

Dr. Eliot a Great Writer of Enduring Inscriptions

By MARVIN HEATH

DR. CHARLES W. ELIOT, President Emeritus of Harvard, is noted as a great educator and his fame as such will live long, yet not many people know that he is probably the greatest writer of enduring inscriptions in this or any other country. He has furnished the text for more inscriptions on monuments, gates, tablets, walls and similar enduring things than any other man, he has memorialized in concrete and perfect English the patriotism and the purpose of American citizenship.

For many years there has been a demand upon the peculiar genius of Dr. Eliot to write fitting sentiments to be chiseled in age-old granite or cast in enduring bronze, especially whenever some patriotic shrine has been marked or erected. It is said that he speaks English better than any other man and it is certain that he has no peer in the rare art of writing inscriptions. Massachusetts, Dr. Eliot's home state, is singularly rich in historical scenes from that sandy tip of Cape Cod, where first the Pilgrims landed, to Concord Bridge where was fired the first real shot of the Revolution, and at most of these spots are to be found inscriptions written by Dr. Eliot that are world-famous because of their brevity, appropriateness of sentiment, power and purity of language.

A careful study of some of these famous inscriptions gives a far better idea of this genius that he possesses than any amount of mere narrative or description.

On the bronze tablet that marks the towering Pilgrim Monument at Provincetown, Cape Cod, is this from the pen of this famous educator:

On November 21, 1620, the Mayflower, carrying 102 passengers, men, women and children, cast anchor in this harbor, sixty-seven days from Plymouth, England.

On the same day the forty-one adult males of the company had solemnly covenanted and combined themselves together "into a civil body politic."

This body politic established and maintained on the bleak and barren edge of a vast wilderness a state without a bishop or a priest; a democratic commonwealth, the members of which were "straightly tied to all care of each other's good and of the whole by every one."

With long-suffering devotions and sober resolutions, they illustrated for the first time in history the principles of the religious and civil liberty and the practice of a genuine democracy.

Therefore the remembrance of them shall be perpetuated in the vast republic that has inherited their ideals.

Dr. Eliot has written so many inscriptions that he cannot give their number for he cannot remember them and has kept no complete list of them. Visitors at the reading room of the Library of Congress have seen the eight statues, allegorical, each bearing an inscription that is, of itself, inspiring. These were written by Dr. Eliot. General Casey was superintending the building of the library and he made several attempts to secure suitable inscriptions for these eight statues. Finally he wrote to Dr. Eliot, sending him descriptions and explaining that there was room for only seventy-two letters in each, as they must be in letters large enough to be easily read.

For the statue on religion Dr. Eliot made considerable study. "After much thought," Dr. Eliot said in telling the story, "I finally took the verse from Romans, 12, 5—'So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another.'

"It was one time that an inscription did not quite suit, and since then I have appreciated the great wisdom of General Casey. 'I like them all except that,' he said, 'that one is too Christian.'

"When we come to think of it, freedom to worship God is one great glory of our Constitution and such a quotation might not be acceptable to many. General Casey asked his secretary to write to me for another, and that day he died suddenly in his home. The next day I went to the Hebrew for my quotation and took, 'What doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to walk humbly with thy God?' Micah, 6, 8."

One of the inscriptions considered the very best Dr. Eliot has written was one of his earliest. This is on the Civil War Memorial in Boston Common and was written in 1877. It reads as follows:

To the men of Boston who died for their country on land and sea in the war which kept the Union whole, destroyed slavery and maintained the Constitution, the grateful city has built this monument that their example may speak to coming generations.

In tributes to men or to deeds Dr. Eliot excelled. He has always been ready with the best possible expression in the fewest words. In writing the inscription for the Benjamin Thompson (Count Rumford) statue erected in Woburn, Mass., he took more than ordinary interest because this man was a founder at Harvard of a professorship which still bears his name. This is how he paid tribute to the memory of the man:

Benjamin Thompson, Count Rumford, born in Woburn, Mass., March 26, 1755, died in Paris, August 21, 1814, the earliest scientific philanthropist. He designed public gardens and by many inventions contributed to the comforts and enjoyments of the people. He proved that heat is motion and had a glimpse of the great doc-

trine known later as the conservation of energy. In exile he won high places of trust and command.

On achievement in general as well as on personal deeds, Dr. Eliot wrote inscriptions of the highest merit. One of the best examples of this was not, unfortunately, permanent, being on the Water Gate at the World's Fair in Chicago. This was really a group of inscriptions, and he was greatly limited as to shape and size of the tablets, which were arranged in advance. Few men could or would even attempt to say anything fitting with the limited number of letters.

Over this grand entrance to the exposition these inscriptions were placed, and the statues that were there should be seen to better appreciate what was written. All but the last two were on the side facing the lake. The last two were on the side facing the Court of Honor and were:

A few dared, toiled and suffered. Myriads enjoy the fruits. Of many races, tongues and creeds and aims but all heroes of discovery. To the bold men their names remembered or forgotten who first explored through perils manifold the shores, lakes, rivers, mountains, valleys and plains of this new world. To the brave settlers who levelled forests, cleared fields, made paths by land and water and planted commonwealths. To the brave women who in solitude amid strange dangers and heavy toil reared families and made homes. Civil liberty the means of building up personal and national character. Toleration in religion the best fruit of the last four centuries.

