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THOMAS RODERICK DEW

An Address delivered April 3, 1939, at the Memorial Service for the Thirteenth President of the College of William and Mary in Virginia, who died in Paris, France, August 6, 1846

BY JOHN STEWART BRYAN

President of the College of William and Mary in Virginia

WILLIAMSBURG, VIRGINIA

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An Address delivered April 3, 1939, at the Memorial Service for the Thirteenth President of the College of William and Mary in Virginia, who died in Paris, France, August 6, 1846.¹

¹ The body of President Dew was recently re-interred in the Crypt of the Chapel in the Wren Building.

General Waller, Colonel Kemper, members of the Board of Visitors of the College of William and Mary, Senior Members of the Faculty, Representatives of the Student Body, Members of the Family of President Dew, distinguished Guests.

We are gathered here to pay a grateful tribute to Thomas Roderick Dew. Though this solemn service brings us together, the real cause of our meeting is not the death but the life of him whom we honor; for it is not of the dreadful finality of death that President Dew's name and memory speak, but of life piled on life.

This will to offer a safe retreat and sacred resting place within the walls of the College Chapel has been thought of in another instance. On November 6, 1860, the Faculty, fearing that his grave might fall into disrepair, or into the hands of unsympathetic owners, offered through Hugh Blair Grigsby to move the body of John Randolph of Roanoke so that it might "repose near those of his ancestors in the Chapel of the College, in which those ancestors, as well as himself, were educated." This offer was not accepted.

Even at that date the body of Thomas Roderick Dew had lain for fourteen years in Montmartre cemetery in Paris, and it remained for the generous impulse of one of his kinswomen to make possible the ceremonies we hold today.

The date of the birth of President Dew, December 5, 1802, has already become a distinctive memorial (*dies honorabilis*) in the long annals of the College of William and Mary, for that was the beginning of Phi Beta Kappa, twenty-six years before.

In the year when President Dew was born, Archibald Stuart, William Short and John Marshall, sons and early members of Phi Beta Kappa, were still alive, and though Alpha Chapter was temporarily suspended, its fame and name were brilliantly manifested in the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court.

The family from which Thomas Roderick Dew sprang originally came from Maryland, where Thomas Dew, father of President Dew, was born May 28, 1763; he died in King and Queen County, Virginia, April 23, 1849. When a young man he moved to Virginia, and by successful farming and financial operations, he came to own the great plantation of Dewsville.

Before the age of seventeen Thomas Dew entered the Revolutionary War; continuing his military record, he was made captain in the War of 1812.

In June, 1793, Thomas Dew, of Dewsville, married Lucy E. Gatewood, daughter of Cheney Gatewood and Elizabeth Leamon.

They had six sons to reach maturity, and all of them came to William and Mary. They were:

William Dew, entered 1814?,

Thomas R. Dew, entered 1818,

Philip Dew, entered 1827

John Wesley Dew, entered 1831,

Benjamin Franklin Dew, entered 1836,

Luther Calvin Dew, entered 1840.

The eldest son, William, attended William and Mary and graduated with distinction from the University of Pennsylvania as a physician.

The second son, Thomas Roderick Dew, whose name and memory we venerate today, was born December 5, 1802, at Dewsville. At the time of his birth George Washington, the first citizen of the United States to be Chancellor of this College, had been dead not quite three years; Thomas Jefferson, an alumnus of William and Mary, was in his second year as President of the United States; James Monroe, another alumnus, only a few months before had been succeeded as Governor of Virginia by John Page, and the great era of the Virginia rule, which remained unbroken until 1825, was in full swing. In influence, population and territorial expansion Virginia, in 1802, far exceeded any other state in the Union. The census of 1800 shows that 880,000 people were in this Commonwealth—278,000 more than in Pennsylvania, and 300,000 more than in New York state.

But it required no gifts of prophecy to foretell what the moving finger would soon write upon the walls of history. In 1800, Virginia had twenty times as many people as Ohio; in 1840, Ohio had a million and a half to Virginia's million and a quarter. In 1790 the population of Virginia had been more than twice that of New York, and in 1840 New York's population was twice that of Virginia.

