

BIOGRAPHICAL MEMOIR
OF
GEORGE PERKINS MARSH.
1801-1882.

BY
WILLIAM M. DAVIS.

READ BEFORE THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES
APRIL 18, 1906.



Yours truly
G. D. Munroe

BIOGRAPHICAL MEMOIR OF GEORGE PERKINS MARSH.

GEORGE PERKINS MARSH* was born in Woodstock, Vermont, March 15, 1801, the son of the Hon. Charles Marsh and his second wife, the daughter of Elisha Perkins, of Plainfield, Connecticut. His ancestor, John Marsh, came from England to Massachusetts in 1633, and in 1635 removed to Lebanon, Connecticut; and his grandfather, Joseph Marsh, was an early settler in the "New Hampshire grants"—afterwards Vermont—where, in 1778, he was the first lieutenant governor of the new State.

Marsh's boyhood was passed in the vigorous life of a hilly country. He narrates that in his fifth year he sat on a little stool between his father's knees in a two-wheeled chaise:

"My father pointed out the most striking trees as we passed them, and told me how to distinguish their varieties. I do not think I ever afterward failed to know one forest tree from another. * * * He pointed out the direction of the different ranges of hills; told me how the water gathered on them and ran down their sides. * * * He stopped his horse on the top of a steep hill, bade me notice how the water there flowed in different directions, and told me that such a point was called a watershed. I never forgot that word, nor any part of my father's talk that day."

At seven the boy used to lay a volume of the *Encyclopædia Britannica* on the floor, lean over it on his elbows, and read it for hours at a time, to the point of injuring his eyes, from which he long afterwards suffered. After brief preparatory studies at Phillips Andover Academy, he entered Dartmouth College in 1816, where he was known as an assiduous student, chiefly in ancient and modern languages, and where he was graduated with

* The following memoir is based chiefly on the "Life and Letters of George Perkins Marsh," by his widow, Caroline Crane Marsh (New York, Scribner, 1888—only vol. I published); a "Discourse Commemorative of the Hon. George Perkins Marsh," by Samuel Gilman Brown, delivered at Dartmouth College and at the University of Vermont in 1883, and a "Bibliography" by H. L. Koopman (Burlington, Vermont, 1892).

highest honors in 1820. After a brief and unsuccessful period as a teacher at a military academy in Norwich, Vermont, he returned home to study law with his father, and was admitted to the bar in 1825. He then removed to Burlington, Vermont, where his cousin, James Marsh, was president of the University of Vermont, and where he divided his time between the practice of his profession and literary studies. Here, in 1828, he married Harriet Buell, who died in 1833; he married again in 1839, his second wife being Caroline Crane, of Berkley, Massachusetts, who survived him. In 1835 he was elected to the Supreme Executive Council of Vermont, one of thirteen members—there was then no State senate—and in 1837 he made a journey to the upper Mississippi Valley as far as the Falls of St. Anthony. Returning to his eastern home, he became interested in the establishment of a woolen manufactory at Winooski, and at the same time took up the study of the languages of Northern Europe, as a result of which he published in 1838 “A Compendious Grammar of the Old-Northern or Icelandic Language, compiled and translated from the grammars of Rask.” This book, representing “much original work, especially in the sections devoted to inflections and in the treatment of the syntax,” was printed in the author’s absence, and contained so many typographical errors that it was never placed on sale. He shortly afterwards delivered an address on “The Goths in New England,” which excited much attention; and it was in this connection that he later pointed out, when speaking before the New England Society of New York, that our forefathers were fortunately harried out of England before their “character had become enervated or its energies spent.”

In 1843 Marsh was elected to Congress and spent the following seven years, a period of great political excitement, in Washington. A number of his speeches attracted notice. In 1844 he spoke in favor of a protective tariff, being doubtless moved thereto by the hope of developing the growth and manufacture of wool in Vermont. In 1845 he made a strong argument against the admission of Texas as a slave State, and at that early time said to one of his friends: “Texas means civil war before we have done with it.” In 1848 he protested against the continuation of the Mexican War, which he characterized as a national crime.

He was an early riser and hard worker during these political years and took some of his needed rest by sleeping in the House—as did J. Q. Adams also—during the speeches of such fellow-members as he did not care to hear. It was during this period that he addressed the Phi Beta Kappa societies at Dartmouth in 1844 and at Harvard in 1847.

