracted Europe are, when properly understood, the expression of a much higher and nobler principle than mere dynastic ambition. Now assuming what the late speech of the British Premier, on the colonial system, justifies us in assuming, that the independence of Canada depends upon Canada herself, we may look upon the continent as a collection of independent nations, free to make their own combinations. Let us then unroll the map and examine its great geographical features; what are they? 1. The almost perfect separation of the Pacific from the Atlantic shore. 2. The existence of two great navigable outlets, the Mississippi and the St. Lawrence, but little separated at their points of furthest interior communication, and yet debouching at the extreme ends of the continent, thus furnishing to each great section its independent highway to the ocean. If we examine the maps more in detail we will find, and it is a curious acknowledgment of the lines nature has drawn, that taking some point about the junction of the Ohio, with the Mississippi as centre, two systems of internal improvement and communication have, in the few last years, developed themselves without any preconcerted plan, but in obedience to the national instinct; the one striking from Nashville and its neighbourhood, southwards, towards the Atlantic at Charleston, the gulf at New Orleans, and further on, through Texas. The other tending northwards towards the Lakes and through the neighbourhood of Wheeling and the old Cumberland Road, to Philadelphia, New-York and Boston.*

* Since writing the above I have met with the following passage, in some measure illustrating the same idea, although from another point of view.

Add to this, the variety of production and the difference of habits consequent upon that variety, and the conclusions of the past press irresistibly upon the present. Applying, then, the first test we suggested, if the present political changes result in the disruption of this continental Commonwealth into separate nations, we can accept this revolution as the necessary consequence of what has gone before, as the work of a great law—illustrated in the fortunes of ancient empires—as the execution of a decree, written by God on the mountains and rivers and plains of the new world, in language unchanged from the time when the Atzec first looked down from the Cordilleras on the table lands of Mexico, and uninterpreted until the tide of Saxon invasion breasted the surf of the Pacific, and the shout of triumph proclaimed that the American Union had fulfilled its destiny.

Let us then apply the other test. It is admitted by all that the public mind is disturbed; that the gentle bond of old associations is broken; that old words of traditionary enthusiasm fall cold on the ear; that everywhere there is a feverish anticipation of a great change;—whence is all this? is it the skilful but mischievous work of party leaders, or is it

"It is true that Federal legislation has made a roundabout voyage, by New-York, shorter for the Southern trade than the straight course to Europe, but there is no part of the slave States whose natural port is not at home. Two great lines of rail road will soon connect the Chesapeake Bay with the valley of the Ohio and the Lakes. A third line will stretch through the Southwest to Memphis, on the Mississippi, while a fourth will form a continuous line parallel to the coast, from Baltimore and Richmond through Columbia, to Natchez, with numerous lateral feeders from the Piedmont vallies. Western commerce can reach the Atlantic by these Southern lines more quickly than by the Northern, and without any interruption from ice and snow, in winter. They will concentrate a vast trade at Norfolk, Charleston and Savannah."—*The Union, Past and Future*, p. 34.

This passage is in much fuller detail than I felt at liberty to employ. The subject of the political geography of this continent is one of such vast fertility and such abounding interest, that within the decorous limits of an oration, I could only refer to it. Indeed, I must ask any chance reader whom these pages may be fortunate enough to find, to remember that my limits compel me to be very general and very brief. In making the above extract, I may be permitted to express my unqualified admiration of the pamphlet from which it is taken. If Virginia has many such sons, the "mother of States and statesmen" is still a nursing mother.

the truthful instinct of national sentiment? To answer this question, I must indicate briefly the outline of our political history. When the Federal Constitution was adopted, it was a compromise between two people, having some common sympathies and very many adverse interests, and who were compelled into the presence of each other by want of that great necessary of political life—a Government. Now, a government which should be only the expression of the national intellect upon the national interests, cannot, in the very nature of things, be created in advance. Every constitution that history records, has been the result of the national powers called into exercise by the exigences of national history. Standing, then, upon the threshold of the future, with all its magnitude and its mystery, how could our forefathers pretend to define its course or prescribe its channel. For just as surely as the germ of the plant contains and compels the character of its growth and the nature of its fruit, which no cultivation can change, so every nation carries in itself the principles of its coming constitution, and no political contrivance can prevent its natural and inevitable development. The constitutional legislation of our revolutionary leaders must then be regarded simply as efforts to aid the nation's progress towards its true and natural condition. To attach a higher consequence to their labours, would be to elevate them above humanity. For it is the privilege of God only to legislate for eternity, and that privilege he has shared with no Statesman whom the world has yet seen. This truth the founders of the Union did not recognise. They deemed it possible to ~~erect~~ enact a Nation, and posterity has pronounced the enactment obsolete. And it is a most striking evidence of their wisdom as legislators, and their necessary imperfection, as statesmen, that the constitution which they formed, while it cannot govern us as one people, should the two sections become separate nations, would be the most admirably adapted form of government for either. And this fact is in itself a demonstration, that through the varied fortunes of the Federal Union, we have been what we were at its organization, two People. The effort to reconcile these two people, and to identify the Na-

