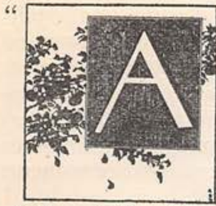
A GLANCE AT DANIEL WEBSTER.



"A FEW flashes of rhetoric, a few happy epigrams, a few labored speeches which now seem cold, lifeless, and commonplace," says Lecky, the historian, "are all that remain of the eloquence of the Pitts, of Fox, of Sheridan, or of Plunket"—and he says this of the Pitts, among the greatest of English orators; of Sheridan, the most brilliant; of Fox, whom Lord Brougham, himself a great orator, pronounced "if not the greatest orator, certainly the most accomplished debater, that ever appeared upon the theatre of affairs in any age of the world." Is Daniel Webster's name now to be added to those on whose speeches the shadow of oblivion has fallen? James Otis, Jr., and Patrick Henry, as orators once famous, now live only in tradition. Clay's and Webster's speeches, it is true, have been preserved; but who now reads Clay's, and how long will Webster's continue to be read?

Webster's talents were undeniably of the first order: but it is said that he lacked genius; that his limitations were serious; that Hamilton was the greater statesman, Marshall the greater jurist, and Clay the unequaled parliamentarian; that he originated no public policy, nor greatly improved an old one; that his ethical sense, neither strong nor acute, was quickened to no beneficent purpose like that of Wilberforce, or of Garrison; that he had no love for the people, nor they for him, and that they will finally forget him.

Doubtless much of this is true. Nevertheless, Daniel Webster is not likely to be forgotten, nor will his words cease to be read. For he wasted no time on party politics, or on small questions, or on issues now dead; but always in the courts, or in the Senate, or before the people, applied his matchless powers to subjects of great moment and popular interest, sure to remain vital, and, like the seasons, ever returning. In these respects he stands alone among the statesmen of his day; and therefore, if they would, the people can never forget him. Nor can statesmen, jurists, or scholars; because, about government, laws, and public policy he said the most authoritative word, save John Marshall's, and said it in a way not easily bettered.

Marshall and Webster were of like principles and purpose, and, working together for the just interpretation of the Constitution in its relations to the States, for forty years they affected the institutions of the country more profoundly and more permanently than any other two men of their day. Marshall's tribunal was supreme; but the people were sometimes restive under its decisions, two of which were openly defied by sovereign States, and were never enforced. In its last analysis the efficient authority of the Supreme Court was public sentiment. Therefore, to make the General government truly national and efficient in all its departments, it was necessary to raise the people to a conception of nationality, and to inspire that conception with patriotic sentiment. This was Webster's great work. In this way he coöperated with Marshall. Webster had the wider field, more varied opportunities, larger audiences, and a farther-reaching voice. To this work he gave his life, and his work was crowned only when the great reply to Hayne became wisdom to Lincoln and valor to Grant. This the people now understand, and they have given to Webster their respect and their admiration, but not yet, I think, a place in their hearts—the true Valhalla. It may be that they have something to forget and something to remember before they learn to regard, as they regard Clay and Lincoln, this man who, though he professed no love for the people whom he served as few men have, loved kindred and friends, and the homes of his ancestors, and the graves of their dead, with a pathetic tenderness which has suffused the eyes of thousands. It may be that he must wait for men's second thoughts, their more charitable judgment, and the next ages.

A famous antislavery orator once publicly thanked God that Daniel Webster was not born in Massachusetts; and this was received with acclaiming shouts by the audience. Nor did they appear to notice any incongruity when the orator proceeded to objurgate Webster, just as though he had been born in Boston, and were a recreant descendant of Thomas Dudley. This is the common mistake—to judge Webster as a Puritan in origin, descent, inherited principles, education, and consequent responsibilities. He was no Puritan, nor did he ever pretend to be one. The Massachusetts Puritans, who came to Boston Bay in 1630, were east of England people. Daniel Webster's ancestors were from the north of England, and, coming six years later, entered New Hampshire by the Piscataqua, and for generations were dispersed along the skirmish-line of civilization, remote from the Puritans of the Bay, and shared neither in their glory nor in their shame.

In Webster was no admixture of nationality, no crossing of plebeian with patrician blood.