No less disturbing was the trend in manufactures, that new and vastly expanding field for the creation of wealth. In 1840, for example, the annual products of industry for Virginia and Massachusetts were practically the same. Each state produced a total of about seventy-five million dollars. But Virginia produced fifty-nine millions of agriculture and only eight millions of manufactures, while Massachusetts produced forty-five millions of manufactures and only sixteen millions of agricultural products.

In education, however, the Old Dominion still held her own, and Virginia had thirteen colleges and universities, with a total enrollment of ten hundred and ninety-seven students, while Massachusetts and Connecticut had four each with an enrollment of seven hundred and sixty-nine and eight hundred and thirty-two students, respectively.

Thus, as a resident of King and Queen County, and as a younger brother of William Dew, it was natural for Thomas Roderick Dew to seek at William and Mary an opportunity for instruction and development. To this College he came, most probably in 1818, and graduated with the A. B. degree in 1820. The Faculty Minutes record that he had been found "very diligent, correct and attentive, and made the most flattering improvement."

He took his M. A. in 1824, after two years of travel in Europe, with profound advantage to himself.

October 16, 1826, he was appointed to one of the six chairs in the College; as professor of Political Law, his assignment included lectures on natural and national law, political economy, metaphysics, government and history. The textbook on natural and national law was to be Vattel, with reference to Rutherford's Institutes; in political economy, Smith's Wealth of Nations; in metaphysics, Browne abridged; in government, Locke on Government and Rousseau's Social Contract, a strange choice for Virginia, just three decades after the French Revolution.

This was strenuous work for the young professor, but he was vigorous, indefatigable and enthusiastic, and, as he said a little later to the Board of Visitors: "My profession affords me my sole occupation, and whether the duties attached to it be great or light, and the emoluments considerable or

inconsiderable, still 'tis my only profession, and I can with truth say under all circumstances I would much prefer to have my time fully occupied," and occupied he was.

William Boulware records in a letter to Henry A. Washington: "Mr. Dew considered this position preferable to a place in the Cabinet." And so, with characteristic vigor the novice professor attacked his work. The prospect which confronted him, however, was far from engaging. Only forty-one students were enrolled at William and Mary in 1820, and that number had shrunk to thirty-one in 1824. In 1827-1828 fifty-four were enrolled; while at the University of Virginia for the same year there were only one hundred and twenty-eight students. But some malevolent spirit seemed to be working at William and Mary, for in 1832-33 the enrollment was twenty-three. The enrollment dropped to eighteen, almost the vanishing point, the following year, and we find Professor Dew writing to William Barton Rogers, who had been his classmate in 1820, and who had been appointed professor of natural philosophy at William and Mary in 1828:

"I have reason to believe more strongly than ever, however, that if next year is a failure like the present, the Visitors will consent to a removal of the College [to Richmond]. Be therefore of good cheer, and continue present sacrifice for future fame."

And sure enough next year things were better, for Professor Dew writes later to his friend Rogers, then a professor at the University of Virginia:

"Our old College has opened under better auspices [that year it had forty-eight students] than I had anticipated; the number of matriculates this morning was thirty-nine, and I believe there are several more in town to subscribe. ... I now really think that if we had you with us the College would have been thoroughly resuscitated, for the present at least. ... I suppose by this time you are fairly under way at the University. Have you trouble in governing your students?"

This question came from the depths of Professor Dew's heart, for William and Mary had its troubles too with students who overslept after possum hunting, or who delighted too long or too openly in the worship of Bacchus, or even those who followed the Code Duello, though it led out of college. But at least William and Mary in this particular fared better than the University of Virginia.

With the exception of William Small, "whose guidance," said Jefferson, "fixed the destinies of my life," William Barton Rogers was the most fascinating and versatile lecturer that ever adorned this College.

However, better days were ahead, for in 1836 the Visitors, upon the resignation of President Adam Empie, elected Professor Dew, a young man of thirty-four, as President of the College. This choice was not without foundation upon the past record of Professor Dew. Not only had his lectures attracted the support of the student body, a very important consideration, but his book on the restrictive system, that is on tariff legislation, published in 1829, which John C. Calhoun called "the ablest political work in America" (Tyler's Quarterly, Vol. XX, page 145), gave evidence of his force and creative ability. In it were marshalled convincing arguments for the agricultural side of the acrimonious controversy that was then raging between protectionism and free trade.

