

ACTION OF THE COUNCIL.

DEATH OF GEORGE BANCROFT.

A SPECIAL meeting of the Council was held, under a call from the President, at the hall of the Society, on Tuesday, January 20, 1891, at 3.30 o'clock P. M.

President SALISBURY in the chair.

In the absence of the RECORDING SECRETARY, Mr. CHARLES A. CHASE, was chosen Secretary *pro tem*.

President SALISBURY announced the purpose of the meeting as follows:—

Gentlemen of the Council. I have called you together to take notice of the death of our first vice-president, Hon. George Bancroft, LL.D., which took place in Washington on the 17th instant. His character, intellectual ability and public services are to-day in the thoughts of a large portion of our countrymen. Not alone in the United States, but in Europe have the fame and works of our associate become familiar and honored, so that we are assured of sympathy from beyond the seas. Not often is a society called upon to consider the life of one whose record was so complete and well rounded, and whose aims and objects had been so uniformly successful.

Mr. Bancroft was elected a member of this Society in 1838, and has been, with Hon. Robert C. Winthrop, one of the two earliest members in time of election. From 1877 to 1880 he was Secretary of Domestic Correspondence, and from 1880 he has been vice-president. His use of our library has been large, and his services during the long period of his membership are now remembered with gratitude. As Secretary of Domestic Correspondence for

three years, he was called upon with the confidence that any matter requiring tact and delicacy, could safely be entrusted to his careful management.

In October, 1883, Mr. Bancroft wrote the report of the Council, treating as his subject an incident in the life of Alexander Hamilton, and his retirement from the position of Secretary and Chief-of-Staff of Gen. Washington in 1781. He has often shown his interest in the proceedings and welfare of this Society since that time, and in September, 1886, was present and participated in a meeting of our council. It is pleasant to remember that his father, Rev. Aaron Bancroft, D.D., was one of the six petitioners for an act of incorporation for this Society in 1812, and was vice-president for fifteen years.

I will ask Hon. P. EMORY ALDRICH to express the views of the Council upon the death of Mr. Bancroft.

TRIBUTE OF JUDGE ALDRICH.

In the recent death of Mr. George Bancroft, at his home in the city of Washington, the country has lost one of its most illustrious citizens, and this Society has, by the same event, been deprived of its most eminent domestic member; one whose name in its list of officers has given additional distinction to the American Antiquarian Society among all other kindred associations in this and foreign lands. He had the good fortune which rarely falls to the lot of men who undertake great enterprises, requiring many years for their accomplishment, for he lived long enough to complete the great work upon which he entered in early manhood, of writing the history of his country, from its first beginnings in the colonial period until it rightfully assumed its proud position as a nation among the great powers of the earth. He was not only able to bring that work to completion by the publication of the tenth volume just forty years after the publication of the first, but he also, in the centennial year, 1876, published a carefully revised edition of the

whole work in six volumes, leaving it as a monument of learning, of industry, and of persevering and accurate research, which will give it a permanent place among the great historical compositions of the world. One of his contemporaries and fellow-members in this Society says of him :

“Our eminent associate, Bancroft, is second to no historian in the thoroughness of his investigation, in conscientious accuracy of detail, and in artistic skill and pictorial power.” There is a deep and calm philosophical speculation underlying and giving direction and tone to all his historical writings. He does not look upon events as detached and unrelated occurrences, but as forming a continuous and related whole. “It is,” he declares, “this idea of continuity which gives vitality to history. No period of time has a separate being ; no public opinion can escape the influence of previous intelligence. We are cheered by rays from centuries, and live in the sunny reflection of all their light. What though thought is invisible, and even when effective, seems as transient as the wind that raised the cloud ? It is yet free and indestructible ; can as little be bound in chains as the aspiring flame ; and, when once generated, takes eternity for its guardian. We are the children and heirs of the past, with which, as with the future, we are indissolubly linked together ; and he that truly has sympathy with everything belonging to man, will, with his toils for posterity, blend affection for the times that are gone by, and seek to live in the vast life of the ages. It is by thankfully recognizing these ages as a part of the great existence in which we share, that history wins power to move the soul. She comes to us with tidings of that which for us still lives, of that which has become the life of our life. She embalms and preserves for us the life-blood, not of master-spirits only, but of generations of the race. It sees the footsteps of providential intelligence everywhere, and hears the gentle tones of her voice in the hour of tranquillity :—