He was a genuine son of the soil, though not, like Burns, of a soil alive with a hundred generations of the dead, nor of a soil like that about Boston, every sod of which was quickened with associations touching the hearts and molding the characters of those born on it; but of a soil on which his father's footfall was the first of civilized man ever heard in that silent wilderness. He was a rustic, yet with marks of gentle blood in his shapely hands and feet, his well-proportioned limbs, and his high-bred face of no known type, unlike even his own brother, who was of Grecian form and face. We know that soil and climate affect character; but it is not easy to accept, save as a poetic theory, the "pathetic fallacy" with which Wordsworth imbued his generation and our own, that Nature has conscious relations with

> Her foster-child, her inmate, Man,

and forms his principles and regulates his methods of action agreeably to her own. But Daniel Webster was very like Nature. Like her, he was unethical; like her, he was not revolutionary; and like her, he applied his powers along the lines of normal development.

Of the Puritans neither by birth nor by circumstances, he possessed few of their virtues, and none of their defects; and least of all their indomitable provinciality of thought and conduct. In this he stands quite alone among the public men of his day in New England. His spirit of nationality appeared so early in life that it indicated character rather than education. And the depth of the sentiment appears from this, that though born a Federalist, and from early manhood associated professionally and socially with some of the very able men prominent in the "Essex Junto" and in the Hartford Convention, he neither accepted their principles nor imitated their conduct. At no time was he a Southern man or a Northern man, but to the end of his life a National Federalist after the fashion of Washington.

This also is noticeable, that although Webster was educated at a small college in the backwoods, where rhetoric was in its worst estate, and at a time when our native literature was to the last degree conventional and vapid, he soon shook himself clear of his surroundings, and, without instructor or example, formed a style which for all the varied forms in which he expressed himself—either in the forum, or in the Senate, or in diplomacy, or before the people, or in familiar letters—still remains the best model.

Mr. Webster's fame as an orator is secure, and his services to the country are acknowledged; but in his last days he suffered some obloquy by reason of his speech of the 7th of March, 1850,—a speech which, whatever else may be said of it, was exactly on the line of his life-work for union and nationality, which he took up before he left college, and pursued with assiduity and constancy for more than half a century. Nor do the recorded lives of statesmen give many examples, if one, of a great and beneficent purpose conceived so early in life, pursued so vigorously, or crowned with so great success. He had coadjutors, but in clearness and consistency of purpose he stood alone. He seized every occasion—often made occasion—to unfold his constitutional views, and to commend them to the people.

Both as statesman and as orator Webster owed much to his historical sense. He was not original, constructive, or aggressive; but he had what, as I think, Hamilton did not have, nor Clay, a clear historical perception of the essential character of our English race, always moving on the line of its normal development, rather than by revolution, toward nationality, in which, though monarchy may have been its form, popular government has been its objective purpose. Webster's historical sense gave precision and consistency to his course as a statesman, and to his speech as an orator. Every step he made was a step forward. Circumstances beyond his control, like the change in the tariff policy, and the antislavery movement, with which, as a Nationalist, he probably had little sympathy, forced him into positions which he would not have chosen. But no statesman ever had fewer occasions for that immunity which the people so often and so readily accorded to Jefferson, to Clay, to Jackson, and to Abraham Lincoln. They made many mistakes, including Webster's, and were forgiven; Webster made one, and was lost—for a time.

Webster's historical sense appears in his orations. In what collection like his own can be found so large a body of thought on various subjects, covering forty years of public life, so consistent, so evenly and so constantly working to one great purpose, expressed with equal cogency, propriety, and eloquence? Certainly, neither in Fox's, nor in Burke's, nor in any other known to me. Goldwin Smith has said that "in political oratory it would be hard to find anything superior to the reply to Hayne; in forensic oratory it would be hard to find anything superior to his speech on the murder of White; among show speeches it would be hard to find anything superior to the Plymouth oration." This Plymouth oration, the earliest and best of Webster's, in which he formed and carried to its highest development a new kind of popular oratory, illustrates the historic sense of which I have spoken. After all that has been written, it remains by far the clearest and most precise view of those causes which, beginning with the Reformation, and acting on the Eng-

lish people, in the fullness of time led to the colonization of America, and to the setting up here of those institutions which best exemplify the sterling qualities of our English race. The key-note of this address sounds through all his speeches. He struck it loudly, and the nation heard; he struck it truly, and it dominates all later speech.

