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COMMEMORATIVE TRIBUTE TO  
HAMILTON WRIGHT MABIE

By HENRY VAN DYKE

READ IN  
THE 1920 LECTURE SERIES OF  
THE AMERICAN ACADEMY OF  
ARTS AND LETTERS



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HAMILTON WRIGHT MABIE<sup>1</sup>

BY HENRY VAN DYKE

A tribute to the memory of Hamilton Wright Mabie must be full of deep and warm affection if it would express in any measure the thoughts and feelings of the many who knew him personally while he walked the paths of earth,—a serene, wise, and generous comrade in the crowded pilgrimage of American life.

He was a man with a genius for friendship and helpfulness. Religious by nature and holding to Christian faith and ideals with unalterable conviction, he had a simple, practical,

<sup>1</sup> Read April 15, 1920.

beautiful, common-sense quality of manhood which kept him from ever becoming a bigot, a fanatic, or a sentimentalist. He understood human nature, with all its faults and twists, and he loved it notwithstanding all. Steering his own course with a steady hand, he wished not to judge or dominate other men, but only to help them to see the star by which he steered and to make its light useful to them for guidance. Those who came to him for counsel got it clean and straight, often with that touch of humor which was the salt of his discourse.

Those who disliked and scorned him as an "old fogey," and followed him with a strange malice of petty mockery, found him silent, tolerant, content to go forward with his own work for human progress, and ready to help them if they got into trouble. He was the most open-minded and kind-hearted of men. To his acquaintances



and his thousands of auditors on his lecture-tours he was a voice of tranquil wisdom, genial wit, and serene inspiration. To his intimates he was an incomparable friend.

I came to know him well only after he had passed middle life. But I am sure that the spirit which was in him then had animated him from the beginning, and continued to illuminate him to the end of his life. Mabie was not a man to falter or recant. He advanced. He fulfilled the aim of Wordsworth's "Happy Warrior," who

When brought  
Among the tasks of real life hath  
wrought  
Upon the task that pleased his childish  
thought.

He was born at Cold Spring, N. Y., in 1846, and graduated from Williams College in 1867, and from the Columbia College Law School in 1869. But

the practice of law as a profession did not attract or satisfy him. In 1879 he became an editorial writer for *The Christian Union*, a religious periodical of broadening scope and influence which developed, under the leadership of Lyman Abbott and Hamilton Mabie and an able staff, into the liberal, national, Christian weekly well-named *The Outlook*. Mabie's work on this paper was constant, devoted, happy, and full of quiet inspiration for clearer thinking and better living. Most of his articles, which must have numbered thousands during his service of thirty-seven years, were unsigned. But they bore the image and superscription of his strong character, fine intelligence, broad sympathies, and high standards, both in literature and in life.

They were not sermons. They were simple words of wisdom uttered in season. They were sometimes pun-

gent,—for he had a vivid sense of righteousness,—but they were never malicious or strident. They were the counsels of a well-wisher. He hated evil, but when he struck at it he desired to help those whom it had deceived and enslaved. For the most part he wrote from the positive rather than from the negative side, preferring the praise of right to the condemnation of wrong. Something in his character permeated his style. A certain unpretending reasonableness, a tranquil assurance of the ultimate victory of light over darkness, an understanding sense of the perplexities and shadows which overcast our mortal life, gave to the words which he wrote from week to week a quiet power of penetration and persuasion. They entered myriads of homes and hearts for good. In this service to modern life through the editorial pages of *The Outlook* he continued steadily, gladly, faithfully,

until his earthly work ended on New Year's Eve, 1916.

During this long period of professional labor as a writer for the press, he developed a national influence perhaps even wider as a public lecturer and an author.

No man in America was more welcome to an intelligent audience, for a lyceum lecture or a commencement address, than Hamilton Mabie. Here his personal qualities had full play, perhaps even more than in his writing. His radiant nature, his keen sense of humor, his ready and attractive manner of speech, his sympathy with all sorts and conditions of men and women, gave him quick and easy access to his listeners. They went with him because he appealed to them. He reached them because he took the trouble to open the doors.

The material of his lectures, as in the case of Emerson, was that which

he afterwards used in his books. But when he was speaking it was put in a different form—more free, more colloquial, adapted to the occasion. Why should a speaker regard his audiences as cast-iron receptacles for a dose of doctrine? Mabie never did that. But he always had something to say that was serious, well-considered, worth thinking about. That was the reason why thoughtful people liked to hear him.

He was a popular lecturer in the best sense of the phrase. The demands upon his time and strength in this field were incessant. In addition he had the constant appeal of humane and hopeful causes looking to the betterment of social life,—like the Kindergarten Society of which he was for many years the president. To these calls he was always ready to respond. It was his self-forgetfulness in such work that exhausted his strength and brought on

his final illness. He was a soldier on the firing-line of human progress. In that cause he was glad to give his life.

His books have deserved and had a wide reading and a high appreciation. They show the clear carefulness of his thinking, the depth of his love for nature and human nature, the excellence of his skill as a writer of pure and translucent English.