The subject of political economy was another priority of this College, for it was probably taught at William and Mary as early as 1798, Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* being the text. "It is certain," says Dr. Broadus Mitchell, "that in 1801 this College gave the earliest instruction on this subject as a science."

Professor Dew was in fact to the College of William and Mary what Professor Cooper was to the College of South Carolina— a teacher whose doctrines entered into the political life of the Southern people.

It was not the tariff, however, that called on Professor Dew for his greatest effort, but slavery. There were none so blind as not to see how rapidly and how menacingly the "irrepressible conflict", was growing in this land. Thomas R. Dew saw it too, and he did not blink its implications. To his students he said:

"You are slave-holders and the sons of slave-holders. You did not create this deplorable condition, and certainly you cannot be called upon to assume its liquidation at your own expense."

Professor Dew did not speak for the whole state. A great body of Virginians were deeply opposed to Slavery, of whom Thomas Jefferson and St. George Tucker—the successor of George Wythe as law professor at William and Mary—were brilliant examples. Jefferson said in 1820:

"It is written in the book of Fate that these people are to be free, nor is it less true that the two races equally free cannot live in the same government. "

Two unforeseen and unforeseeable forces had entered into the conflict. Those factors were the Southampton Insurrection in Virginia, in 1831, led by Nat Turner, and the venomous Abolitionist attacks made by the North on Southern slave-holders. Under the impact of murder by the Negroes, and the murderous misrepresentation by the Abolitionists, wisdom and reasonableness were put to flight. Professor Dew wrote a long and well- reasoned treatise in 1832 on the debates in the Virginia Legislature on Slavery in 1831-32. He asserted that under the known laws of population it would be impossible to people what he called the "luxuriant lands of the West" with the White race.

In 1832 he said: "We now have 13,000,000 population. By 1850 we will have 50,000,000." In 1850 the actual number was 50,157,000 or 99.7 percent correct. And under the increase of the Negroes he foresaw "white progeny destined to a galling indigence." He held that the Negroes, freed of White direction, would return inevitably to barbarism and poverty, and he brushed aside as utterly impossible the purchase of all the slaves in America by the national Government as something that would entail an intolerable burden of debt; that was based upon his estimate of two million slaves who, at two hundred dollars apiece, would have entailed a total outlay of four hundred million dollars.

In less than thirty years this country was embarked on a war that cost the North alone four billion dollars, and the South three billion dollars, a total of seventeen and one-half times the amount Dew thought impossible, and in addition left the South, seventy-four years after the war, "Economic Problem No. 1 of the Union."

His other great work was "A Digest of the Laws, Customs, Manners and Institutions of the Ancient and Modern Nations." Of this volume Herbert B. Adams said:

"No unprejudiced student can examine this work without coming to the conviction that the author knew precisely what he was about and lectured in such a way that students could catch his points. For the ground which it professes to cover, this digest embodies a remarkable collection of notes for lectures and dictations. It would be very difficult to match them anywhere in this country in the period from 1827 to 1846."

This volume was reprinted in 1893, more than fifty years after the writing.

Of his plan for William and Mary, President Dew said, in his inaugural address:

"Our plan embraces a course of general study, which may be pursued to great advantage by all having the time and means, no matter what may be their professions in after life. Besides this course of general study, it embraces the subject of law, and aims at accomplishing the student in one of the learned professions. Besides the degree in the classical school, there are three others of a high order given in our institution; these are the degrees of A. B., B. L., and A. M."

Then President Dew gives this noble and complete statement of what it means to be a Liberal Arts College. Said he:

"From these studies a utility springs both from the enlargement of the understanding by the salutary exercise which they afford to it, and from the light which they respectively cast on each other."

Then he added:

"When I reflect upon the long line of efficient and distinguished men who have preceded me in this office, I cannot but feel a weight of responsibility which excites in me a deep and painful solicitude."

His work, which brought about a rebirth of the College, shows how his solicitude was translated into service.

