

ADDRESS

BY

Maj. JOSEPH B. CUMMING,

AT THE

UNVEILING OF CENOTAPH

ON GREENE STREET.

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DECEMBER 31, 1873.

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CHRONICLE JOB PRINT,  
AUGUSTA, GA.



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Eleven years ago today, at this hour, a great conflict was raging on the banks of Stone River. All day long the tide of battle rolled through the cedar forest. The result was indecisive, and night found both armies shattered and bleeding—the living and the dead lying down together on the frozen ground. I can see now the faces of the slain—the blue coated and the grey—in the pale moonlight, where it struggled through the rifts of the forest. Among them were the faces of some of those whose names are inscribed on this monument. Some of these were lifted from their gory beds by comrades' hands, and now rest in their native soil commemorated by other monuments. Others still sleep where they first sank to rest; their graves are lost in the depths of the forest or the plowshare has passed over them, and no man shall know their sepulchre henceforth forever until the great day.

I speak of Murfreesboro, because this happens to be the anniversary of that bloody struggle. It was, however, but a type. What happened there was then happening everywhere in this war stricken land. Everywhere the brave were falling. In the few instances, the bleeding clay was borne lovingly to weeping kindred and thus gathered to the resting places of their fathers; but the great number found scanty burial where they fell. And this, too, was true of the vast multitude who took their departure less stormy but not less heroic from the fever-smitten hospitals.

The conflict ceased, and while, as yet, no true peace came, at least the sound of actual warfare rolled away in the distance. Then followed that which was hitherto unknown in the annals of time—a conquered people busied itself to erect monuments which should perpetuate the memory of its conquest. Strange spectacle! and yet not strange. We were conquered, but our cause was just. We had fallen, but were not dishonored. Our efforts had failed, but those efforts had made the world ring with our praises. We had the irreparable and the irrecoverable to lament; to blush for nothing. And we might fitly rear monuments with proud front, albeit covered with the symbols of mourning.

Had there been, however, only this feeling of mournful pride, it alone would not have expressed itself in the erection of monuments. But it soon became the pious care of our people after the war to preserve the names of our martyrs,

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and to inscribe on the monuments erected to their memory simple legends protesting to earth and Heaven the purity of their motives. Few were the offerings they could make at first out of their poverty, and the work has been slow. But it was a sacred enterprise, not to pass away with the freshness of grief, but to become deeper rooted with time and to expand with returning prosperity. Moreover, our enemies, exercising the right of conquerors, ungenerously—I would say, but I pause with the words unspoken when I remember that they did it for their dead—our enemies were studding our own land—ours if not to control, at least to live and to die in—with monuments to their soldiers, imposing their version of the great struggle upon our children and our children's children. And thus in some of the loveliest places of the land, the child receiving his first impressions, the wayfarer, the unlearned, who reads nothing except what he finds in his pathway, are confronted by monuments, on which, in a perverted vocabulary, a just cause is styled rebellion, and true men are branded traitors. Then, what had been a sentiment for the dead became also a high duty to the living and the unborn; and what had been intended only as a memorial of heroism became also a protest against calumny. And so, devoted men and women working in tender love for the dead and with unwavering conviction that they were right, this monument, planted in love, watered by the tears of mothers, wives, daughters, sisters, now rises under these trees to perpetuate, as far as imperishable marble can make them perpetual, the names of the soldier dead of Richmond County, and to proclaim while it lasts, that their's was a just cause, and their's a sweet and honorable departure.

In what language does this monument make these weighty utterances? Read! "These men died in defense of the principles of the Declaration of Independence". And is this not true? These men fought for the right of self government and against centralization. These men fought for the right of communities, empires in extent, organized and self sustaining, to regulate their own affairs, and against the interference of a people alien in sentiment and interest. These men shed their blood for the independence of a country four times more populous, and many times larger than the original United States. "These men died in defense of the principles of the Declaration of Independence." What did the fathers more or other than this? And were these men rebels and their cause treason? If so, Washington was a traitor, and Benedict Arnold truly loyal.

And if this monument speaks thus fitly of the cause in which these men suffered, what does it say of their discharge from service? Read again. "Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori". How simple and how old! Adopted by all people until it belongs to no one alone—from the time that the poet first traced it on his tablet of wax, the immortal phrase, chiseled upon aspiring monuments, engraved upon minister pavements where great empires collect the ashes of their heroes, lettered upon the unpretending slab or cross beneath the cedar, the myrtle and the pine, rudely carved by the hands of comrades on the rough head-boards of the battle-field—the immortal phrase has proclaimed to every age and in all climes that it is sweet and honorable to die for one's country. And is it less effective because so old? Nay, it is so old because so effective. The human heart, which changes not, when it seeks to convey one of its universal immutable sentiments, borrows the same vehicle from age to age. And do hearts respond the less as time goes on? As soon bid the heart to beat no quicker henceforth forever to the old story of love; for it was spoken in simplest language in the bowers of Eden, and was whispered to-day, unchanged, in the ear of beauty. Old, old, phrase, denied to an Emperor, falling in the midst of brilliant battalions with insignia of orders—for he pursued ambition and conquest—it is rightfully due to the poor Confederate soldier, buried, it may be, in his thin rags by hostile hands on a lost battle-field, for he indeed died for his country; and so dying found sweet and honorable discharge—**dulce et decorum est pro patria mori.**

The task of love is accomplished. The Cenotaph has risen. The statement of the cause is made. The Roll of Honor is inscribed. A time-honored formula, dedicated to the fallen brave, is chiseled upon it. The work is done. We shall pass away; it will continue. We commit it to the judgment of future generations, in the firm faith that they will commend our purpose and approve its execution.

So much for this monument and this visible world. But there is over us and around us a world to us invisible, inhabited by the great army of those gone before. How thin the veil depending between these two worlds; how transparent to the ecstatic soul! Who shall forbid that I shall attempt to penetrate it? Who shall say I am too bold if, lifting up my eyes, I seem to see the ranks of the departed marshalled in the air, looking down on this scene? Who should forbid that I recognize in those ranks of spiritual bodies—so like the natural, but more glorious—the form of those who stood and

fell in the ranks of battle? Who shall say that but a shadow flits across my brain when I seem to see along those shadowy lines the waving of the conquered banner? Who shall deny that I seem to see them in their places rest, attentive to this pageant, knowing the while that all we can do is very little for those who gave their all for us, yet pleased that what we can we do. And if I may not see these marshalled hosts; if these be but unsubstantial shadows, no man may deny that surely **this is true**: Above and beyond where these banners seem to float, and these hosts seem to stand, Himself, the God of Hosts, looks down and orders all; and while for his own purpose decreeing defeat where we had hoped for victory, able, in His own way, to change the former into the latter, and in his own good time to permit the same people to place by the side of their monuments of mourning the trophies of triumph.