With no American orator save Hamilton — and with him only at the bar, or in the affairs of State — need Webster be compared. Hamilton's speeches have not been preserved, and his fame as an orator rests mainly upon tradition. To Burke's genius for discursive speculation, or to his copiousness of felicitous, light-diffusing phrase, Webster made no pretension, nor, on the other hand, did he ever lose sight of his purpose in prolix or irrelevant generalities, or imperil his cause by lack of measure, judgment, or self-control. He was the better orator. He gained his causes. He seldom attempted Burke's highest flights, but when he did, he came safely down. Webster's oratory was symmetrical and harmonious, working evenly, by just degrees, and inevitably, to his one constant purpose of convincing and persuading those who heard him. Loyal to his art, he was never seduced by desire of popular applause, or by a wish to please the schools.

Lord Chatham is accounted the most consummate of English orators. In my youth I greatly admired that passage in his speech on the address to the king in 1777, in which, referring to Lord Suffolk, who had defended the employment of the Indians in the war against the colonies, he exclaimed, "From the tapestry that adorns these walls, the immortal ancestor of this noble lord frowns with indignation at the disgrace of his country." It is a very striking passage; but I once heard Webster say grander words. It was on the 17th of June, 1843, when I was one of that vast throng, gathered at Bunker Hill, which saw Webster raise his outstretched arm up to the newly completed monument, and heard him say: "It is not from my lips — it could not be from any human lips — that that stream of eloquence is this day to flow, most competent to move and excite this vast multitude around me. *The powerful speaker stands motionless before us.*" I felt the thrill which ran through that vast audience, and I saw their uplifted eyes and blanched cheeks, and joined in that responsive shout which told, as no words could tell, that we had heard one of the most perfect passages in all oratory. These sentences fairly contrast these great orators. Webster could never have laid himself open to Lord Suffolk's crushing reply, that Chatham rashly condemned a policy inaugurated by himself only a few years before. Nor could Lecky have said of Webster, as he has said of Chatham, that he was often florid and meretricious, theatrical and affected, far from pure in taste, and, indeed, too much of a mountebank. But Chatham's eccentricities were those of genius. Burke had them, and Sheridan had them. If Webster lacked genius, he was at least free from its eccentricities. He was perfectly sane in his oratory, and, it may be, the greatest perfectly sane orator who ever spoke English.

Webster could also be dull — in his later years, very dull. Those who heard him in his prime are quite angry when one doubts whether he ever could have been as popular an orator as Everett or Choate or Phillips. Few now live who heard him in those early days, when he was at his best. I, who heard him often between 1840 and 1850, never heard him at his best but once, and then only for a few minutes. The circumstances were these:

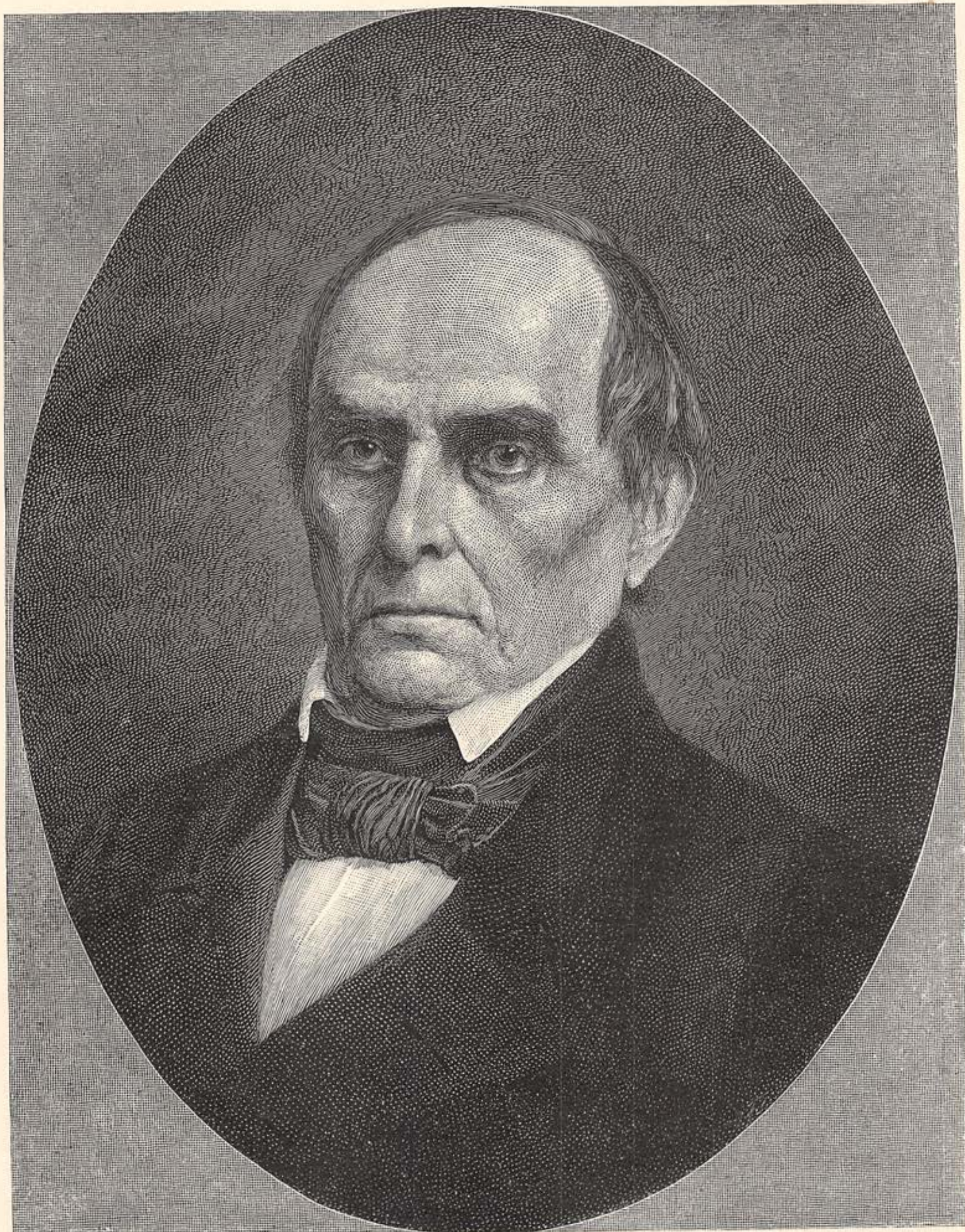
At the festival of the Sons of New Hampshire, gathered in the hall of the Fitchburg Railroad in 1849, Mr. Webster presided with admirable grace, and spoke of his native State as her sons would like to hear her spoken of. His speech, though interesting, was not particularly striking until, passing from our own affairs to those of Hungary, then in her struggle for liberty, he said: "I see that the Emperor of Russia demands of Turkey that the noble Kossuth and his companions shall be given up to be dealt with at his pleasure. And I see that this demand is made in derision of the established laws of nations. Gentlemen, there is something on earth greater than arbitrary or despotic power. The lightning has its power, and the whirlwind has its power, and the earthquake has its power; but there is something among men more capable of shaking despotic power than the lightning, the whirlwind, or the earthquake, and that is the excited and aroused indignation of the whole civilized world."

Before we were aware of what was coming his majestic form began to tower, and his eyes to kindle, and his voice soon caught the key-note of the vast building, till in an illusion of the senses the lightning flashed, and the whirlwind shook the place where we were sitting, and the firm foundation rocked as with an earthquake. But it was an illusion of the sort produced only by famous orators like those

> Whose resistless eloquence . . . .
> Shook the arsenal, and fulmined over Greece.

I once saw Mr. Webster when he was forty and I was eleven. The best likeness of him at that time, it seems to me, is the bust by Powers. I saw him often between 1840 and 1850, and the best likeness of him at that time, I should say, is the one now printed for the first time in this magazine.

Mellen Chamberlain.



ENGRAVED BY T. JOHNSON. FROM A DAGUERREOTYPE BY BRADY, WASHINGTON.

Danl Webster