The first year of his presidency the number of students increased from sixty-nine to one hundred and thirteen, and three years later, in 1839-40, it reached one hundred and forty. Then a decline set in, and by the time President Dew started in 1846 on his ill-fated trip to Paris the enrollment was sixty-eight, within one of what it had been when he assumed office.

It may be recalled that this was the period of depression following the terrible panic of 1837. We should also remember the new force that had broken in the educational field; that force was the rise of the denominational colleges just at this time, which drew on the student supply available for the established colleges.

These new colleges were founded:

Randolph-Macon.....1830
Richmond College.....1832
Emory and Henry.....1836
Virginia Military Institute.....1839

This attraction to other schools undoubtedly affected William and Mary, as it did the University of Virginia.

An old account book of President Dew's shows with what intense application he gave himself to the work of being president. Nothing seems to have been too high or too small for his care and attention. He paid three women 32.25 for scrubbing two days; he bought a bucket for the backyard; he bought lime, hoop poles, books, articles for the laboratories, and one item says, "50 cents for digging Joe's grave."

Even before he was president the growth of the classes he taught gave continuing proof of the power and attractiveness of his lectures. In 1839-40, for example, the Senior Political Class paid fees of \$760, and the Junior Moral Philosophy Class paid \$1430.

Yet when we consider the revival he wrought in the strength of William and Mary, the influence he exerted on dominant political issues in the South, and the impress he left upon students under his guidance, we see that he was correct in the valuation that he placed upon a position at William and Mary, and that the world judges wisely in the irreplaceable importance it attaches to great teachers.

Some of those he taught were John B. Cary, soldier and teacher; Dr. William Alexander Thorn, soldier and surgeon; William Wood Crump, jurist and member of the Board of Visitors of William and Mary College, Assistant Secretary of the Treasury for the Confederacy; Beverley Browne Douglas, soldier and congressman; William Booth Taliaferro, major-general, Confederate Army, lawyer, prominent in politics and an educator; Benjamin Blake Minor, lawyer, editor Southern Literary Messenger, educator, revivor of the Virginia Historical Society; Duncan Kirkland McRae, brilliant lawyer and editor.

Time fails to sketch the lives and services of these students whose names recall innumerable evidences of high service to this Commonwealth—at the bar, in the council chamber, in science and in commerce, in peace and in war. But we may call in part the roll of representative Virginia families whose sons came to William and Mary under Dew's presidency and took his courses: Peachy, Gait, Bland, Coke, Claiborne, Armistead, Scott, Waller, Page, Coleman, Carrington, Gresham, Moncure, Cocke, Ruffin, Randolph, Poindexter, Harrison, Tyler, Seawell, Nottingham, Robertson, Pollard, Meade, Gwathmey, Mason, Barziza, Blow, Boisseau, Christian, Pendleton, Neblett, Mayo, Gatewood, Lewis, Selden, Preston, Stith, Booker, Brodnax, Tazewell, Warren, Spratley, Eppes, Cauthorne, Berkeley, Hughes, Custis.

Once again it is demonstrated that the controlling factors in the choice of a college are the questions, with whom will the student be associated, and, by whom will he be taught?

It has been a habit to decry Baccalaureate addresses and to belittle the faith which America professed with such zeal and courage in the Jacksonian era, and yet today we feel that a solution of many of our problems would be found if we recognized and applied the faith of Thomas Roderick Dew in his Baccalaureate address of July 4, 1837. He saw no easy way to wealth; on the contrary he said:

"The great men of the world are the real working men, and everywhere talent and learning command the admiration and respect of mankind. "

Turning to America, he said:

"Never forget the interest of your country. Never forget that we have here tried—upon a grander and fairer scale than has ever before been exhibited to the world—the great experiment of self-government. Remember that sovereignty pervades our Empire like the air we breathe; it descends to the farthest and it binds the most distant together. When the people are sovereign all must depend on their intelligence and virtue."

Then he addressed the students with these words:

"Never yield to the greedy appetite for present popularity, which may too often tempt the weak aspirant to sacrifice that which will dim forever and irretrievably the lustre of his name."

The last official reference to him in the Minutes of the College is a statement on June 11, 1846, as follows:

"The President gave notice that he should be absent from College during the remainder of the course."