“ ‘Nor God alone in the calm we find ;
He mounts the storm and walks upon the wind.’ ”

After the completion of his general history of the United States, Mr. Bancroft began, and in 1882 published, what must be considered a most instructive history of the Constitution of the United States. Still later, he published in pamphlet form a review and searching criticism of the decision of the Supreme Court of the United States, in the notorious legal tender case, in which that Court held for the first time that Congress possessed the constitutional power to make paper money a legal tender in the payment of debts. For wealth of learning, power of reasoning and eloquence, Mr. Bancroft's argument against the conclusions of the Court in that case has rarely been surpassed in any cause or in any court by the most eminent forensic advocates and jurists.

Soon after Mr. Bancroft's graduation from Harvard College, at the age of seventeen, he went to Europe for the purpose of prosecuting his studies in language, philosophy and history, and spent some years in several of the leading German universities. While thus employed, and during the years immediately following, he wrote essays on a variety of subjects connected with his studies: *On Studies in German Literature,—its General Characteristics; The Revival of German Literature; Men of Science and Learning; The Age of Schiller and Goethe;* and translations in verse from both those great poets. He also wrote several essays under the titles of: *Studies in History; Economy of Athens; Decline of the Roman People; Russia; and The Wars of Russia and Turkey.* These essays, together with *Occasional Addresses*, were published by Mr. Bancroft in one volume in 1855, a volume that will well repay a perusal by any student of history and philosophy, even at this late day, when German literature and philosophy are no longer the possession of a few, but have become the common property of all scholars.

In his essay on the *Economy of Athens*, he contrasts the democracy of that city with that of our own republic, showing the artificial character of the Athenian common-

wealth, and with what a chary hand it conceded the rights of citizenship to the strangers resident on its soil. He proceeds to say: "It is the genius of our institutions to leave everything to find its own natural level, to throw no obstacles in the way of the free progress of honest industry, to melt all the old castes of society into one mass, to extend the rights of equal citizenship with perfect liberality, and to prevent everything like a privileged order in the State." These brief extracts from his early and later writings serve to show Mr. Bancroft's views of the true functions of human governments and of his strong convictions upon the subject of the universal rights of man.

Upon returning from his foreign travels and studies he, in connection with Dr. Joseph G. Cogswell, founded the celebrated Round Hill School, in Northampton, which, under their joint management, attracted large numbers of students from all parts of the country, many of whom became themselves distinguished as scholars or as leaders in public affairs. Among them at one time was John Motley, the accomplished diplomatist, and the historian of the Dutch Republic. After leaving that school, if not before, Mr. Bancroft took an active and conspicuous part in the politics of the times. He was frequently called upon as the orator of his party, and if he did not succeed as a public speaker it must have been because he was too learned and refined for political campaign oratory. He was appointed Collector at the port of Boston, by President Van Buren, which office he held until General Harrison's accession to power.

Upon the organization of President Polk's cabinet, Mr. Bancroft was appointed Secretary of the Navy, which position he held until December, 1846, when he was sent as our Minister to the Court of St. James, and remained there until the accession of General Taylor to the presidency. He then returned to this country and gave his undivided attention to his historical studies and writings, until he ac-

cepted an appointment from President Johnson as Minister Plenipotentiary from this country at the Prussian and afterwards German Court. He held that important post with unusual distinction until 1874, when he was recalled at his own request. He returned home and taking up his residence in Washington and Newport, he passed the closing years of his long and illustrious life among men of a younger generation, honored as few men have been by their contemporaries. The best evidence of his eminent rank among the great diplomats of his age is perhaps the testimony of the great German Chancellor, Bismarck. In a letter to Motley, the Chancellor, then at the height of power, says: "Bancroft is one of the most popular personages in Berlin . . . He represents practically the same great process of development in which Moses, the Christian revelation, and the Reformation appear as stages, and in opposition to which the Cæsarian power of ancient and modern time, the clerical and dynastic prejudices of the people, offer every hindrance, including that of calumniating an honest and ideal minister like Bancroft."