tion with the Government, is the key to our political history. Both parties strove to attain this end; the Federalists by raising the country up to the constitution, which, in point of political maturity was in advance of the popular sentiment. And had it been possible they would have succeeded, for their policy was unselfish, consistent, and firm; but they failed; the country's future lay in a different direction. They would have created a Nation one and indivisible. Providence intended one that in its very extension should draw the lines of its future dissolution. They having failed, the Republican party reversed the experiment, and sought the same end by striving to identify the constitution with the popular will, and we are in the midst of that disastrous experiment. It has resulted in the developing of two popular wills—a Northern and a Southern—and in spite of the selfish caution of party zeal, against the vehement protests, and still stronger example of party leaders, these two wills have concentrated upon their fundamental principle, and stand opposed in undisguised and inextinguishable hostility. Fellow-citizens, national sentiment is never slightly stirred. The same Providence who piled up the mountains and poured out the rivers, in order to divide men into separate nations, has given to each nation its peculiar institutions, its special character. He knows when and how to harmonize them for his wise purposes: it is our duty to preserve those national distinctions in their vigour and purity. When, then, in any country you find two populations characterized by different institutions, preserving their ~~natural~~ national characteristics, and yet so resolutely opposed that a surrender of the one to the other is necessary to national unanimity, the time for the departure of those two people is at hand: the language of wisdom will be the language of experience, "Let there be no strife, I pray thee, between thee and me, and between thy herdsmen and my herdsmen; for we be brethren. Is not the whole land before thee? separate thyself, I pray thee, from me; if thou wilt take the left hand, then I will go to the right, or if thou depart to the right hand, then I will go to the left;" and well for them, if history adds: "and they separated themselves, the one from the other."

The tendency and scope of what I have now briefly and imperfectly said, may be summed up thus: while it is impossible for us to foresee the future of our national history, we can yet see enough to warrant us in believing that if the alternative placed before us be the abandonment of the institution of slavery or the dissolution of the Union, that then the past history of the whole world—the great natural divisions of the continent, and the consenting testimony of the national sentiment, all indicate that the dissolution of the Union is the next step in the path of our history. And when I say the abandonment of the institution, I do not mean the extreme necessity of emancipating our slaves, deserting our fields, and diverting our decimated capital into strange and unnatural channels, but I mean the necessity of existing by toleration in the commonwealth, of yielding one hairbreadth of our full political equality, as necessary, efficient, honourable constituents of the great American Empire. We know our value. The history of past civilization is open for our study, and we see that every nation that has impressed its spirit and its institutions in beneficial influence upon the times—the Arab, the Roman, the Norman—have all been slaveholders. We see that all the great achievements of the world's art—the Greek Drama, the Roman Law, the untold wealth of modern manufactures—have sprung from, and been sustained by slaveholding people. We know our value. The history of our own country is before us; we know from which section sprang the great minds of the revolution; we know whose blood has illustrated the history of three great national wars; we know what great staple feeds the world's traffic, and we know that without slavery the pride of Northern prosperity would be broken, the power of British commerce sapped, and millions of so-called freemen would perish in their destitution. We know our value. We know that we are the great conservative element of this colossal commonwealth. For all that we are, and all that our Northern brethren are, through us, we believe ourselves, under God, indebted to the institution of slavery; for a national existence, a well ordered liberty, a prosperous agriculture, an exulting commerce, a free people and a firm government; and we believe that without slavery, the Union could guaran-

tee us none of these things.

tee us none of these things. That the result of this struggle will be its dissolution, no man ventures to prophesy—no man dares to hope.

> "The vast, the unbounded future lies before us,
> But shadows, clouds, and darkness rest upon it."

The consequences of such a consummation no one can foretell, and in the discharge of a paramount duty, no one ought to regard. We know that Providence has placed us in the midst of an institution which we cannot, as we value national existence, destroy. It has solved for us in the wisest manner, that most dangerous of social questions, the relation of labour to capital, by making that relation a moral one. It has developed the physical wealth of the country in its highest—that is, its agricultural branch—in unprecedented proportion. It has created a civilization combining in admirable measure, energy and refinement. It informs all our modes of life; all our habits of thought lies at the basis of our social existence, and of our political faith. Our first great national duty is to protect it, at any and every hazard. If it can be protected and the Union preserved, there will be nowhere in the land an honester joy than in our borders, for our memory of the past is proud and our faith in the future is strong. But if it cannot, if we must surrender the idea of one great commonwealth, circling the continent with the protection of its constitution, blending in harmonious energy the varied activity of a thousand interests, moulding into one majestic nationality the tempered sovereignties of independent States, if from this dream we must wake to the stern reality of conflicting interests and dissevered States—we, at least, have no responsibility to shun; we shall enter upon the untried path confident in the Providence which so wondrously watched our youth and guided our manhood, sure that whatever form our national existence may assume, so long as we are true to the institutions which have made us what we are, we will proceed in strength to the fulfilment of our fortunes, to the discharge of that duty which, from the beginning, has been assigned us among the nations, and to the vindication of the great truth of all history, that

> "In the unreasoning progress of this world,
> A wiser spirit is at work, a better eye than ours."