THE AMERICAN READER

WORDS THAT MOVED A NATION

Old and new classics from Benjamin Franklin, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, W. E. B. DuBois, Irving Berlin, John F. Kennedy, and others whose words have become part of America's heritage

Edited by Diane Ravitch

"Here in a single, rich volume are the classic texts that evoke America in both its wondrous diversity and its abiding centrality of purpose." —*Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.*

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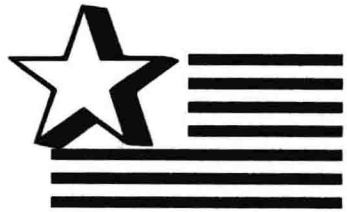

WORDS THAT MOVED A NATION

Edited by

Diane Ravitch

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For Mary

If you wou'd not be forgotten
As soon as you are dead and rotten,
Either write things worth reading,
Or do things worth the writing.

Benjamin Franklin
Poor Richard's Almanack

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INTRODUCTION

The American Reader aims to put its readers into direct contact with the words that inspired, enraged, delighted, chastened, or comforted Americans in days gone by. Gathered here are the classic speeches, poems, arguments, and songs that illuminate—with wit, eloquence, or sharp words—significant aspects of American life.

The imagined audience of *The American Reader* is a group of family or friends, sharing with each other a favorite poem or discovering for the first time a stirring speech. In choosing the contents, I looked for entries that almost everyone once seemed to know, words that resonated in the national consciousness, words that have a timeless quality for the listener and reader. I looked for entries that in their time were widely discussed, that possess literary quality, and that deserve to be remembered. Many of the recent pieces—those that were written since 1970—are not yet established as classics, and perhaps they never will be. But in an anthology of this sort, it is necessary to place bets when dealing with recent work. Not every entry fulfills every criterion, but all, in some manner, speak to the age of which they were part.

A guiding principle for selection of entries was suggested by these questions: What should a reader look like at this time in our history? Who should be added to the pantheon of oft-heard American voices? In my search, I found more material of a very high caliber than I could ever use. I discovered speakers and writers who should be read and heard because of their eloquence and because of the light that they shine on the past and the present. Given the vast number of candidates worthy of inclusion, I could easily have produced several volumes, rather than only one. The number of impassioned speeches, moving poems, and wonderful songs in the American past is far greater than any one volume could encompass.

This collection does not represent every important event in American history; some did not inspire either great oratory or memorable songs. Nor does it represent every major voice; I did not include, for example, those who preached disunion or hatred toward others.

In shaping this collection, I was mindful of the school readers of the nineteenth century, like the *McGuffey's Readers* and the *Sanders' Readers.* Compiled as anthologies, they were the kind of books that families saved and savored. In a similar spirit, this collection offers its readers a respite from the bland and the banal. It contains ample doses of principled rhetoric, angry demands, joyous verse, and uplifting sentiment. Although the longer pieces had to be condensed, the words belong to the original speaker. They have not been homogenized or pasteurized for contemporary consumption. Almost every piece can be read aloud with pleasure. Most of them, at least those written before the mid-twentieth century, were written to be declaimed. Poems and songs, of course, are meant to be recited or sung aloud, not just read silently. Poetry works best when it is spoken and heard. Young people don't read much poetry today; they seldom hear it read

out loud or recite it themselves. Most of the poems that they read in school lack the pounding rhythm and the decided rhyme that causes the poem to become a permanent tenant in the brain.

Almost no one memorizes anything anymore, except perhaps baseball statistics or commercial jingles or the comparative prices of consumer goods. But there is something wonderful about having a poem or a song or the rhetorical crest of a speech available for instant recall. When beautiful speeches and poems are memorized, they remain with you as a lifelong resource. Words that are learned "by heart" become one's personal treasure. In some curious way, they are committed to "memory" but stored lovingly in the "heart." Some things are a pleasure to memorize, a pleasure that one may own and enjoy forever.

The range of good material seems to have narrowed in recent years. This is probably due to the fact that we now live in a visual age, where people learn from blinking screens, not from books or political debates. Words don't seem to matter as much as they used to.

In politics, we know this is so. National political candidates seldom bother to deliver carefully crafted speeches. The candidates campaign not for live audiences but for the television camera. Rather than speak eloquently to an audience of thousands, they try to fashion the riveting sentence or pithy comment that will get them a few seconds on television, where they will be seen and heard by millions of viewers.

Some people think that television has made books obsolete and that the use of interactive technology in schools and offices will make reading obsolete. Some think that it already has. And it is true that many people live utterly in the present, uninterested in anything that happened before today, indifferent to any words except those they hear in the movies, on the radio, or on television.

But reading is not about to disappear. Despite the ease and immediacy of the electronic media, language will continue to be indispensable for intelligent communication. Those who cannot use it will find themselves manipulated and directed by those who can. Those who only listen and watch will be at the mercy of those who write the scripts, program the computers, interpret the news, and extract meaning from the past. No matter how powerful the technology of the future, we will still rely on the power of words and ideas. Those who can command them will be enabled to affect the world. Those who cannot will find themselves excluded not only from jobs and opportunities but from all those experiences that allow us to reflect on the significance of our lives.

The words here collected reveal an integral part of the dynamic of American life. In a democratic society, the power of persuasion is a necessary ingredient of social change. As our society has evolved, articulate men and women have emerged to advocate, argue, debate, demand, and celebrate. Much of what they said and did has relevance for partisans of democratic ideas throughout the world. As we get to know the history of our society and hear the voices of those who created our energetic, complicated, pluralistic, and humane culture, we will understand ourselves and our times better.