This notice of a great career, brief and altogether inadequate as it is, cannot be further extended at this time. Mention of two or three facts showing Mr. Bancroft's relation to Worcester will only be now added. He was born in Worcester, October 3, 1800. He was the son of Rev. Aaron Bancroft, a distinguished clergyman, who was himself a student and well-known writer of history. Although Mr. Bancroft has been but rarely seen in his native town during the last half-century, yet he has recently furnished plenary evidence that he had not forgotten the place of his birth or become inattentive to the memory of his honored ancestry. He established a few years since what is known as the Aaron and Elizabeth Bancroft scholarship as a memorial of his father and mother, by giving in trust to the city of Worcester the sum of \$10,000, the income of which is to be expended in aiding meritorious young men of Worcester to acquire a liberal education.

All that was mortal of the grand personality of which I have spoken will, by his own order, be buried in our Rural Cemetery. Mr. Bancroft was long a member of this Society, and occasionally he enriched its Proceedings from the overflowing treasury of his historical learning. A just and adequate memorial of this great man's life and works will be prepared by order of the Council for future publication.

Mr. SAMUEL S. GREEN said :—

Among the most interesting incidents recorded in the recently published correspondence of the late John Lothrop Motley are those which have to do with that gentleman's familiar intercourse with Prince Bismarck, while a fellow-student in one of the German universities, and afterwards when they had both been honored by being placed in the highest positions in the gift of their respective countries. Mr. Motley writes in his letters that Prince Bismarck told him that our distinguished countryman, Mr. George Bancroft, stood in the highest esteem in Berlin with the whole intelligent population. As I took up a newspaper this morning and read the despatch from the young German Emperor, sent as a tribute of respect to the memory of one who had had intimate relations with his grandfather, the late King of Prussia, head of the Confederation of Northern Germany and German Emperor, and remembered with what respect Mr. Bancroft was regarded by Prince Bismarck, I realized profoundly the greatness of the opportunities which were afforded him for serving this country in Germany, and felt proud to remember how admirably he had improved those opportunities.

Mr. PRESIDENT, I have never enjoyed the privilege of intimate acquaintance with Mr. Bancroft. Our walks in life have not often crossed, and the difference in our ages may be indicated by the fact that he became a member of

this Society the year after I was born. I remember distinctly, however, how he appeared at the Commencement dinner of the alumni of Harvard College in 1867, as the representative of the class of 1817 on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of graduation. As he stood up and spoke in the great dining-hall of the University, every man in the immense assembly of graduates was impressed by the strength of his voice, the firmness of his carriage and the vigor which he showed in all movements of mind and body.

When Mr. Bancroft visited Worcester in 1886, I had the rare felicity of acting as his guide in going about the city, and was with him the larger portion of an afternoon, an evening, and for a few hours on the following morning. I should like some time to prepare an account of that visit, for it recalled to Mr. Bancroft certain reminiscences which it is well should be put in print before they are forgotten. While he was here he showed many of the qualities that have been known as his characteristics. There was apparent the enthusiasm and energy which have always marked his career, the thorough spirit and love of hard work which ever distinguished him, and that conspicuous gallantry in the presence of women which no one ever failed to notice who had been brought in contact with him. Mr. PRESIDENT, it is a source of great satisfaction to me to remember that Mr. Bancroft wished to associate his own name with the memorial which he established here in honor of his father and mother, and that his name will suggest to citizens of Worcester now and hereafter not only the historian of the United States and the great statesman, but one who although long absent from the place of his birth remembered that birthplace in his old age by adding to its educational facilities. It is also a source of satisfaction to me to remember that we have in this city the little house in which Mr. Bancroft was born, and that by his own choice, his remains are being borne hither to find a resting-place in a grave in our own Rural Cemetery.

