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Johnny Long of Buckfield, Maine?

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JOHNNY LONG OF BUCKFIELD, MAINE

By RICHARD CARY

LONG was his name, long his life, and long his list of noteworthy accomplishments. Evidently, the Honorable John Davis Long was by natural inclination a poet and scholar, by moral compulsion and training a lawyer, public servant and temperance activist. Though basically introspective, he could exude Rotarian heartiness. While Governor of Massachusetts he wrote in his diary, "I suppose people think I think politics. Ah, how far away in other dreams I float."[1] Yet, during the time he served as Secretary of the Navy, a local newspaper could honestly report: "To the people of Buckfield 'Old Home Week' wouldn't be worth the breath you spend in speaking of it if 'Johnny' was not coming home to help the thing along. Yes, they all call him 'Johnny,' just as every one who loves him calls the governor of New York 'Teddy.'" Any attempt to understand this antipodal man and the sentiments he voiced in the Commencement Address[2] at Colby University in 1883 must begin at least within the first decade of his life in Buckfield, Maine.

He was born in that farming community center not far from Portland on October 27, 1838, the youngest of Zadoc Long's four children. His father, a veritable Antaeus of the spirit, was pressed into early retirement from his prosperous vocation of village storekeeper by unfortunate frailties of the flesh. A traditionalist given to frequent apothegms, he filled out his days

1 This and subsequent quotations from Long's diaries are derived from Lawrence Shaw Mayo's *America of Yesterday, as Reflected in the Journal of John Davis Long* (Boston, 1923).

2 The recently discovered unpublished 61-page manuscript of this Address has been acquired by Colby College Library.

reading, writing verses (some of which were published), commenting on the state of the nation, and acquiring for himself a reputation of immense culture. To this insatiably curious and implacably formalistic father, the attentive son owed more than one glint of his divergent characteristics.

John's first explorations in his father's small but select library led him to English and American history. Enjoined to avoid novels until he reach a discriminate maturity, he nevertheless savored the exciting (and asceptic) fictions of Scott and Cooper before he was twelve. Another injunction — which he observed more strictly to the letter — was to set down daily memoranda of thoughts and events. Thus, at the age of nine he inaugurated a series of diaries which he maintained until the month of his death sixty-seven years later, in point of pure stamina eclipsing Emerson's monumental record by an even dozen years.

The earliest entries in this astounding journal are precociously sonorous. With all the weight of his infantine punditry, the boy expounded dutifully his reactions to national politics, international diplomacy, corporate finances, and other topics of comparable moment. Often he dwelt on his love of music and Latin literature, on kindliness of heart, on hard work and temperance. Between these sallies into statesmanship, estheticism and homiletics, the stern script of the mentor was apt to materialize. "My son," interpolated Zadoc in 1848, "I have looked over what you wrote in your journal during my absence, and find the matter well enough, but the *penmanship is not good*. . . . You must take more pains." Obedient effort under this fire brought the boy only additional censure within sixty days: "John Davis, you *must* write better and plainer." What may have smouldered before in the boy's breast now broke out in his nearest approach to rebellion. "I have no good pen," he answered boldly and, one may surmise, reproachfully. Well into John's sophomore year at college, dour Zadoc continued to intrude gratuitous Polonius-like counsels, with no further signs of protest. But the dichotomy in the boy's mind was plainly manifested in a pair of notations made before he was ten. Compare the primitive ebullience of "We joined the boys who fired the Cannon and blowed the trumpets, and drummed on

old tin pails, and made all the noise we could, so as to wake up the folks, every one of them," with the accrued priggishness of

> I hate to see a scholar's desk
> With toys and playthings full,
> As if to play with rattletraps
> Was all he did at school.

Under the thumb of father's chief canon — "Fit yourself to be useful" — the twig was steadily bent, submitted, but not entirely. In the secret grain, the counterforce persisted.

Education was throughout his life a matter of closest regard and regret. From the very first he was disgruntled, rating his village schoolmasters and schoolmistresses as not "especially inspiring." At Hebron Academy, where his teachers were graduates of Colby [then Waterville] College, he complained of homesickness and inadequate academic fare. When fourteen he entered Harvard and immediately succumbed to loneliness again. Upon seeing haycocks in Cambridgeport, he regressed vehemently. "It put me in mind of my home in the country, far away in Maine, a little village . . . with its brooks and river flowing instead of the salt water standing still; with its hills and valleys and rugged mountains instead of the same continual, monotonous, even plain." Intuitively, he ascribed his malaise to Zadoc's overpowering prevalence. "One reason is that in my disposition, being some like my father, I cannot be very happy in any foreign situation."

As at Hebron, he eventually conquered his sense of isolation and engaged in an assortment of student activities. But, although he was graduated second in his class, he reviled "Harvard faddists" and declared unequivocally, "I look back upon my college education with less satisfaction than any other part of my life. . . . I secured good marks . . . but it meant very little solid acquirement either of knowledge or of character."[3] Similarly of Harvard Law School; he felt he had been indifferently prepared for the rigorous experiences he was to encounter.

During his academy days he came strongly to the opinion that "acquirement [of knowledge] is the rule; but clear, inter-

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3 "Reminiscences of My Seventy Years' Education," *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, XLII (1908-1909), 351-352.

esting, accurate, forcible expression is the exception." Thereafter he considered that educators were misplacing their emphasis — there should be less "piling in" and more "putting out." He took earnestly to declamation, determined that "they shall find in the Maine boy — ay! — the wild Oxford County boy — no contemptible elocutionist." He participated regularly in fortnightly Hebron debates, describing his delivery as "the drone of a scared infant," but prized by his classmates "as if he were Daniel Webster himself."[4]

Despite his insistence that the instruction in declamation at Harvard was "nerveless and meagre," he developed his aptitude there and was elected to a literary debating society for his demonstrated prowess in public speaking. Indeed, so far did he progress, that he constituted himself a critic at large. In his senior year he recorded flatly: "I heard the celebrated lecturer and peculiar philosopher, Ralph Waldo Emerson, but his speech was very poor, dry, and uninteresting." When, a month later, he heard James Russell Lowell, then professor of romance languages and literatures, Long seemed less disturbed about the performance.

At this date one can only speculate vaguely upon his own relative excellence in speechmaking, but it is impressive that he was sought by every variety of provincial and metropolitan organization, and that he was chosen to read the oration at the dedication of Washington Monument in February 1885. While his published speeches cannot divulge his manner of presentation, their matter and tone make clear some reasons for his universal popularity. Almost all the pieces in his *After-Dinner and Other Speeches* (Boston, 1895) are brief and sincere tributes to institutions or anniversaries. Long had a talent for striking the appropriate note without appearing mawkish or exigent. There was just enough of the scholarly and the homely, enough alteration of humor and reflectiveness, overlaid by glowing rhetoric and unspotted optimism, to be attractive to a diversified audience. Perhaps, however, his public charm sprang from more fundamental sources. "He has no personal enthusiasms, and no vanity," stated two contemporary historians.[5]

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4 Alfred Cole & Charles F. Whitman, *A History of Buckfield* (Buckfield, Me., 1915), 237. Long's portrait is on the frontispiece of this work.

5 *Ibid.*, 245.

They made no direct application of their dictum but one may espy Zadoc's dogged admonitions of selfless service lurking in the background.

The reverse of Long's social trend disclosed itself in his chronic striving toward literary creativity. Here the irrepressible individual bucked hard against the conventional shell that encased him. Beginning as a boy, he produced through his busiest years stories and articles for newspapers, and poetry "by the cart load." He was elected Class Odist in his senior year at Harvard, and his composition was sung on commencement day. Innumerable other ceremonial verses rolled off his pen, best remembered being "Forefather's Hymn," theme of the 1882 Plymouth Celebration. But overshadowing all these were the sensuous swatches of nostalgia (*viz.*, "The Mountains of Maine") in which he recreated the landscapes and dreamscapes of his youth. Some of the more intimate self-expressions he collected in *Bites of a Cherry* (Boston, 1872) and *At The Fireside* (Boston, 1914). Once, a play he had written was professionally performed at the Boston Theatre. And to escape the tedium of the legislative chamber during the year he served as Lieutenant-Governor of Massachusetts, he translated Vergil's *Aeneid* into English blank verse while his less fanciful colleagues contended over affairs of commonwealth.

