

NOTES FROM THE LIBRARY

FOURTH OF JULY ORATIONS

THE LIBRARY is fortunate in having a fine collection of approximately 350 Fourth of July orations which affords a unique opportunity to penetrate into the thought of an earlier age. These orations enhance our knowledge of state and local history, especially in New Jersey and New England which have the strongest representation in the collection. A sampling of the three dozen New Jersey orations shows that it is good for the historian to review what is said on the Fourth of July, for its orators reflect the sources of national pride at the moment as well as the hopes and fears of the people. What were the current issues? How did they evaluate their heritage and achievements? What was their attitude toward the future? There is much to be gleaned from the remarks of these honored speakers.

First and foremost they spoke of patriotism, the one consistent theme of the orations. Sometimes youthful enthusiasm carried the spirit of '76 in flag-waving rhetoric. Certainly most of the orators warmed to the probability of success with this most natural theme and waved the flag until its magnetic powers waned and imagination failed, and then concluded with a few gems of local significance.

It seems ironical, however, that the hero of many an enterprise of nationalism and the most famed of our New Jersey orators, Commodore Robert F. Stockton, dismissed the traditional appeal to patriotism as soon

as expedient. He had good reason. There was no written speech or prepared notes before him; besides, he said (July 4, 1851), "I have not learned the art of seductive eloquence." This was a playful humility, for his speech and career exude a magnificent self-assurance.

While they spoke of patriotism they also spoke of God. This was a nation under God—"his American Israel." There was no attempt to distinguish love of God and love of country. The two went hand in glove. Even sacred and secular terms were freely fused to project the divine nature of patriotism or, as the pastor to the Second Presbyterian Church of New Brunswick entitled his Fourth of July sermon in 1852, "The Divine Providence in American History and Politics." The Puritan tradition in America placed a high premium upon morality and erudition which is manifest in many an oration.

Some orations were purely patriotic and religious in content; some reflect the political leanings of the speaker on topics ranging from human rights and political parties to slavery, the Indian problem, the Doctrine of Manifest Destiny, and the preservation of the Union.

These orations are of particular value to the student of state history, for they punctuate and date the thoughts of local leaders on many an issue of national welfare.

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