Several life-long friendships were developed from the acquaintance made in Washington. Among those with whom he became most intimate was Colonel, afterwards Sir James Estcourt, British Boundary Commissioner, who with Lady Estcourt seems to have given Marsh and his wife a different opinion of English people from that which they had previously conceived in a provincial American spirit. While serving on a committee to report a bill for the establishment of what has come to be known as the Smithsonian Institution, Marsh met a number of the scientific men then in Washington, and of these Spencer F. Baird became his intimate associate and correspondent. The letters addressed by Marsh to Estcourt and to Baird in later years afford a pleasing insight into his versatile character. The letters to the Estcourts, although phrased in a familiar style, seldom depart from courteous formality. The letters to Baird are full of fun and nonsense, in which the writer seems to have found much entertainment. A New Year's greeting in 1859 wished Baird "thousands of letters less to write. 'Tis the pestilentest, most soul-destroying occupation on earth, that is, when you have anything to write about. *But to scribble about nothing, as we used to do before we came to be such a couple of sapless dry old sticks as time, trouble, and Satan have made us, is good. It prolongeth life, health and youth, driveth away blue devils and red, and comforteth the inward man exceedingly.*" Again: "I don't know where I shall be, but if you blow a tin horn about once in half an hour all summer long, I shall probably come within hearing of it, and will go to you." Some of these letters begin "My Dear Boy;" and once, when Baird was visiting Sing Sing, a letter to him opened with "Unfortunate Youth."

In 1849 Marsh was appointed Minister to Turkey, where no American has made a better impression. On his arrival at Constantinople it is stated that he could speak "with the representatives of France, Germany, Italy, Sweden, Denmark, and

Norway in their own tongues ;” he soon learned to speak Turkish also and made some progress in Arabic and Persian. These unusual linguistic accomplishments as well as his strong personal character gave Marsh a marked eminence among the other members of the diplomatic circle, although his diplomatic rank was below that of every other European minister, from however small a country. In 1851 he made a journey up the Nile as far as the second cataract, collecting specimens for Baird on the way, and then undertook a long trip on camels from Cairo into Palestine. In 1852 he was given a special mission to Athens in behalf of an American who had been unjustly treated there ; he thus had to study out a great body of legal records, largely in the form of modern Greek manuscript, and he afterwards said that in no part of his life had his labor been so severe as in those hot months. Fortunately his mission was successful. The change in administration at Washington in 1853 resulted in the recall of this valuable public servant, and after a return journey through southern Europe he made his home again in Burlington. The following period was harassed with business difficulties, for his affairs had not prospered during the absence in Turkey. Some relief came in 1857 when he was appointed railroad commissioner for Vermont, but full relief was not reached until 1861, when after long delayed action he received a considerable sum of money from Congress in payment of his claim for work during his special mission to Athens, ten years before. Regarding this he wrote : “I am very glad to learn the passage of my bill. The amount will just about pay what I owe, and leave me penniless and contented.” His business embarrassments had indeed been for a time so serious that they caused him to decline with much regret the offer of a professorship of history at Harvard College in 1855 ; he did not feel that he could turn away from his affairs at Burlington, where his creditors had left everything in his hands, to be made the most of. He had, however, some relaxation from business in the preparation of a book on “The Camel, * * * with reference to his introduction into the United States” (Boston, 1856), in which much of his eastern experience was recalled ; and he seems to have derived great satisfaction in delivering in 1858 to the graduate students at Columbia College a course of “Lectures on the English language” (New York, 1860 ;

revised edition, 1885), in which "he dwelt much on the value of etymology, and especially on the importance of tracing the individual history of words in their actual use, from their first recognized appearance to their present employment or their final disappearance." During the winter of 1860-'61 he gave before the Lowell Institute in Boston a series of lectures on "The origin and history of the English language and of the early literature that it embodies" (New York, 1862; revised edition, 1885). Both of these books give evidence of unusual erudition and of keen interpretation, and were highly valued by literary students. It was during the visit to Boston that Marsh wrote, after a dinner with the "Atlantic" Club: "These dinners make me most keenly sensible of what I have lost intellectually by the want of more frequent opportunities of meeting with persons of high culture." Regarding the secession of the Southern States from the Union, then threatened, Marsh wrote: "I take it to be quite certain that the Cotton States will accept no terms which the people of the North can or ought to propose. * * * I have no hope of a peaceable adjustment of this controversy. * * * I do not believe that a division of the Union is feasible. The States are a geographical and must be a political unit."

Early in 1861 Marsh was appointed by Lincoln minister to the new Kingdom of Italy; he was the first American minister to the first king. This important position was held at Turin, Florence, and Rome, with great acceptance to Italians and Americans alike, for twenty-one years, until his death, in 1882—a length of continuous foreign service as minister that is said to be unparalleled in our diplomatic service. The only volume of his "Life and Letters" that has been published unfortunately closes with his departure for Italy, and it is therefore difficult to obtain adequate material for an account of these interesting later years, during which Marsh greatly increased his acquaintance with men worth knowing, accumulated a large library and made diligent use of it, and became known to scientific men as the author of an important geographical work.