Hon. EDWARD L. DAVIS said :—

MR. PRESIDENT: It seems to me that our late associate, George Bancroft, the most illustrious man ever born in Worcester, furnishes a beautiful and forcible illustration of that love of one's native place, which is inherent in us all, but which not unfrequently finds no expression or proof in the lifetime of its possessor. His boyhood was spent in Worcester, but after college life at Cambridge came studies in foreign lands, and varied experiences in private and public life, so that he never returned to stay in the place of his birth.

About the year 1846 he was here, and although his homes in New York and Newport were within easy distance of his native place he did not after that time revisit Worcester for a period of forty years. Meantime, however, he had established the scholarship at the Worcester High School in memory of his father and mother, and when at the age of eighty-six he did appear here for a little while, he gave substantial evidences of his love for his native place, and received gratifying proofs of the affectionate regard and esteem in which he was held by the citizens of Worcester, to which more extended allusion has been made by our associate, Mr. SAMUEL S. GREEN.

Mr. NATHANIEL PAINE, speaking of Mr. Bancroft's interest in Worcester, said: A few years ago I had a very pleasant call upon Mr. Bancroft at his Newport residence, in company with our President. At that time he made inquiries for some of his old friends and acquaintances in Worcester, and spoke of old locations with which he was familiar in his boyhood. In a letter received from him some years ago, he stated that at that time he had not visited Worcester since he was ten or twelve years old, except on brief school vacations. This was a few years before the visit mentioned by Mr. DAVIS.

Mr. J. EVARTS GREENE said :—

What I can say of Mr. Bancroft is scarcely worthy of an occasion like this. I knew him personally only through a visit of two days, nearly ten years ago at Mr. Evarts's house in Windsor, Vermont, where Mr. Bancroft was also a guest. He was then more than eighty years old: his hair and his long beard were snow white; but his slight figure was erect, his step elastic, and there was in his speech and manner a suggestion of vivacity and alertness, uncommon at any age, and extraordinary at his. The remarkable brilliancy and restlessness of his dark eyes added to this impression.

He seemed inclined to talk with me as opportunities offered, somewhat to my surprise, because several of the company were friends whom he had known for many years, and were otherwise, as I supposed, more likely than I to engage his attention. It seemed that the fact of my living in Worcester attracted him, for he spoke much of the town as it was when he knew it, and enquired of the persons whom he remembered.

His manners were both ceremonious and abrupt, an apparent contradiction, but true. His phrases in conversation were formal, and his action or gesture such as implies elaborate courtesy, but these movements were so rapid and compressed, and his words so sharply spoken as to leave a confused impression of punctilious civility and startling curtness.

In Mr. Bancroft's presence you felt that he did not think lightly of himself. He had the air of one to whom the society of great men is familiar and whose opinions are important because their expression may have influenced the destiny of nations. A man who, besides having had a part in making the history of our own country at an interesting period, has been on familiar terms with Bismarck and his master when they were founding an empire, can scarcely help revealing by his manner that his associations have been

with great events and great men. I do not wish to be understood that Mr. Bancroft's manner displayed vanity or suggested condescension. It seemed to me that there was nothing in it which could give offence on that score to the most morbidly sensitive person. On the contrary, his demeanor put his companion distinctly upon his own level so that it seemed to imply: "We (not I) have been familiar with great personages and are their equals."

These were my impressions of Mr. Bancroft, formed during the acquaintance of two days, and confirmed in one or two short conversations with him since. They are not worth much, I fear. But while I know that many members of our Society knew Mr. Bancroft much longer and more intimately than I did, I remember that there are others and yearly will be more who did not know him personally at all.

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