But this propensity for belles lettres was stolidly subordinated to his "useful" public career, which was noted for honesty, routine competence and "conscientious impartiality." His most audacious political partisanships involved prohibition, women's suffrage, silver coinage, capital punishment and world peace. Elected a representative to the Massachusetts legislature (1875), he was quickly installed as Speaker, a position he held through 1877. Next he campaigned successfully for Lieutenant-Governor against General Benjamin Franklin Butler, a Colby alumnus and a controversial figure, to say the least.[6] In 1880

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6 Uncharacteristic of Long's bland dignity in these matters, the Butler-Long campaign turned out "vindictive, personal, bitter beyond example in Massachusetts." Long had had previous brushes with "that most corrupting demagogue," and, truth to tell, the onus must fall on the head of Butler, who had already been in and out of some notable scrapes. Indeed, when in 1883 Butler succeeded Long as Governor, the President and Fellows of Harvard decided that the time was ripe to discontinue the custom of awarding the degree of Doctor of Laws, *ex officio*, to the incoming head of state. For a detailed account of the Long-Butler campaign, see next article.

Long occupied the Governor's chair for his first of three annual terms, declining renomination to avert the prolonged "Chinese gong-beating of false charges and cunning insinuations" which had plagued him. But in that same year he was induced to run for U. S. Representative and was elected to the 48th Congress. Thus, in July 1883, the Honorable John Davis Long came proudly to Colby as ex-Governor and Congressman-elect.

The circumstances surrounding his invitation to speak were not of the simplest or most flattering, had he known. On January 29 the Kennebec *Journal* announced: "It is understood that an invitation has been extended to Gov. Butler of Massachusetts, to deliver the address . . . the coming commencement." This alternate choice alone could have rendered the request intolerable to Long. But could he have seen the list of preferred speakers submitted by the senior class to President George Dana Boardman Pepper, then in his first year of tenure at Colby, he must certainly have refused. Thereon, his name appeared seventh in a slate of seven.[7] And this was not all. An excerpt from the Colby *Echo* of June 1883 reveals an attempt by the near-belligerent, Long-suffering senior class to shunt him gracelessly aside:

> By a strange lack of consideration, the almanac makers have billed the Fourth of July for Commencement Day. This coincidence is especially unhappy for the Seniors, who are always expected, and who are always anxious, to close up their college course with an entertainment of more than ordinary merit at the Town Hall. Notwithstanding this change in terms which was thought by the Trustees a desirable one, the class were determined to face the difficulty, and not to be outdone in this direction by any former class. They instructed their committee to lay before them prices, etc., of a high-toned drama, and a first-class concert. This the committee did. But in the meantime learning that plans were forming for a "loud time" in town at the rink on the night of the Fourth, they hit upon what they believed was a paying scheme. It was to defer the oration till Wednesday evening, secure the rink for Tuesday evening, and bring out at that place the oratorio of "The Creation" with a chorus of five hundred voices. . . . But alas for our scheme, it fell through because the Faculty and some of the Trustees and

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7 This list is handwritten on a small square of paper pasted into one of President Pepper's scrapbooks, recently acquired by Colby College Library. The seven names are inscribed in ink, below which, in another hand, are lightly pencilled the names of two other personages, apparently last ditch emergencies.

For further description of President Pepper's scrapbooks, see pages 276-282 of this issue.

friends of the college thought it not advisable to change the time for the oration. We would not complain, however . . .

The older heads remained adamant and John Long's teetering position on the program was officially sustained.

