

John Hancock

By L. Carroll Judson

Biography is a subject of such thrilling interest, that the memory of most men, in every age and nation, who have rendered themselves eminent, either in the cause of virtue or vice, glory or infamy, has been handed down on the pages of history. Among the unlettered nations of the earth, we find the exploits of their heroes and sages recorded with hieroglyphics, in wild simplicity; or find their names interwoven in the wild and more romantic tales of mysterious tradition. When graced with truth and impartiality, the subject is not only interesting, but calculated to enrich our minds, by producing a desire to emulate the examples of the great and good, and by pointing out to us the paths of error, that lead us to disgrace and ruin. The interest felt in the history of an individual, depends much upon the manner the biographer performs his important and responsible duty, but more upon the sphere of action and the magnitude of the cause in which the individual has been engaged. The cause in which JOHN HANCOCK, the subject of this brief sketch, was engaged, is one deeply interesting to every philanthropist, and more especially to every American. It was the cause of humanity and equal rights, opposed to cruelty and oppression; the cause of American Independence, opposed to British tyranny. The part he acted, was alike creditable to his head and heart; his fame is enrolled on the bright list of the illustrious patriots of the revolution.

He was a native of Massachusetts, born near Quincy, in 1737. His father, of the same name, was a clergyman, eminent for his piety, and highly esteemed by the parishioners under his charge. He died during the infancy of his son, and left him under the guardianship of his paternal uncle, who treated him with all the tenderness of a father, and continued him at school until he graduated at Harvard College in 1754. His uncle was a merchant of immense wealth, and, on the completion of his studies, placed him in his counting-house, that he might add to his science a knowledge of business, of men, and of things. In 1760, he visited England, saw the mortal remains of George II. laid in the silent tomb, and the crown placed upon the head of his successor. He continued in the business of his uncle until the age of twenty-seven, when his patron and benefactor died, leaving him his vast estate, supposed to be the largest of any one in the province.

He was, for many years, one of the select men of Boston; and, in 1766, was elected a member of the General Assembly of Massachusetts. He there exhibited talents of a superior order, which attracted the attention, excited the admiration, and gained the esteem of his colleagues. They also excited the jealousy and irony of his enemies, who soon put him in the crucible of slander and persecution; but, after a long trial, he came out like gold seven times tried; he was weighed in the scale of justice, and not found wanting.

As a proof of the high estimation in which he was held when in the assembly, he was placed on the most important committees of that body, and was uniformly chairman. He was also elected speaker, but the governor, who was jealous of his liberal principles, put a veto upon his appointment.

His intelligence had led him to investigate the laws of nature, of God, and of man; he arrived at the conclusion, that men are endowed by their Creator with certain inherent privileges, that they are born equal, and they of right are and should be free. He drank deep from the fountain of liberal principles, and was among the first to repel the blind and cruel policy of the mother country, and rouse his fellow men to a sense of impending danger.

Although deeply interested in commercial business, and more exposed to the wrath of kingly power than any individual in the province, he boldly placed himself at the head of associations for prohibiting the importation of goods from Great Britain. The other provinces caught the fire from these examples; and, to these associations may be traced the preliminaries of the tragic scene, that resulted in the emancipation of the enslaved colonies of the pilgrim fathers.

As an evidence that John Hancock was a leading patriot at that time, the first seizure that was made by the revenue officers, under pretence of some trivial violation of the laws, was that of one of his vessels. The excitement produced by this transaction was so great, that a large number collected to rescue the property. It was moved under the guns of an armed ship, ready charged, to repel any attack. But the popular fury rose like a thunder gust from the western horizon; they rushed to the onset; brought away the vessel, razed to the ground some of the houses occupied by the custom-house officers, and burnt, in triumph, the boat of the collector. This fire was, for a time, smothered by the mantle of authority, but it was never extinguished; it was the fire of Liberty. It only required to be fanned by the impolitic oppression that eventually blew it into curling flames.

To prevent the recurrence of a similar scene, several regiments of British troops, with all their loathsome vices fresh upon them, were quartered amongst the inhabitants. This was like pouring pitch on a fire to extinguish it. The stubborn and independent spirits of Boston were not to be awed into subjection. The consequences were tragical. On the evening of the 5th of March, 1770, a party of these soldiers fired upon, and killed a number of the citizens, who had collected to manifest their indignation against those they hated more than they *feared*. Had an earthquake shook the town to its very centre, the agitation could not have been greater. Had it been melting before devouring flames, the commotion could not have increased.

The tolling of bells; the groans of the wounded and dying; the shrieks of widows, mothers, and orphans; the flight of soldiers; the rush of the inhabitants; the cry of vengeance, urged on by popular fury; all combined to render it a scene of confusion and horror, upon which imagination dwells and sickens; beneath which, description quails and trembles; at the sight of which, humanity bleeds at every pore. It is a commentary, strong and eloquent, upon the impropriety of quartering soldiers amongst citizens, of maintaining civil law by military force, and of intruding upon the *sanctum sanctorum* of private and domestic peace.

On the following day, a meeting of the inhabitants was held; a committee was appointed, at the head of which were Hancock and Samuel Adams, instructed to request the governor to remove the troops from the town. He at first refused, but finding, under existing circumstances, that discretion was the better part of valour, he ordered their removal. This, with promises that the offenders should be brought to condign punishment, prevented further hostilities at that time.

The awful and imposing solemnities of interring those who were killed, was then attended to. Their bodies were deposited in the same tomb; tears of sorrow, sympathy, and a just indignation, were mingled with the clods as they descended upon the butchered victims; and the event was, for many years, annually commemorated with deep and mournful solemnity. A *te deum* and *requiem* were chanted to their memory, and the torch of liberty was replenished at their tomb.

At one of these celebrations, in the midst of the revolution, John Hancock delivered the address. A few brief extracts will give the reader some idea of the feelings and sentiments that pervaded his bosom, and of his powers as an orator and a statesman.

“Security to the persons and property of the governed, is so evidently the design and end of civil government, that to attempt a logical demonstration of it, would be like burning a taper at noon day, to assist the sun in enlightening the world. It cannot be either virtuous or honourable to attempt to support institutions of which this is not the great and principal basis.”

“Some boast of being friends to government: I also am a friend to government, to a righteous government, founded upon the principles of reason and justice; but I glory in avowing my eternal enmity to tyranny.”

He then proceeded to portray, in vivid colours, the wrongs inflicted by the mother country, and urged his fellow citizens to vindicate their injured rights.

In speaking of the Boston massacre, his language shows the emotions of his heaving bosom, the feelings of his indignant soul.

“I come reluctantly to the transactions of that dismal night, when, in such quick succession, we felt the extremes of grief, astonishment, and rage; when Heaven, in anger, suffered hell to take the reins; when Satan, with his chosen band, opened the sluices of New England’s blood, and sacrilegiously polluted her land with the bodies of her guiltless sons.

“Let this sad tale never be told without a tear; let not the heaving bosom cease to burn with a manly indignation at the relation of it through the long tracts of future time; let every parent tell the story to his listening children, till the tears of pity glisten in their eyes, or boiling passion shakes their tender frames.

“Dark and designing knaves, murderous parricides! how dare you tread upon the earth which has drunk the blood of slaughtered innocence shed by your hands? How dare you breathe that air, which wafted to the ear of heaven the groans of those who fell a sacrifice to your accursed ambition? But if the labouring earth doth not expand her jaws; if the air you breathe is not commissioned to be the minister of death; yet, hear it and tremble! the eye of heaven penetrates the darkest chambers of the soul, and you, though screened from human observation, must be arraigned, must lift your hands, red with the blood of those whose death you have procured, at the tremendous bar of God.”

His boldness greatly exasperated the adherents of the crown, and every artifice was put in requisition to injure his growing popularity. Amongst them, was his nomination by the governor, who had uniformly been his enemy, to the council, hoping, by this stratagem, that he would, by his acceptance, turn the populace against him. By a prompt refusal he defeated the intrigues of his enemies, and riveted himself more strongly on the affections of those who favoured liberal principles, rendering himself more obnoxious to the king’s officers. He was at this time captain of the governor’s guard, and was immediately removed. As a testimony of respect to him, his company; composed of the first citizens of Boston, dissolved themselves at once.

The tocsin of the revolution was now sounded from the heights of Lexington; American blood had again been shed by British soldiers; the people heard the dread clarion of revolution; thousands rushed to the rescue; the hireling troops fled; in their flight, they found the messengers of death stationed on their whole route; retribution met them at every corner; the trees and fences were illumined by streams of fire from the rusty muskets of the native yeomanry; and many of Briton’s proud sons slumbered in the arms of death on that memorable, that eventful day.