Nothing could be better for the purpose for which they were intended than the volumes in which he rendered, for the boys and girls of to-day, the great stories and legends of the past,—*Norse Stories from the Eddas*, *Myths Every Child Should Know*, *Heroes Every Child Should Know*, and so on.

But much more significant and original is the series of books in which he made his contribution to the art of essay-writing,—*My Study Fire*, *Under the Trees and Elsewhere*, *Short Stud-*

*ies in Literature.* These are rich in the fruits of observation in the home, the library, the great out-of-doors,—

The harvest of a quiet eye  
That broods and sleeps on his own heart.

These volumes were followed by others in which he expressed his deepening thoughts on the unity and the beauty of life in brief essays on *Nature and Culture*, *Books and Culture*, *Work and Culture*, *The Life of the Spirit*, and *The Great Word*,—by which he means *Love*, not blind and selfish, but open-eyed, intelligent, generous,—the kind of love which made his home a refuge of peace, a spring of joy and strength.

It is a fine ideal which guides the course of all these essays,—an ideal of the coöperation of nature and books and work in the unfolding of personality. Culture, in that sense, was Mabie's conception of the best reward

that life has to give. *Kultur*, in the German sense, machine-made and iron-bound, he despised and hated. For this and other reasons he was ardent for the cause of the free and civilized nations against Germany in the barbaric war which she forced upon the world in 1914.

But the bulk of his work lies back of this sharp and bitter crisis, in a period of general tranquillity, through which his writing flows like a pure and fertilizing stream in a landscape. He was an optimist, but not of the rose-water variety. He knew that life involves painful effort, hard conflict. Nevertheless he believed that for those who will face the conflict and make the effort, help and victory are sure. He was a critic, delighting to read and comment upon the great books,—Homer, the Greek Tragedies, the Mediæval Epics, Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, and the more modern classics.



But he was not a technical and scholastic critic. He sought to catch the spirit and meaning of the literature which he loved. His work always reminds me of that passage in the *Pilgrim's Progress* which describes the "House of the Interpreter." The beauty of his comment on the classics is that it has a way of being right about their real significance.

This is true of his most important critical work,—*William Shakespeare, Poet, Dramatist, and Man*. On this volume he spent long, loving, patient study and toil. The result was one of the best, clearest, most readable and illuminating books in Shakespearean literature. Its central thesis,—that Shakespeare's poetic genius, his gift of vision, passion, and imagination, was the spring of his dramatic power, and that therefore, despite our imperfect knowledge of his biography, we may be sure of his greatness as a

man,—is thoroughly sound. It is set forth with admirable lucidity and abundant illustration.

There is one of Mabie's books which is less known than others. It is called *A Child of Nature*. It represents his first and only attempt, so far as I know, in the field of fiction. But it is fiction of a peculiar type,—no plot, little dialogue, no incidents except birth and death and the ordinary run of life in the New England village where John Foster spent his days. The theme of the book, developed with deep fidelity and subtle beauty, is the growth of this quiet, simple, lonely man's spirit in the fellowship of nature and of great books. He dies silent and alone, never having learned to speak to the world or even to his neighbors the wisdom which he has garnered. But some brief daily record of his experiences, his thoughts, the light of life that has come to him,

he has written down and leaves behind him. Then comes a young man of another type, Ralph Parkman, scholar, traveler, and author, to live in the old farmhouse. He finds the forgotten papers, and their sincerity and beauty take hold of him. He gives them the form and finish which they need, and sends them out to the world.

“It was a little book which finally went forth from the old house, but it was very deep and beautiful; like a quiet mountain pool, it was far from the dust and tumult of the highways, and there were images of stars in it. With the generosity of a fine spirit the younger man interpreted the life of the older man through the rich atmosphere of his own temperament, but there was nothing in the beautiful flowering and fruitage which the world received from his hand which was not potentially in the heart and mind of John Foster. The silent man had come

to his own, for God had given him a voice. After the long silence of a lifetime he spoke in tones which vibrated and penetrated, not like great bells swung in unison in some high tower, but like dear familiar bells set in old sacred places, whose sweet notes are half-audible music and half-inaudible faith and prayer and worship."

With these words of his own I leave this brief, imperfect tribute to Hamilton Mabie as man and author. The value of his work is still living in the hearts of his hearers and readers whom it has enlightened and encouraged. It is worthy to be treasured. To me the memory of his friendship is more precious than words can tell. Twenty years ago I tried to express something of its meaning in a bit of verse dedicated to his comradeship.

O who will walk a mile with me  
 Along life's merry way?  
 A comrade blithe and full of glee,

Who dares to laugh out loud and free,  
And let his frolic fancy play,  
Like a happy child, through the flowers  
    gay  
That fill the field and fringe the way  
    Where he walks a mile with me.

And who will walk a mile with me  
    Along life's weary way?  
A friend whose heart has eyes to see  
The stars shine out o'er the darkening  
    lea,  
And the quiet rest at the end o' the day,—  
A friend who knows, and dares to say,  
The brave, sweet words that cheer the  
    way  
    Where he walks a mile with me.

With such a comrade, such a friend,  
I fain would walk till journeys end,  
Through summer sunshine, winter rain,  
And then?—Farewell, we shall meet  
    again!














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