In preparing this book, I incurred many personal debts. I owe my deepest gratitude to Eileen Sclan, who worked tirelessly as my assistant. She had the able assistance of Mary Greenfield, Thalassa Curtis, Indira Mehta, Kelly Walsh, and Adam Brightman. I owe special thanks to Nelida Perez of the Center for Puerto Rican Studies at Hunter College, Richard Chabran of the Chicano Studies Research Center of UCLA, Russell Leong of the Asian-

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Diane Ravitch

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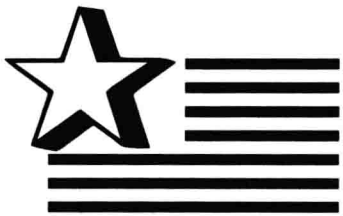

A 1792 commemorative medal showing President George Washington and an Indian leader passing a peace pipe.

THE MAYFLOWER COMPACT

We whose names are underwriten . . . doe by these presents solemnly & mutualy in the presence of God, and one of another, covenant & combine our selves togeather into a civill body politick.

The settling of America began with an idea. The idea was that the citizens of a society could join freely and agree to govern themselves by making laws for the common good.

On November 11, 1620, after sixty-six days at sea, the sailing ship *Mayflower* approached land. On board were 102 passengers. Their destination was the area at the mouth of the Hudson River, but because of rough seas they missed their goal and anchored in what is now Provincetown Harbor off Cape Cod. Since it was late autumn, they decided to make their landing there rather than to sail on. And since they were no longer in the territory for which they had a patent, they signed a covenant before they landed in order to establish a basis for self-government by which all of them were bound.

About a third of the passengers were members of an English separatist congregation that had earlier fled to Leyden, the Netherlands, in search of religious freedom. The entire group of English colonists was later called the Pilgrims. The colonists had negotiated an agreement with the Virginia Company of London that gave them the right to locate wherever they chose in that company's vast holdings and to govern themselves.

Forty-one of the male passengers signed the covenant aboard ship. In what was later known as the Mayflower Compact, the signers pledged to create a body politic that would be based on the consent of the governed and ruled by law. And they further agreed to submit to the laws framed by the new body politic.

The compact was signed by every head of a family, every adult bachelor, and most of the hired manservants aboard the *Mayflower*. It was signed both by separatists and non-separatists. Women were not asked to sign, since they did not have political rights.

On the day after Christmas, the 102 settlers disembarked at what is now Plymouth, Massachusetts. Those who had signed the compact became the governing body of the Plymouth colony, with the power to elect officers, pass laws, and admit new voting members. The covenant entered into on that November day on a ship at anchor in a wilderness harbor established the basis for self-government and the rule of law in the new land.

In the name of God Amen. We whose names are underwriten, the loyall subjects of our dread soveraigne Lord King James by the grace of God, of great Britaine, Franc, & Ireland king, defender of the faith, &c.

Haveing undertaken, for the glorie of God, and advancements of the Christian faith and honour of our king & countrie, a voyage to plant the first colonie in the Northerne parts of Virginia, doe by these presents solemnly & mutualy in the presence of God, and one of another, covenant & combine our selves togeather into a civill body politick; for our better ordering, & preservation & furtherance of the ends aforesaid; and by vertue hearof to enacte, constitute, and frame shuch just & equall lawes, ordinances, Acts, constitutions, & offices, from time to time, as shall be thought most meete & convenient for the generall good of the Colonie: unto which we promise all due submission and obedience.

In witnes whereof we have hereunder subscribed our names at Cap-Codd the • 11 • of November, in the year the raigne of our soveraigne Lord King James of England, France, & Ireland, the eighteenth and of Scotland the fiftie fourth. An°: Dom. 1620.

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

POOR RICHARD'S ALMANACK

Benjamin Franklin (1706–1790) was one of the most remarkable Americans who ever lived. Author, printer, statesman, diplomat, educator, inventor, philosopher, humorist, entrepreneur, shopkeeper, civic leader, scientist, auto-didact, public servant, national hero, Franklin tried a variety of careers and succeeded brilliantly at all of them. His almanacs, published in Philadelphia as the work of a fictional Richard Saunders (and thus "Poor Richard"), appeared annually from 1733 until 1758. They were immensely popular among the colonists; typically they contained calendars, weather predictions, advice, recipes, and much other useful knowledge. Poor Richard's proverbs, adages, and maxims were sometimes original, sometimes not; they were a popular vehicle for Franklin's pragmatic, tolerant, cheerful wit and philosophy.

Following is a selection from among the hundreds of sayings and commentaries by "Poor Richard."

The poor have little, beggars none, the rich too much, *enough* not one.

He that lies down with Dogs, shall rise up with fleas.

Men and melons are hard to know.

Take this remark from *Richard* poor and lame,
Whate'er's begun in anger ends in shame.

No man e'er was glorious, who was not laborious.

All things are easy to Industry,
All things are difficult to *Sloth.*

Would you persuade, speak of Interest, not of Reason.

Teach your child to hold his tongue, he'll learn fast enough to speak.

He that cannot obey, cannot command.

The magistrate should obey the Laws, the People should obey the magistrate.

He that waits upon a Fortune, is never sure of a Dinner.

A learned blockhead is a greater blockhead than an ignorant one.

Keep thy shop, and thy shop will keep thee.

Three may keep a secret if two of them are dead.

Early to bed and early to rise, makes a man healthy wealthy and wise.

To be humble to Superiors is Duty, to Equals Courtesy, to Inferiors Nobleness.

If you know how to spend less than you get, you have the Philosophers-Stone.

Fish & Visitors stink in 3 days.

He that has neither fools, whores nor beggars among his kindred, is the son of a thunder gust.

Diligence is the Mother of Good-Luck.

He that lives upon Hope, dies farting.