The governor, on the reception of this news, issued his proclamation in the name of his most Christian Majesty, George the III., declaring the province in a state of rebellion, but graciously offering pardon to all returning penitents, excepting John Hancock and Samuel Adams, who had also rendered himself obnoxious by his patriotic and independent course. A secret attempt was made to arrest them, but was foiled. These two philanthropists were preserved to aid in the glorious cause they had boldly and nobly espoused, and to become shining lights in the blue arch of liberty, and bright examples of patriotism to future generations. Their proscription by the governor only served to endear them still more to their friends and their bleeding country. In 1774, John Hancock was unanimously elected President of the Provincial Congress of Massachusetts; and, in 1775, he was called to preside over the Continental Congress. He accepted this appointment with diffidence, there being many of its number much his senior, and of eminent talents. He, however, succeeded in discharging the arduous duties assigned him, with fidelity and great ability, and to the satisfaction of his colleagues and his country.

His was the only name affixed to the Declaration of Independence when it was first published and presented to the fearless patriots for their approval; and it stands first in bold relief, on a thousand facsimiles, scattered through the world. It stands at the head of a list of sages, whose names are enrolled in unfading glory, and will be handed down to the remotest ages of time, unsullied and untarnished.

Impaired in his health and worn down by fatigue, Mr. Hancock resigned his station in Congress in October, 1777, having presided over that august body for two years and a half, with a credit to himself, gratifying to his friends, and advantageous to the cause of human rights.

Soon after he returned home, he was elected to a convention of his native state to form a constitution for its government. His experience and talents were of great service in producing a truly republican instrument. In 1780, he was elected the first governor under the new constitution, and continued to fill the gubernatorial chair for five years, when he resigned. After two years he was again elected, and continued to fill this station, with dignity and usefulness, during the remainder of his life. During his administration over the destinies of his dear native state, there were many difficulties to overcome, many evils to suppress. The devastations of the war had paralyzed every kind of business; reduced thousands from affluence to poverty; polluted the morals of society; and left a heavy debt to be liquidated. Many conflicting interests were to be reconciled; many restless spirits were to be subdued; and many visionary theories were to be exploded. Insubordination, arrayed in a faction of 12,000 men, threatening to annihilate the government, was the most prominent evil to be removed. Abuses and riots were of frequent occurrence; the civil authorities were disregarded; and it was found necessary to call out the militia to preserve order. By the prudent management of Governor Hancock, these difficulties were adjusted, the clamour of the people hushed, their complaints silenced, order restored, and but few lives sacrificed at the shrine of treason.

For a time, the governor, by his firm and determined course, incurred the displeasure and enmity of many prominent men; but when reason resumed her station, and prosperity began to alleviate the burdens that had been so strongly felt, their ire was appeased, the sour feelings of party spirit lost their rancour, and admiration and esteem for his sterling virtues and talents, and the long and arduous services he had rendered his country and his state, disarmed his enemies of their resentment, and produced uniform love and esteem.

He used his best exertions in favour of the adoption of the federal constitution, and, to cap the climax of his well earned fame, he left a sick bed on the last week of the session of the Assembly of his state, and, by his vote and influence, induced them to accept and sanction that important instrument of

confederation, that has thus far held us in the bonds of union, strength, and power.

Governor Hancock now had the satisfaction of seeing prosperity spread its benign influence over the whole infant republic, and her institutions, laws, trade, manufactures, commerce, and agriculture, based on the firm pillars of freedom and eternal justice. His long nursed vision was reduced to a happy reality; he felt that he could die in peace; and, on the 8th of October, 1793, his soul took its flight suddenly and unexpectedly, to join the kindred spirits that had gone before, to enter upon the untried scenes of the eternal world. He continued to serve his country to the last, and, if a particle of malice against him lingered in the dark bosom of any man, it was buried with him in the tomb. Governor Hancock was amiable in his private character; highly honourable in his feelings; gentlemanly in his deportment; fashionable in his style of living; fond of innocent amusements, but free from corrupting vices; liberal and charitable; a friend to the poor, the oppressed, and the distressed; diligent in business; open and frank in his disposition; a faithful companion; a public spirited citizen, and a consistent man.

Source:

Judson, L. Carroll. "John Hancock." *A Biography of the Singers of The Declaration of Independence and of Washington and Patrick Henry*. Philadelphia: J. Dobson, and Thomas, Cowperthwait & Co, 1839. 25 – 29. Electronic.