For a man so prestigious, his imminent arrival in Waterville roused singularly little excitement in the local press. This of course preceded the era of flash headlines, but one might have expected more from the Waterville *Mail* (June 15) than this drab second-page morsel in lower case type: "In the evening the oration before the Literary Societies will be delivered by Hon. John D. Long," crammed in after Class Day Exercises and meeting of the Alumni Association. Moved to the front page on June 22 and June 29, this identical item received markedly less prominence than Forepaugh's Great Show (a HUNDRED ELEPHANTS: ROMAN HIPPODROME: 3-RING CIRCUS, Transcendent! Tremendous! Immense!), Colby's victory over Bowdoin in baseball, and the effectiveness of a new patent diuretic.

Notwithstanding the absence of flutter, Long arrived on campus in good time and delivered his oration to a larger than usual attendance at the Waterville Baptist Church, Tuesday, July 3 at 7:30 P.M., as scheduled. Competing as it did with such major municipal concerns as the pickpockets who habitually followed Forepaugh's extravaganza, the "grand time" planned at the Roller Skating Rink on the Fourth, and the spectacular pre-dawn fire at Bang's flour and grist mills, Long's speech managed to raise some fairly extensive ripples of its own. It was reported, quoted and criticized in such representative papers as the Kennebec *Journal* (Augusta), *Zion's Advocate* (Portland), the Lewiston *Journal, The Watchman* (Boston), the *National Baptist,* and — almost penitentially — the Waterville *Mail* of July 6, which devoted eight full columns of its first and second pages to a detailed chronicle of Commencement proceedings, with bountiful observance of the ex-Governor's share.

The speech may have been called "The Relations Existing Between Colleges and the Public," but we have only *The Watchman's* word for this; the unpublished manuscript admits no title. Neither is it possible to reconstruct faultlessly what Long read: the manuscript is a scraggle of eliminations and amendments,

I have accepted with genuine pleasure your invitation to Colby University. There are some who will forgive me if, more loyal to early associations and grateful memories than to present inspiration I call ~~her~~ your alma mater Waterville College, the modest name of her former marriage. It was her sons of that time, of whom I heard in my school-days; whose examples helped fire me with the ardor of learning, and who were my revered instructors in the preparation of the academy. Nor, as a son of Maine can I forget that under that name she stood for something more than classic University at whose springs ~~the~~ pilgrim may drink of the fresh and sparkling waters of literature. For more than half a century she stood in this state for the cause of ~~education~~ a higher popular Education. She represented a struggling but determined purpose that, whatever obstacles opposed, whatever poverty or slenderness of means deterred such an education should be within the reach of every boy who dreamed of the scholar's

FIRST PAGE OF LONG'S COLBY COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

Delivered at Waterville Baptist Church, July 3, 1883

not always clearly scored, and no two newspaper versions agree verbatim in the passages they chose to print. Long's message, however, is unilateral and unmistakable. Now in the fullness of his forty-five years, consummately conditioned in childhood and tempered to perfection by his adult activities, it was predictable that, after the nominal compliments to the college, he would say what he said. No sedulous Poor Richard ever learned better or recited more stoutly "the very alphabet of the conduct of life."

He struck his theme resoundingly on page 3 and hammered it *ad seriatim* thereafter.

> It is not an idle thing to remember today for what these schools stand. Their results are to be read not in the measure of the classroom and the text book but in the history of the graduates, who, scattered like good seed upon the face of the earth, ripen into lives of usefulness and good example and influence, and who in the church, at the teacher's desk, at the bar, in Congress and in labor everywhere in public and private station bear fruit, some a hundred fold, some sixty fold, some thirty fold. They help weave the fabric of this marvellous national and social development which is the crowning glory of the ages, and to which they add alike the strong fibre of use and the grace of ornament.