On the massive bronze bas-relief memorial to Col. Robert Gould Shaw, opposite the State House in Boston, there was room for much more to be written than is usually the case. August St. Gaudens, the sculptor, who designed the memorial, declared that the lines composed by Dr. Eliot and carved on the stone structure that forms the background for the bronze, constituted the finest example of inscription writing he had ever read, and his experience in such things was wide. This inscription was:

THE WHITE OFFICERS.

Taking Life and Honor in their Hands—Cast their Lot With Men of a Despised Race Unproved in War—and Risked Death as Inciters of a Servile Insurrection if Taken Prisoners Besides Encountering All the Common Perils of Camp March and Battle.

THE BLACK RANK AND FILE.

Volunteered when Disaster Clouded the Union Cause—Served Without Pay for Eighteen Months Till Given That of the White Troops—Faced Threatened Enslavement if Captured—Were Brave in Action—Patient Under Dangerous and Heavy Labors and Cheerful Amid Hardships and Privations.

TOGETHER.

They Gave to the Nation Undying Proof That Americans of African Descent Possess the Pride, Courage and Devotion of the Patriot Soldier—One Hundred and Eighty Thousand Such Americans Enlisted Under the Union Flag in MDCCLXIII—MDCCLXV.

There is a bronze tablet in the Town Hall at Revere, Mass., upon which Dr. Eliot has drawn, in forty-seven words, a better picture of the patriot Paul Revere than can be found elsewhere in history, and this without mentioning Revere's ride, but giving his actual worth as a citizen. It is:

REVERE.

A Patriot of the Revolution, Friend of Warren, Hancock and Adams, and their Frequent Messenger. For 50 Years a Leader of the Mechanics and Traders of Boston. Himself Through Life a Skilled Artisan and Bold Manufacturer. He was an Able, Honest, Public-Spirited Citizen, Who Loved Liberty.

When former Senator W. Murray Crane was governor of Massachusetts he asked Dr. Eliot to write an inscription to Jonathan Smith, a "Plain Farmer." Although this is devoted largely to an abstract from Jonathan Smith's famous speech, the selection from that speech and the few but fitting words analyzing that honest old farmer's sentiment, makes it an unusual tribute:

In memory of Jonathan Smith, a plain farmer of Lanesboro who, by a speech full of good sense and good feeling, carried the Massachusetts convention September, 1787—February, 1788, by a vote of 187 to 168 in favor of ratification of the federal Constitution.

"I have lived in a part of the country where I have known the worth of good government by the want of it. I have been a member of the convention to form our own state constitution, and have learned something of the checks and balances of power, and I found them all here. Take things in time; gather the fruit when it is ripe. We sowed our seed when we sent men to the federal convention, now is the harvest, now is the time to reap the fruits of our labor."

We have had "Brevity is the soul of wit" quoted to us for many generations. Dr. Eliot has taught us



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DR. CHARLES W. ELIOT,
President Emeritus of Harvard University.

that upon certain occasions and under certain circumstances, like inscription writing, brevity may also be the soul of wisdom. This is best exemplified in the double inscription over the outer and inner lintels of the Samuel Dexter memorial gate at Harvard University. Here, in fourteen words, Dr. Eliot has told the reason for Harvard's existence and the duties of its graduates.

Over the outer lintel where one entering the grounds may read, is:

Enter to grow in wisdom.

Over the inner lintel where one departing from Harvard may read, is:

Depart to serve better thy country and thy kind.

While history and patriotism have inspired Dr. Eliot to write many inscriptions, he has found inspiration in other things. One of the best examples of this is found in the big railroad terminus in Washington, D. C. There are many quotations about the great station, supplied by Dr. Eliot, but beneath the six allegorical statues he has written that which makes him our greatest writer of history in bronze and stone:

Fire—The greatest of discoveries, enabling man to live in various climates, use many foods and compel the forces of nature to do his work.

Electricity—Carrier of light and power, devourer of time and space, bearer of human speech over land and sea, greatest servant of man—itsself unknown. "Thou hast put all things under his feet."

The Farm—Best home of the family, main source of national wealth, foundation of civilized society—the natural providence.

The old mechanic arts controlling new forces, building new highways for goods and men, override the ocean and make the very ether carry human thought. "The desert shall rejoice and blossom as the rose."

For Freedom—Sweetener of hut and hall, bringer of life out of naught; Freedom, O fairest of all the daughters of time and of thought.

For Imagination—Men's imagination has conceived all numbers and letters—all tools, vessels and shelters—every art and trade—all philosophy and poetry—and all politics. "The truth shall make you free."

All these are but a few of the scores of such inscriptions that this very remarkable man, Dr. Eliot, has written—inscriptions that will last through many generations.

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