This absence was caused by the fact that President Dew purposed a trip to Europe with his wife, who had been Miss Natilia Hay, of Clarke County, Virginia.

President Dew died in Paris on the day after his arrival, probably of pneumonia, August 6, 1846, and his body was interred in Montmartre cemetery.

The news of his death caused widespread expressions of sorrow not only in Virginia, but throughout the South, where his reputation and leadership were recognized and followed.

The Richmond Enquirer of September 17th reprinted from The Washington Union a tribute to President Dew which deplored the fact that his body should be left in foreign soil, and adds:

"William and Mary College, which has contributed so much to establish the political and literary character of Virginia, and to educate so many distinguished men, sustains a heavy loss in his death. The institution is in a prosperous condition and the society of Williamsburg is of a most attractive character."

So, in the words of Bishop Meade, "by tact at management, great zeal and unwearied assiduity," President Dew raised the College "to as great prosperity as perhaps had ever been its lot at any time since its first establishment."

We see here once more that life in its fulness is not an inheritance, but an adventure. It was the receptive mind, the springing generosity, which made the students of William and Mary fit subjects for fit instruction. To be really educated is to be led out of one's morasses of lethargy and self-indulgence to the shining heights of limitless energy and consecrated purpose, and this requires not only a leader, but a follower. President Dew gave nobly. His generous outpourings of energy and hope were prodigal in their munificence.

The miasma still rose from exhausted tobacco lands, and the unscreened mosquito plied his deadly and malarious trade; but a miracle was impending. I sometimes wonder why we never seem to learn that a miracle is essentially nothing but an unbelievable outworking of the spiritual forces that forever lie around us. We gape and crane our necks and mumble, without seeing that all progress has been a new attack by an unconquerable spirit upon a plastic world.

Thomas R. Dew was, above and before all, exactly that type of force; he was unconquerable, and whether through him or beyond him, William and Mary, as its history abundantly shows, was endowed with indestructibility.

To him to be a professor was to be one who speaks out from the depths of his own being, and not the utterer of polished platitudes. As he saw it, the province of the professor is not solely to comment oracularly on what happened in the past, but, knowing the past in its fulness, to proclaim prophetically how man may control the future. The opportunity to follow this faith and to manifest this fortitude was not lacking. He met the challenge of his age, and in so doing achieved ageless fame; for his name is indissolubly bound up with the immortality of this College.

The choir in his beloved Chapel will sing Mendelssohn's "Oh Rest in the Lord. Wait Patiently on Him, and He Will Give Thee Thy Heart's Desire". How beautifully and richly that promise is fulfilled today.

The College to which he gave his every energy is rebuilt, restored, revived. The social sciences which he illumined and loved have become an immense field for research and application. The promise they hold out for social betterment is as hopeful now as it was novel in his day.

The railroad and the motor car have removed the burden caused by lack of transportation, the screen and drainage have exterminated malaria, and the student body now is twentyfold what it was in 1846.

Here in a Chapel thrice burned and now restored in all its early beauty, and set forever beyond the power of fire, he has come home, and not as a stranger. The unbroken stream of the College life flows on; faculties and student bodies change in their constituent membership, but the faculty as such goes on, and the faculty is here today to pay reverence to the great President; here is represented His Excellency, James H. Price, 145th Governor of this Commonwealth; leaders of the student body are here, senior members of the faculty, and this large and impressive assemblage of the family of Thomas Roderick Dew, a family bound together by ties of blood and the great tradition of culture and service, gathered now from far and near in his honor.

We may feel, and I think, properly, that his desires for William and Mary have been in large part fulfilled. But there can be no limit to the scope of man's knowledge, man's progress, and man's mastery. This age can set no bounds to the achievement and grasp of the oncoming years, and we would miss the deep significance of these services were we to see in them only the return of the body of President Dew to this College. True it is, here he lies where he longed to be; after a separation of ninety-three years he sleeps at last in this congenial soil, in which for two centuries his family has been rooted. Life is not sleep, but waking, and to comprehend the purpose and heart's desire of any great soul, must we not look beyond the earthly resting place to citizenship and service in that Eternal City which has no need of the sun, neither of the moon to shine, for the glory of God doth lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof?