

Marx Hardy Machiavelli Joyce Austen
Defoe Abbot Melville Montaigne Cooper Emerson Hugo
Stoker Wilde Christie Maupassant Haggard Chesterton Molière Eliot Grimm
Garnett Engels Byron Schiller
Goethe Hawthorne Smith Kafka
Cotton Dostoyevsky Hall
Baum Henry Kipling Doyle Willis
Leslie Dumas Flaubert Nietzsche Turgenev Balzac
Stockton Vatsyayana Crane
Burroughs Verne
Curtis Tocqueville Gogol Busch
Homer Tolstoy Whittman
Darwin Thoreau Twain
Potter Zola Lawrence Dickens Plato Scott
Kant Freud Jowett Stevenson Andersen Burton Harte
London Descartes Cervantes Wells Hesse
Poe Aristotle Wells Voltaire Cooke
Hale James Hastings Shakespeare Chambers Irving
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Patrick Henry

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PATRICK HENRY

BY
MOSES COIT TYLER



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PREFACE

In this book I have tried to embody the chief results derived from a study of all the materials known to me, in print and in manuscript, relating to Patrick Henry, — many of these materials being now used for the first time in any formal presentation of his life.

Notwithstanding the great popular interest attaching to the name of Patrick Henry, he has hitherto been the subject of but one memoir founded on original investigation, and that, of course, is the *Life* by William Wirt. When it is considered, however, that Wirt's book was finished as long ago as the year 1817, — before the time had fairly come for the publication of the correspondence, diaries, personal memoranda, and official records of every sort, illustrating the great period covered by Patrick Henry's career, — it will be easy to infer something as to the quantity and the value of those printed materials bearing upon the subject, which are now to be had by us, but which were not within the reach of Wirt. Accordingly, in his lack of much of the detailed [Pg vi] testimony that then lay buried in inaccessible documents, Wirt had to trust largely to the somewhat imaginative traditions concerning Patrick Henry which he found floating in the air of Virginia; and especially to the supposed recollections of old people, — recollections which, in this case, were nearly always vague, not always disinterested, often inaccurate, and generally made up of emotional impressions rather than of facts. Any one who will take the trouble to ascertain the enormous disadvantages under which Wirt wrote, and which, as we now know, gave him great discouragement, will be inclined to applaud him for making so good a book, rather than to blame him for not making a better one.

It is proper for me to state that, besides the copious printed materials now within reach, I have been able to make use of a large number of manuscripts relating to my subject. Of these may be specified a document, belonging to Cornell University, written by a great-grandson of Patrick Henry, the late Rev. Edward Fontaine, and giving, among other things, several new anecdotes of the great orator, as told to the writer by his own father, Colonel Patrick Henry Fontaine, who was much with Patrick Henry during the later

years of his life. I may add that, through the kindness of the Hon. William Wirt Henry of [Pg vii] Richmond, I have had access to the manuscripts which were collected by Wirt for the purposes of his book, but were only in part used by him. With unstinted generosity, Mr. Henry likewise placed in my hands all the papers relating to his illustrious grandfather, which, during the past thirty years or more, he has succeeded in bringing together, either from different branches of the family, or from other sources. A portion of the manuscripts thus accumulated by him consists of copies of the letters, now preserved in the Department of State, written by Patrick Henry, chiefly while governor of Virginia, to General Washington, to the president of Congress, to Virginia's delegation in Congress, and to the Board of War.

In the very front of this book, therefore, I record my grateful acknowledgments to Mr. William Wirt Henry; acknowledgments not alone for the sort of generosity of which I have just spoken, but for another sort, also, which is still more rare, and which I cannot so easily describe,—his perfect delicacy, while promoting my more difficult researches by his invaluable help, in never once encumbering that help with the least effort to hamper my judgment, or to sway it from the natural conclusions to which my studies might lead.

Finally, it gives me pleasure to mention that, in the preparation of this book, I have received [Pg viii] courteous assistance from Mr. Theodore F. Dwight and Mr. S. M. Hamilton of the library of the Department of State; from the Rev. Professor W. M. Hughes, of Hobart College; and from the Rev. Stephen H. Synnott, rector of St. John's, Ithaca.

M. C. T.

Cornell University, 3 June, 1887.

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PREFACE TO REVISED EDITION

I have gladly used the opportunity afforded by a new edition of this book to give the text a minute revision from beginning to end, and to make numerous changes both in its substance and in its form.

During the eleven years that have passed since it first came from the press, considerable additions have been made to our documentary materials for the period covered by it, the most important for our purpose being the publication, for the first time, of the correspondence and the speeches of Patrick Henry and of George Mason, the former with a life, in three volumes, by William Wirt Henry, the latter also with a life, in two volumes, by Kate Mason Rowland. Besides procuring for my own pages whatever benefit I could draw from these texts, I have tried, while turning over very frequently the writings of Patrick Henry's contemporaries, to be always on the watch for the means of correcting any mistakes I may have made concerning him, whether as to fact or as to opinion.

[Pg x] In this work of rectification I have likewise been aided by suggestions from many persons, of whom I would particularly mention the Right Rev. Joseph Blount Cheshire, Jr., D. D., Bishop of North Carolina, and Mr. William Wirt Henry.

M. C. T.

Cornell University, 31 March, 1898

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PATRICK HENRY

CHAPTER I EARLY YEARS

On the evening of October 7, 1732, that merry Old Virginian, Colonel William Byrd of Westover, having just finished a journey through King William County for the inspection of his estates, was conducted, for his night's lodging, to the house of a blooming widow, Mistress Sarah Syme, in the county of Hanover. This lady, at first supposing her guest to be some new suitor for her lately disengaged affections, "put on a Gravity that becomes a Weed;" but so soon as she learned her mistake and the name of her distinguished visitor, she "brighten'd up into an unusual cheerfulness and Serenity. She was a portly, handsome Dame, of the Family of Esau, and seem'd not to pine too much for the Death of her Husband, who was of the Family of the Saracens.... This widow is a person of a lively & cheerful Conversation, with much less Reserve than most of her Countrywomen. It becomes her very well, and [Pg 2] sets off her other agreeable Qualities to Advantage. We tost off a Bottle of honest Port, which we relisht with a broil'd Chicken. At Nine I retir'd to my Devotions, And then Slept so Sound that Fancy itself was Stupify'd, else I shou'd have dreamt of my most obliging Landlady." The next day being Sunday, "the courteous Widow invited me to rest myself there that good day, and go to Church with Her, but I excus'd myself by telling her she wou'd certainly spoil my Devotion. Then she civilly entreated me to make her House my Home whenever I visited my Plantations, which made me bow low, and thank her very kindly." [1]

Not very long after that notable visit, the sprightly widow gave her hand in marriage to a young Scotchman of good family, John Henry, of Aberdeen, a protégé and probably a kinsman of her former husband; and continuing to reside on her estate of Studley, in the county of Hanover, she became, on May 29, 1736, the mother of Patrick Henry.

Through the lineage of both his parents, this child had some claim to an inheritance of brains. The father, a man of firm and sound intellect, had been liberally educated in Scotland; among the country gentlemen of his neighborhood in Virginia, he was held in high esteem for superior intelligence and character, as is shown by the positions he long held of county surveyor, colonel of his regiment, and presiding judge of the county court; while he [Pg 3] could number among his near kinsmen at home several persons of eminence as divines, orators, or men of letters,—such as his uncle, William Robertson, minister of Borthwick in Mid Lothian and afterward of the Old Greyfriars' Church in Edinburgh; his cousin, David Henry, the successor of Edward Cave in the management of the "Gentleman's Magazine;" and especially his cousin, William Robertson, principal of the University of Edinburgh, and author of the "History of the Reign of the Emperor Charles V." Moreover, among the later paternal relatives of Patrick Henry may be mentioned one person of oratorical and forensic genius very brilliant and in quality not unlike his own. Patrick Henry's father was second cousin to that beautiful Eleanor Syme of Edinburgh, who, in 1777, became the wife of Henry Brougham of Brougham Hall, Westmoreland. Their eldest son was Lord Brougham, who was thus the third cousin of Patrick Henry. To some it will perhaps seem not a mere caprice of ingenuity to discover in the fiery, eccentric, and truculent eloquence of the great English advocate and parliamentary orator a family likeness to that of his renowned American kinsman; or to find in the fierceness of the champion of Queen Caroline against George IV., and of English anti-slavery reform and of English parliamentary reform against aristocratic and commercial selfishness, the same bitter and eager radicalism that burned in the blood of him who, on this side of the Atlantic, [Pg 4] was, in popular oratory, the great champion of the colonies against George III., and afterward of the political autonomy of the State of Virginia against the all-dominating centralization which he saw coiled up in the projected Constitution of the United States. [2]

Those, however, who knew the mother of Patrick Henry, and her family, the Winstons, were accustomed to think that it was from her side of the house that he derived the most characteristic traits not only of his genius, but of his disposition. The Winstons of Virginia

were of Welsh stock; a family marked by vivacity of spirit, conversational talent, a lyric and dramatic turn, a gift for music and for eloquent speech, at the same time by a fondness for country life, for inartificial pleasures, for fishing and hunting, for the solitude and the unkempt charms of nature. It was said, too, of the Winstons that their talents were in excess of their ambition or of their energy, and were not brought into use except in a fitful way, and under the stimulus of some outward and passing occasion. They seem to have belonged to that very considerable class of persons in this world of [Pg 5] whom more might have been made. Especially much talk used to be heard, among old men in Virginia, of Patrick Henry's uncle, his mother's own brother, William Winston, as having a gift of eloquence dazzling and wondrous like Patrick's, nay, as himself unsurpassed in oratory among all the great speakers of Virginia except by Patrick himself. [3]

The system of education prevailing in Virginia during Patrick Henry's early years was extremely simple. It consisted of an almost entire lack of public schools, mitigated by the sporadic and irregular exercise of domestic tuition. Those who could afford to import instruction into their homes got it, if they desired; those who could not, generally went without. As to the youthful Patrick, he and education never took kindly to each other. From nearly all quarters the testimony is to this effect, — that he was an indolent, dreamy, frolicsome creature, with a mortal enmity to books, supplemented by a passionate regard for fishing-rods and shot-guns; disorderly in dress, slouching, vagrant, unambitious; a roamer in woods, a loiterer on river-banks; having more tastes and aspirations in common with trappers and frontiersmen than with the toilers of civilized life; giving no hint nor token, by word or act, of the possession of any intellectual gift that could raise him above mediocrity, or even up to it.

During the first ten years of his life, he seems [Pg 6] to have made, at a small school in the neighborhood, some small and reluctant progress into the mysteries of reading, writing, and arithmetic; whereupon his father took personal charge of the matter, and conducted his further education at home, along with that of other children, being aided in the task by the very competent help of a brother, the Rev. Patrick Henry, rector of St. Paul's parish, in Hanover,

and apparently a good Scotch classicist. In this way our Patrick acquired some knowledge of Latin and Greek, and rather more knowledge of mathematics,—the latter being the only branch of book-learning for which, in those days, he showed the least liking. However, under such circumstances, with little real discipline, doubtless, and amid plentiful interruptions, the process of ostensible education went forward with the young man; and even this came to an end by the time that he was fifteen years old.

At that age, he was duly graduated from the domestic school-room into the shop of a country tradesman hard by. After an apprenticeship there of a single year, his father set him up in trade, joining with him in the conduct of a country store his elder brother, William, a youth more indolent, if possible, as well as more disorderly and uncommercial, than Patrick himself. One year of this odd partnership brought the petty concern to its inevitable fate. Just one year after that, having attained the ripe age of eighteen, and being then [Pg 7] entirely out of employment, and equally out of money, Patrick rounded out his embarrassments, and gave symmetry to them, as it were, by getting married,—and that to a young woman quite as impecunious as himself. The name of this damsel was Sarah Shelton; her father being a small farmer, and afterward a small tavern-keeper in the neighborhood. In the very rashness and absurdity of this proceeding on the part of these two interesting young paupers, irresistibly smitten with each other's charms, and mutually resolved to defy their own helplessness by doubling it, there seems to have been a sort of semi-ludicrous pathos which constituted an irresistible call for help.

The parents on both sides heard the call, and by their joint efforts soon established the young couple on a little farm near at hand, from which, by their own toil, reënforced by that of half a dozen slaves, they were expected to extort a living. This experiment, the success of which depended on exactly those qualities which Patrick did not then possess,—industry, order, sharp calculation, persistence,—turned out as might have been predicted. At the end of two years he made a forced sale of some of his slaves, and invested the proceeds in the stock of a country store once more. But as he had now proved himself to be a bad farmer, and a still worse merchant, it is not easy to divine by what subtle process of reasoning he had

been able to conclude that there would be any improvement in his circumstances by getting out of agriculture and back into merchandise. [Pg 8]

When he undertook this last venture he was still but a youth of twenty. By the time that he was twenty-three, that is, by the autumn of 1759, he had become convinced that his little store was to prove for him merely a consumer of capital and a producer of bad debts; and in view of the necessity of soon closing it, he had ample excuse for taking into consideration what he should do next. Already was he the happy father of sundry small children, with the most trustworthy prospect of a steady enlargement and multiplication of his paternal honors. Surely, to a man of twenty-three, a husband and a father, who, from the age of fifteen, had been engaged in a series of enterprises to gain his livelihood, and had perfectly failed in every one of them, the question of his future means of subsistence must have presented itself as a subject of no little pertinence, not to say urgency. However, at that time Patrick seems to have been a young fellow of superabounding health and of inextinguishable spirits, and even in that crisis of his life he was able to deal gayly with its problems. In that very year, 1759, Thomas Jefferson, then a lad of sixteen, and on his way to the College of William and Mary, happened to spend the Christmas holidays at the house of Colonel Nathan Dandridge, in Hanover, and there first met Patrick Henry. Long afterward, recalling these days, Jefferson furnished this picture of him:—

“Mr. Henry had, a little before, broken up his store, or [Pg 9] rather it had broken him up; but his misfortunes were not to be traced either in his countenance or conduct.” “During the festivity of the season I met him in society every day, and we became well acquainted, although I was much his junior.... His manners had something of coarseness in them. His passion was music, dancing, and pleasantry. He excelled in the last, and it attached every one to him.” [4]

Shortly after Jefferson left those hilarious scenes for the somewhat more restrained festivities of the little college at Williamsburg, Patrick succeeded in settling in his own mind what he was going to do next. He could not dig, so it seemed, neither could he traffic, but

perhaps he could talk. Why not get a living by his tongue? Why not be a lawyer?

But before we follow him through the gates of that superb profession,—gates which, after some preliminary creaking of the hinges, threw open to him the broad pathway to wealth, renown, unbounded influence,—let us stop a moment longer on the outside, and get a more distinct idea, if we can, of his real intellectual outfit for the career on which he was about to enter.

FOOTNOTES:

[1] *Byrd Manuscripts*, ii. 79, 80.

[2] I have from private sources information that Brougham was aware of his relationship to Patrick Henry, and that in recognition of it he showed marked attentions to a grand-nephew of Patrick Henry, the late W. C. Preston, of South Carolina, when the latter was in England. Moreover, in his *Life and Times*, i. 17, 18, Brougham declares that he derived from his maternal ancestors the qualities which lifted him above the mediocrity that had always attached to his ancestors on the paternal side.

[3] Wirt, 3.

[4] In a letter to Wirt, in 1815, *Life of Henry*, 14, 15; also *Writings of Jefferson*, vi. 487, 488, where the letter is given, apparently, from the first draft.

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ToC

CHAPTER II

WAS HE ILLITERATE?

Concerning the quality and extent of Patrick Henry's early education, it is perhaps impossible now to speak with entire confidence. On the one hand there seems to have been a tendency, in his own time and since, to overstate his lack of education, and this partly, it may be, from a certain instinctive fascination which one finds in pointing to so dramatic a contrast as that between the sway which the great orator wielded over the minds of other men and the untrained vigor and illiterate spontaneity of his own mind. Then, too, it must be admitted that, whatever early education Patrick Henry may have received, he did, in certain companies and at certain periods of his life, rather too perfectly conceal it under an uncouth garb and manner, and under a pronunciation which, to say the least, was archaic and provincial. Jefferson told Daniel Webster that Patrick Henry's "pronunciation was vulgar and vicious," although, as Jefferson adds, this "was forgotten while he was speaking." [5] Governor John Page "used to relate, on the testimony of his own ears," that Patrick [Pg 11] Henry would speak of "the yearth," and of "men's naiteral parts being improved by larnin'"; [6] while Spencer Roane mentions his pronunciation of China as "Cheena." [7] All this, however, it should be noted, does not prove illiteracy. If, indeed, such was his ordinary speech, and not, as some have suggested, a manner adopted on particular occasions for the purpose of identifying himself with the mass of his hearers, the fact is evidence merely that he retained through his mature life, on the one hand, some relics of an old-fashioned good usage, and, on the other, some traces of the brogue of the district in which he was born, just as Edmund Pendleton used to say "scaicely" for scarcely, and as John Taylor, of Caroline, would say "bare" for bar; just as Thomas Chalmers always retained the brogue of Fifeshire, and Thomas Carlyle that of Ecclefechan. Certainly a brogue can never be elegant, but as it has many times coexisted with very high intellectual cultivation, its existence in Patrick Henry does not prove him to have been uncultivated.

Then, too, it must be remembered that he himself had a habit of depreciating his own acquaintance with books, and his own dependence on them. He did this, it would seem, partly from a consciousness that it would only increase his hold on the sympathy and support of the mass of the people of Virginia if they should regard him as absolutely one of themselves, and in no sense raised [Pg 12] above them by artificial advantages. Moreover, this habit of self-depreciation would be brought into play when he was in conversation with such professed devourers of books as John Adams and Jefferson, compared with whom he might very properly feel an unfeigned conviction that he was no reader at all,—a conviction in which they would be quite likely to agree with him, and which they would be very likely to express. Thus, John Adams mentions that, in the first intimacy of their friendship begun at the Congress of 1774, the Virginian orator, at his lodgings, confessed one night that, for himself, he had “had no public education;” that at fifteen he had “read Virgil and Livy,” but that he had “not looked into a Latin book since.” [8] Upon Jefferson, who of course knew Henry far longer and far more closely, the impression of his disconnection from books seems to have been even more decided, especially if we may accept the testimony of Jefferson’s old age, when his memory had taken to much stumbling, and his imagination even more to extravagance than in his earlier life. Said Jefferson, in 1824, of his ancient friend: “He was a man of very little knowledge of any sort. He read nothing, and had no books.” [9]

On the other hand, there are certain facts concerning Henry’s early education and intellectual habits which may be regarded as pretty well established. [Pg 13] Before the age of ten, at a petty neighborhood school, he had got started upon the three primary steps of knowledge. Then, from ten to fifteen, whatever may have been his own irregularity and disinclination, he was member of a home school, under the immediate training of his father and his uncle, both of them good Scotch classical scholars, and one of them at least a proficient in mathematics. No doubt the human mind, especially in its best estate of juvenile vigor and frivolity, has remarkable aptitude for the repulsion of unwelcome knowledge; but it can hardly be said that even Patrick Henry’s gift in that direction could have prevented his becoming, under two such masters, tolerably well

grounded in Latin, if not in Greek, or that the person who at fifteen is able to read Virgil and Livy, no matter what may be his subsequent neglect of Latin authors, is not already imbued with the essential and indestructible rudiments of the best intellectual culture.