There it was, familiar and well-worn as a doorstep, the doctrine of social *usefulness,* the litany of *use.* The function of the educated man or woman was not mere self-cultivation but the enhancement of "the whole body of the popular life and sentiment." They were not to think that this in any manner "elevated or separated [them] from the level and work and needs of the people;" on the contrary, they were "only the more identified with and immersed in them." Now he touched his pinnacle: "There is no conflict, no rivalry, no balancing of accounts between the scholar and the people." ("Admirable," said the Lewiston *Journal.*) For the education of true scholars owes as much to the people, to "contact with the living needs and interests of humanity," as it does to schools. With a magniloquent flourish of the rhetorical question, Long vivified his point:

> Does Emerson, when you walk at his side, take you to the cloisters of the academy or of nature? Can you separate the furrows of the farmer Cromwell from those of the scholar John Milton, twin ploughshares of civil liberty? Will you array Washington, Franklin and Lincoln on one side of the line of useful patriotic scholarship and Jefferson, John Quincy

Adams, and Sumner on the other and say it is because these were college graduates and those were not?

("Most excellent," said *Zion's Advocate.*)

Useful, and its variants, dominates these extracts and crops up elsewhere in firm wedlock with *service.* Education, for instance, is the fairest of all pathways by which "the student may go to usefulness and honorable service." "Nothing is a sure triumph that does not rest on . . . genuine useful service." And the mutation, "public service is a noble ambition." ("Really serviceable," said *The Watchman.*) Long went on to dilate his concept of pragmatic self-negation: "There is a public sentiment which is distinct from the sentiment of the individuals who compose the public. It is the aggregate of their better sentiment, undressed from their worse, as the two cannot be separated in the individual, but can be separated in this common massing." The individual would flower only to the extent that he sank his roots into common soil. This seemed irrefutable to him, as did the infallibility of common sense. "Popular sentiment," he pontificated, "in the long run never misjudges those who stand for its verdict." The echo of Zadoc's "Fit yourself to be useful" pulses brazenly throughout the context. That indurate apostle of utility had done his work well.

In the course of his talk Long made incidental forays into several of his favorite areas: the basis of moral happiness or misery lies not in worldly circumstance but in the personal moral character; the public's apathy to illicit sales of prohibited liquors; the requisites of vigor and eloquence in the arts of expression (writing and speaking) which he looked upon as "the very desiderata of education." ("Real practical good counsel," said an unidentified newspaper clipping.) But among these and other high-minded suasions could be detected an anomalous sound, sometimes explicit and paradoxical, more often inferential and ironic. The private man who lived under the civic husk would not be totally denied. About halfway through the speech Long discharged this probably unwitting *cri de coeur:* "'We can live only in our ideals — by the purposes which tone the heart and animate the will, and by the steady silent effectual influences that breathe from the complete man." Wondrous statement from a man who had succumbed to over-

weening demands of duty and had all but suppressed the poetic side of his completeness. What oblique compassion he evokes by his continuing self-indictment. "The best is at our command, and yet many of us . . . will accept the meaner things . . . not infrequently from our modesty and our self-depreciation, and too often from innocent unconsciousness of how easy it is to have and breathe the upper air." More than one psychoanalyst will assure you that — all unaware, of course — Long was alluding to Parnassus, exposing an unresolved guilt paradigm, and indulging a kind of Dimmesdalean masochism. I bow before their collective wisdom.

Uncovering his stifled bias less deviously, *Zion's Advocate* pointed to the beauty and felicity of expression rare on such occasions. As a practicing politician, Long was not unaffected by the turgid parlance of Victorian oratory, and much of the claimed "felicity" runs to hyperbole, cliché, and distended parallelism. He discoursed glossily about hearts of oak, incense of college flattery, soaring souls, treasures of literature richer than caves of gold, plough handles warm with honest sweat, and the glory of the noonday sun. To give Long his due, however, he drew artfully simple metaphors from nature, consistent with those in his better poems. Seed and water images predominate, and while there may be an overflow of the latter (springs, pools, streams, fountains, tides, cataracts), they are deftly channeled to the purpose. And, gleaming here and there, one discovers inklings of above-ordinary sensibility:

> It was the glittering but unsubstantial fabric of a distinction that exists only in words thrown by the consummate skill of an artist, like a rainbow of dew drops, athwart the gazer's vision. (Page 8)

> May each of you [not] feel that you are an Endymion lulled by false luxurious gods to sensuous endless slumber, but an Alexander burning for new worlds to conquer, a Sydney waving the cup from his own dying lips to some fainter brother's, a Puritan forerunner, though in exile for his conscience's sake, laying the foundations of a new commonwealth of civil and religious liberty . . . a poet always in the serenity and gentleness and bravery of your heart. (Pages 60-61)

> The oriental horror of the living and the dead in one hideous embrace . . . (Page 41)

Granted, these are unpolished nuggets, but what might Long have accomplished had he elected to promote the special rather

than the communal self, had he deferred to the artist, not the moralist? Wistfully, one recalls the owlish little boy inditing dutiful rubrics for father Zadoc to the everlasting detriment of the poet that might have been.

After the Commencement Dinner in Alumni Hall on the afternoon of July 4th, John Long was at his expansive best. The Waterville *Mail* reporter lavished fullest detail and admiration upon his after-dinner comments, and *The Watchman* opined that he had "seldom, if ever, been more felicitous in his post-prandials." To the satisfied assemblage he extolled the merits of the town, the college, and the state, cannily appending a jovial reference to his quondam foe — and Colby alumnus — fearsome Ben Butler. He expressed delight that the student speeches at the graduating exercises were not primly literary or esthetic but dealt with the *practical* subjects of monopoly, socialism, the scholar in politics, and others in similar vein. Since it was now the practical business man who controlled public affairs, this was all to the good. In commending the contemporaneity of student interests, he cast another lance at his alma mater. "My indictment against Harvard is not that it taught Latin and Greek too exclusively, but that it taught me nothing at all." Besides delivering his oration gratis, before he left campus Long contributed $100 to a permanent endowment fund.

Although he complained that public life kept him under "a constant and severe headlight of criticism," he served continuously in Congress from 1883 to 1889, returning to Washington after an interval of private law practice as Secretary of the Navy in President McKinley's cabinet. Thus, he presided over the department during — of all coincidences — the blowing up of the *USS Maine* in the Havana harbor, and endorsed Dewey's maneuvers in the Spanish-American War. His assistant for part of this time was the uncontainable Theodore Roosevelt, and their association was not unmarked by shock. Tactful, conservative Long portrayed Roosevelt as a bull in a china shop and asserted that "in his precipitate way, [Roosevelt] has come very near causing more of an explosion than happened to the *Maine*." "He shouts at the top of his voice, and wanders all over creation." "And yet," he mused clairvoyantly, after Teddy had resigned to fight in the war, "how absurd all this will sound,

if by some turn of fortune he should accomplish some great thing and strike a very high mark!" There was talk of Long as candidate for Vice-President in 1900, but while he was solemnly pondering its possibilities, Roosevelt reluctantly accepted the nomination — and landed in the presidency upon McKinley's assassination.

After his tiring stint in the capital, Long looked forward to spending half-years amid the rolling hills, cedar woods, and "original Maine men" of Buckfield, but he was not to return for more than two or three weeks at a stretch. He resumed the practice of law, found time to write or edit several books (most important, *The New American Navy,* 2 vols., New York, 1903), and puttered happily in his do-it-yourself carpenter shop. With a pert nod to incongruity, he consented to the presidency of Harvard's Alumni Association and in the same year was elected president of its Board of Overseers.

On August 28, 1915, in his "maritime Buckfield" — the village of Hingham, Massachusetts, where he had made his home for more than four decades — death came to Johnny Long. Where might life have taken him had he followed Apollo instead of Bentham? In the deepest recesses of his being, how often had he confronted that gnawing query?

FOR GOVERNOR OF MASSACHUSETTS: LONG *vs.* BUTLER

By JAMES HUMPHRY III

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN, in *Poor Richard's Almanac,* wrote that "the first mistake in public business is the going into it." The truth of these words is especially applicable to the Massachusetts gubernatorial campaign of 1879. Even if contrived, the nominations of the opposing parties could not have brought face to face two candidates more diverse in both temperament and reputation. Viewing the experience in retrospect, John Davis Long — caught in a vise to "save" his party, like many another candidate of present-day vintage — might well have