Marsh was at this time tall, erect, and of a firm step; of grave manner in more formal relations, but always simple in tastes, a lover of intelligent society and of truthful, unaffected men; he enjoyed meeting with children, who returned his affection. He

loved the arts, especially music, and he delighted in outdoor walks, above all among the mountains. "He could hardly be called popular, for he neither flattered nor would receive flattery, nor had he the light and airy arts of familiarity which are sometimes mistaken for sincere goodwill. Yet he drew others to himself in a strong personal attachment." To his intimate friends he was a genial and lovable companion. To this fine end he reached when death came peacefully at his summer residence in Vallombrosa on July 23, 1882. He was buried in the Protestant cemetery at Rome on October 17 of that year. The following tribute was written at that time by W. J. Stillman:

"Those of us who have lived in the East, especially on the basin of the eastern Mediterranean, during the last twenty years, will have heard more, and measured better, the personality of the late George P. Marsh than his countrymen at home. His public services are matter of public record. Those who have access to his dispatches to the Department of State can tell better than I how he constantly studied whatever might be turned to the advantage of his country, and perhaps may read between the lines what he never made ostentation of, his love for it—an ardent, never-faltering, watchful devotion such as few public men have ever given their native land and few governments have acknowledged and recompensed as ours. An Englishman, Mr. Marsh had been a peer, and long ago in the enjoyment of a pensioned leisure to follow up the studies in which he was the most widely distinguished American. * * * It has been my fortune in a varied and adventurous life to make the acquaintance of many distinguished men, and of all I ever knew George P. Marsh was the noblest combination, *me judice*, of the noblest qualities which distinguish man—inflexible honesty, public and private; the most intelligent and purest patriotism; ideality of the highest as to his service in his official career; generosity and self-sacrifice in his personal relations; quick and liberal appreciation of all good in others, and the most singular modesty in all that concerned himself; unflinching adherence to truth at any cost; an adamant recognition of duty which knew no deflection from personal motive; and, binding the whole in the noblest and truest of lives, a sincere religious temperament, in which the extreme of liberality to others was united to the profoundest humility as to

himself. * * * I knew no European who had met him who had not a higher esteem of our country from having known him. I have often heard European men of letters speak of him as a splendid result of American institutions, which perhaps in one sense he was. * * * He loved children, the Alps, the glaciers, the woods and fields and trees, with an untiring devotion, and the only complaint I remember his making of his own losses and decay was of his being unable to climb as he used to do." (The Nation, October 12, 1882.)

It was during his absence in Italy that Marsh was elected a member of the National Academy in 1866, and assigned to the Section of Anthropology and Philology. There is no record of his ever having presented a paper at any of our sessions. He was also a member of the American Philosophical Society of Philadelphia, an associate fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences of Boston, a corresponding member of the American Geographical Society of New York, a foreign member of the Reale Accademia dei Lincei of Rome, and an honorary member of the Societá geográfica italiana. His large and rich library was after his death bought by Mr. Frederick Billings and given to the University of Vermont, at Marsh's old home in Burlington; his collection of engravings was bought by the Government and is preserved in the Congressional Library.

While Marsh was in Italy he finished and published his most noted scientific work, "Man and Nature, or Physical Geography as Modified by Human Action" (New York, 1865), afterwards revised as "The Earth as Modified by Human Action, a new edition of Man and Nature" (New York, 1874). Letters to Baird show that the book was begun at Burlington in 1860. The first mention of it is the following brief statement: "I began another book this morning and wrote 11 pages. I won't tell you what the book is about, because you'll call me names." The next letter said: "Well, I will tell you about the book. * * * It's a little volume showing that whereas Ritter and Guyot think that the earth made man, man in fact made the earth. * * * I am not going into the scientifics, but into the historicals, in which I am as good as any of you. * * * My father had a piece of thick woodland where the ground was always damp. Well, sir, he cleared up that lot, and drained and cultivated it, and it became a

good deal drier, and he raised good corn and grain on it. Now, I am going to state this as a *fact*, and I defy all you speculators about cause and effect to deny it." The book gained great popularity from its intrinsic value and interest. It brought together a wealth of knowledge on geographical and historical matters and presented them in a most attractive way. It treated debatable problems, such as the influence of deforestation on rainfall, with much better judgment than was the habit of the time, for although addressed to a large circle of readers it had genuine scientific spirit and thoroughness. It has certainly been rarely the case that a man who advanced a subject so far in a single book should leave that book as practically his only work of the kind.

In reviewing the life of this eminent man, who studied languages while he practiced law, who divided his time between business and politics, who wrote books and delivered lectures on literary subjects, and who investigated geographical problems while he elevated diplomacy, one cannot fail to be impressed with the breadth of his interests and the variety of his activities and duties on the one hand, and on the other hand the high degree of specialization and the necessary narrowing of interests and activities which has characterized the general membership of the National Academy. When we recall that the Academy was created to act as the scientific adviser of the Government—to examine and report upon any subject of science or art—one can hardly fail to question whether advice on the treatment of national scientific problems can be as well given by intensive specialists of the modern school as by men of a wider experience, of whom Marsh was so admirable an example.