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THE
AMERICAN
COMMON-PLACE BOOK
OF
PROSE,
A COLLECTION OF
ELOQUENT AND INTERESTING EXTRACTS
FROM THE WRITINGS OF
AMERICAN AUTHORS.

BY G. B. CHEEVER.

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62

PREFACE.

Books of common-place are the amusements of literature. It is pleasant to have at one's side a well-selected volume, to which he may turn for mental recreation, when the fatigue of preceding exertion has rendered him unequal to intellectual effort. It is pleasant, also, to have before us the eloquent passages of our favourite authors, so that we may occasionally awake, and prolong the delightful sensations with which we at first perused them. But the mere power of conferring amusement is not that, which gives to publications of this sort their highest value. To all those, whose constant occupation precludes the possibility of spending many leisure hours in the acquisition of literary taste and knowledge, they may be rendered eminently useful.

The present volume is selected entirely from American authors, and contains specimens of American literature from its earliest period to the present day. It is hoped that it may not be found inferior in excellence or interest to any of those compilations which have hitherto embraced only the *morceaux delicieux* of English genius.

When we say this, it is without any feeling of national vanity or rivalry. Our wish is merely to furnish a volume which shall correspond in design and execution to those which are now so popular abroad, and

which contribute so extensively to the improvement of general and literary taste, by bringing the happier efforts of higher minds within the reach of all classes of society.

The volume now offered to the public may also, we trust, prove serviceable to the interests of education. The selection contained in the following pages is such it is hoped, as will exert a favourable influence on the minds of youth, by the predominating intellectual and literary character of the pieces. The sentiments imbibed from the perusal of this compilation will be such as our most eminent writers have inculcated; and the spirit infused by it will be that vivid admiration of nature and of human excellence, which forms a characteristic trait in American writings.

There is a period, too, in education, in which an enlightened instructor will not omit a candid comparison of our native literature with the contemporary productions of English writers,—not for the sake of indulging national prejudice of any kind, but of enlarging the intelligence, and disciplining the taste, of the rising minds, which, in their subsequent advancement, are to influence the literary estimation of their country. As a reading book for the higher classes in seminaries for both sexes, the Common-place Book will be found, it is thought, well adapted to a department of education in which it is difficult to find a volume of suitable character, and especially when that excellent volume the First Class Book, or any similar work, has been used in the previous stages of instruction.

Boston 1828.

EDITOR.

TABLE OF CONTENTS.

	Page.
Goodness of the Deity displayed in the Beauty of Creation. <i>Dwight.</i>	9
Night Season favourable to Contemplation and Study. . . . <i>Dennis.</i>	10
Colloquial Powers of Dr. Franklin. <i>Wirt.</i>	12
An Apparition. <i>Club-Room.</i>	14
Rural Occupations favourable to the Sentiments of Devotion.	
<i>Buckminster.</i>	19
Reciprocal Influence of Morals and Literature. <i>Frisbie.</i>	21
Evening Scenes on the St. Lawrence. <i>Silliman.</i>	23
Franklin's first Entrance into Philadelphia. <i>Franklin.</i>	23
Passage of the Potomac through the Blue Ridge. <i>Jefferson.</i>	25
Moral and intellectual Efficacy of the Sacred Scriptures. <i>Wayland.</i>	26
Character of Washington. <i>Ames.</i>	29
Labours of periodical Composition. <i>Idle Man.</i>	33
Industry necessary to the Attainment of Eloquence. <i>Ware.</i>	34
Ingratitude towards the Deity. <i>Appleton.</i>	36
Resistance to Oppression. <i>J. Quincy, Jun.</i>	37
Lafayette in the French Revolution. <i>Ticknor.</i>	38
Poeta nascitur, Orator fit. <i>Monthly Anthology.</i>	42
Intellectual Qualities of Milton. <i>Channing.</i>	43
National Recollections the Foundation of national Character.	
<i>E. Everett.</i>	44
Extract from the Legend of Sleepy Hollow. <i>Irving.</i>	46
Reflections on the Settlement of New England. <i>Webster.</i>	51
Forest Scenery. <i>Paulding.</i>	53
Influence of Christianity in elevating the female Character.	
<i>J. G. Carter.</i>	55
Necessity of a pure national Morality. <i>Beecher.</i>	57
Value of religious Faith. <i>Buckminster.</i>	59
Death of General Washington. <i>Marshall.</i>	64
The Lessons of Death. <i>Norton.</i>	66
Character of Chief Justice Marshall. <i>Wirt.</i>	68
Moral Sublimity illustrated. <i>Wayland.</i>	71
Eloquent Speech of Logan, Chief of the Mingoos. <i>Jefferson.</i>	74
Fox, Burke, and Pitt. <i>A. H. Everett.</i>	75
Surprise and Destruction of the Pequod Indians. <i>Miss Sedgwick.</i>	81
Character of Fisher Ames. <i>Kirkland.</i>	88
Reflections on the Death of Adams and Jefferson. <i>Sergeant.</i>	94
Indolence. <i>Dennis.</i>	97
Escape of Harvey Birch and Captain Wharton. <i>Cooper.</i>	99
Scenery in the Notch of the White Mountains. <i>Dwight.</i>	107
Exalted Character of Poetry. <i>Channing.</i>	111
Eloquent Appeal in Favour of the Greeks. <i>North American Review.</i>	115
Death of J. Quincy, Jun. <i>J. Quincy.</i>	123
Danger of Delay in Religion. <i>Buckminster.</i>	124
Scenes in Philadelphia during the Provalence of the Yellow Fever, in 1793. <i>C. B. Brown.</i>	128