It is this early initiation, on the basis of a drill in Latin, into the art and mystery of expression, which Patrick Henry received from masters so competent and so deeply interested in him, which helps us to understand a certain trait of his, which puzzled Jefferson, and which, without this clue, would certainly be inexplicable. From his first appearance as a speaker to the end of his days, he showed himself to be something more than a declaimer,—indeed, an adept in language. “I have been often astonished,” said Jefferson, “at his [Pg 14] command of proper language; how he obtained the knowledge of it I never could find out, as he read little, and conversed little with educated men.” [10] It is true, probably, that we have no perfect report of any speech he ever made; but even through the obvious imperfections of his reporters there always gleams a certain superiority in diction,—a mastery of the logic and potency of fitting words; such a mastery as genius alone, without special training, cannot account for. Furthermore, we have in the letters of his which survive, and which of course were generally spontaneous and quite unstudied effusions, absolutely authentic and literal examples of his ordinary use of words. Some of these letters will be found in the following pages. Even as manuscripts, I should insist that the letters of Patrick Henry are witnesses to the fact and quality of real intellectual cultivation: these are not the manuscripts of an uneducated person. In penmanship, punctuation, spelling, syntax, they are, upon the whole, rather better than the letters of most of the great actors in our Revolution. But, aside from the mere mechanics of written speech, there is in the diction of Patrick Henry’s letters the nameless felicity which, even with great natural endowments, is only communicable by genuine literary culture in some form. Where did Patrick Henry get such literary culture? The question can be answered only by pointing to that painful drill in Latin which the book-hating boy [Pg 15] suffered under his uncle and his father, when, to his anguish, Virgil and Livy detained him anon from the true joys of existence.

Wirt seems to have satisfied himself, on evidence carefully gathered from persons who were contemporaries of Patrick Henry, that the latter had received in his youth no mean classical education; but, in the final revision of his book for publication, Wirt abated his statements on that subject, in deference to the somewhat vehement assertions of Jefferson. It may be that, in its present lessened form, Wirt's account of the matter is the more correct one; but this is the proper place in which to mention one bit of direct testimony upon the subject, which, probably, was not known to Wirt. Patrick Henry is said to have told his eldest grandson, Colonel Patrick Henry Fontaine, that he was instructed by his uncle "not only in the catechism, but in the Greek and Latin classics." [11] It may help us to realize something of the moral stamina entering into the training which the unfledged orator thus got that, as he related, his uncle taught him these maxims of conduct: "To be true and just in all my dealings. To bear no malice nor hatred in my heart. To keep my hands from picking and stealing. Not to covet other men's goods; but to learn and labor truly to get my own living, and to do my duty in that state of life unto which it shall please God to call me." [12]

Under such a teacher Patrick Henry was so [Pg 16] thoroughly grounded, at least in Latin and Greek grammar, that when, long afterward, his eldest grandson was a student in Hampden-Sidney College, the latter found "his grandfather's examinations of his progress in Greek and Latin" so rigorous that he dreaded them "much more than he did his recitations to his professors." [13] Colonel Fontaine also states that he was present when a certain French visitor, who did not speak English, was introduced to Governor Henry, who did not speak French. During the war of the Revolution and just afterwards a similar embarrassment was not infrequent here in the case of our public men, among whom the study of French had been very uncommon; and for many of them the old colonial habit of fitting boys for college by training them to the colloquial use of Latin proved to be a great convenience. Colonel Fontaine's anecdote implies, what is altogether probable, that Patrick Henry's early drill in Latin had included the ordinary colloquial use of it; for he says that in the case of the visitor in question his grandfather was able, by means of his early stock of Latin words, to carry on the conversation in that language. [14]