not have us forget, but cherish, our affections for the dead ; for it makes known to us, that these affections shall be immortal. It gradually takes away the bitterness of our recollections, and changes them into glorious hopes ; for it teaches us to regard the friend, who is with us no longer, not as one whom we have lost on earth, but as one whom we shall meet, as an angel, in heaven.

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Character of Chief Justice Marshall.—WIRT.

THE chief justice of the United States is in his person tall, meager, emaciated ; his muscles relaxed, and his joints so loosely connected, as not only to disqualify him, apparently, for any vigorous exertions of body, but to destroy every thing like elegance and harmony in his air and movements. Indeed, in his whole appearance and demeanour,—dress, attitudes, and gesture—sitting, standing, or walking,—he is as far removed from the idolized graces of Lord Chesterfield, as any other gentleman on earth. To continue the portrait : his head and face are small in proportion to his height ; his complexion swarthy ; the muscles of his face, being relaxed, give him the appearance of a man of fifty years of age, nor can he be much younger. His countenance has a faithful expression of great good-humour and hilarity ; while his black eyes—that unerring index—possess an irradiating spirit, which proclaims the imperial powers of the mind that sits enthroned within.

This extraordinary man, without the aid of fancy, without the advantages of person, voice, attitude, gesture, or any of the ornaments of an orator, deserves to be considered as one of the most eloquent men in the world ; if eloquence may be said to consist in the power of seizing the attention with irresistible force, and never permitting it to elude the grasp until the hearer has received the conviction which the speaker intends.

As to his person, it has already been described. His voice is dry and hard ; his attitude, in his most effective orations, was often extremely awkward, as it was not unusual for him to stand with his left foot in advance ; while all his

gesture proceeded from his right arm, and consisted merely in a vehement, perpendicular swing of it, from about the elevation of his head to the bar, behind which he was accustomed to stand.

As to Fancy, if she hold a seat in his mind at all, which I very much doubt, his gigantic Genius tramples with disdain on all her flower-decked plats and blooming parterres. How, then, you will ask, with a look of incredulous curiosity,—how is it possible that such a man can hold the attention of an audience enchained through a speech of even ordinary length? I will tell you.

He possesses one original, and almost supernatural faculty,—the faculty of developing a subject by a single glance of his mind, and detecting at once the very point on which every controversy depends. No matter what the question though ten times more knotty than “the gnarled oak,” the lightning of heaven is not more rapid nor more resistless than his astonishing penetration. Nor does the exercise of it seem to cost him an effort. On the contrary, it is as easy as vision. I am persuaded that his eyes do not fly over a landscape, and take in its various objects with more promptitude and facility, than his mind embraces and analyzes the most complex subject.

Possessing while at the bar this intellectual elevation, which enabled him to look down and comprehend the whole ground at once, he determined, immediately, and without difficulty, on which side the question might be most advantageously approached and assailed. In a bad cause, his art consisted in laying his premises so remotely from the point directly in debate, or else in terms so general and specious, that the hearer, seeing no consequence which could be drawn from them, was just as willing to admit them as not; but, his premises once admitted, the demonstration, however distant, followed as certainly, as cogently, and as inevitably, as any demonstration of Euclid.

All his eloquence consists in the apparently deep self-conviction and emphatic earnestness of his manner; the correspondent simplicity and energy of his style; the close and logical connexion of his thoughts; and the easy gradations by which he opens his lights on the attentive minds of his hearers.

The audience are never permitted to pause for a moment. There is no stopping to weave garlands of flowers to be hung in festoons around a favourite argument. On the contrary, every sentence is progressive; every idea sheds new light on the subject; the listener is kept perpetually in that sweetly pleasurable vibration, with which the mind of man always receives new truths; the dawn advances in easy but unremitting pace; the subject opens gradually on the view; until, rising in high relief in all its native colours and proportions, the argument is consummated by the conviction of the delighted hearer.

His political adversaries allege that he is a mere lawyer; that his mind has been so long trammelled by judicial precedent, so long habituated to the quart and tierce of forensic digladiation, (as Dr. Johnson would probably have called it,) as to be unequal to the discussion of a great question of state. Mr. Curran, in his defence of Rowan, seems to have sanctioned the probability of such an effect from such a cause, when he complains of his own mind as having been narrowed and circumscribed by a strict and technical adherence to established forms; but, in the next breath, an astonishing burst of the grandest thought, and a power of comprehension, to which there seems to be no earthly limit, proves that his complaint, as it relates to himself, is entirely without foundation.

Indeed, if the objection to the chief justice mean any thing more than that he has not had the same illumination and exercise in matters of state as if he had devoted his life to them, I am unwilling to admit it. The force of a cannon is the same, whether pointed at a rampart or a man of war, although practice may have made the engineer more expert in one case than in the other. So it is clear that practice may give a man a greater command over one class of subjects than another; but the inherent energy of his mind remains the same whithersoever it may be directed. From this impression, I have never seen any cause to wonder at what is called a universal genius: it proves only that the man has applied a powerful mind to a great variety of subjects, and pays a compliment rather to his superior industry than his superior intellect. I am very certain that the gentleman of whom we are speaking

possesses the acumen which might constitute him a universal genius, according to the usual acceptation of that phrase. But if he be the truant, which his warmest friends represent him to be, there is very little probability that he will ever reach this distinction.

Moral Sublimity illustrated.—WAYLAND.

PHILOSOPHERS have speculated much concerning a process of sensation, which has commonly been denominated the emotion of sublimity. Aware that, like any other simple feeling, it must be incapable of definition, they have seldom attempted to define it; but, content with remarking the occasions on which it is excited, have told us that it arises in general from the contemplation of whatever is vast in nature, splendid in intellect, or lofty in morals: or, to express the same idea somewhat varied, in the language of a critic of antiquity, "That alone is truly sublime, of which the conception is vast, the effect irresistible, and the remembrance scarcely, if ever, to be erased."

But, although philosophers alone have written about this emotion, they are far from being the only men who have felt it. The untutored peasant, when he has seen the autumnal tempest collecting between the hills, and, as it advanced, enveloping in misty obscurity village and hamlet, forest and meadow, has tasted the sublime in all its reality; and, whilst the thunder has rolled and the lightning flashed around him, has exulted in the view of Nature moving forth in her majesty. The untaught sailor-boy, listlessly hearkening to the idle ripple of the moonlight wave, when on a sudden he has thought upon the unfathomable abyss beneath him, and the wide waste of waters around him, and the infinite expanse above him, has enjoyed to the full the emotion of sublimity, whilst his inmost soul has trembled at the vastness of its own conceptions. But why need I multiply illustrations from nature? Who does not recollect the emotion he has felt while surveying aught, in the material world, of terror or of vastness: