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Walker Lewis's Speak for Yourself, Daniel (book review)

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Speak for Yourself, Daniel. Edited and arranged by Walker Lewis. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company. 1969. Pp. xix, 505. \$8.95.)

Walker Lewis, by gleaning primarily from the 1903 National Edition of *The Writings and Speeches of Daniel Webster* those "bits I liked most," has allowed us to evaluate Webster for ourselves. The selections contain excerpts of most of Webster's best known speeches, but it is the letters, I think, that best illustrate Webster the man. The letters, unlike some of the speeches, are concise and compact, yet one senses the glow and warmth of a man full of love of country, politics, and the law. There is a certain spark, a magnetism or strength about him, which is further enhanced by the keen sense of humor he often exhibited.

Mr. Lewis has also included letters that reveal certain of Webster's human failings. A few pertain to Webster's ill-fated land speculations and various other financial dealings—among them monetary subscriptions by those men of means he counted as his constituents, who were probably not too disappointed that their money-raising activities enabled Webster to continue his able work on behalf of all the people he represented in Washington. Lewis does point out though that "arrangements" such as the subscriptions "were then viewed with greater tolerance than they would be today."

It is true that Webster's income as a public official was but a fraction of what he could have earned as probably the most famous and

successful lawyer of his time. The costs of being a public servant combined with the need to support a family must have indeed been burdensome. This may account for some of the letters that emphasize money-accumulating or money-spending ventures. Yet one is confronted with the young Webster and his plea, upon beginning the study of law, that "(i)f I prosecute the profession, I pray God to fortify me against its temptations." In the same letter of May 18, we find the following questions:

What shall I do? Shall I say "Yes, Gentlemen," and sit down here to spend my days in a kind of comfortable privacy, or shall I relinquish these prospects, and enter into a profession where my feelings will be constantly harrowed by objects either of dishonesty or misfortune; where my living must be squeezed from penury (for rich folks seldom go to law) and my moral principle continually be at hazard?

The discrepancy between the queries of the fledgling lawyer and the pursuits, a few decades later, of the more mature (and less idealistic?) politician is striking. One must wonder whether Webster had truly abandoned all ethical considerations. In 1806 he wrote "(t)he evil is, that an accursed thirst for money violates everything. We cannot study, because we must pettefog." He appears to have been repulsed "by the mean, money-catching, abominable practices, which cover with disgrace a part of the modern practitioners of the law." In the very next sentence, Webster commented on what seems to have been his great source of discouragement as a young man:

The love of money is the ruling passion of this country. It has taken root deeply, and I fear will never be eradicated. While this holds everything in its gripe, America will produce few great characters. We have no patronage for genius; no reward for merit. The liberal professions are resorted to not to acquire reputation and consequence, but to get rich. Money is the chief good; every eye is on it; every heart sighs for it. When the day will come when these things shall be ordered better, you and I cannot tell, but will hope that it will come some time.

These early expressions of distaste for the more materialistic side of the law stand in sharp contrast to letters written to Nicholas Biddle, President of the Bank of the United States, some two decades later. For his legal services on behalf of the Bank, "I shall take the liberty of charging somewhat liberally," Webster told Biddle. And Webster's quaint reminder to Biddle in 1833, that

(s)ince I have arrived here, I have had an application to be concerned, professionally, against the Bank, which I have declined, of course, although I believe my retainer has not been renewed, or refreshed as usual. If it be wished that my relation to the Bank should be continued, it may be well to send me the usual retainers.

Although Webster (in Lewis' words) "believed wholeheartedly in the cause of the Bank," he nevertheless felt constrained to complete for himself a suitable financial "arrangement" with the Bank. One can trace from his youth the development of Webster's appreciation for the value (and perhaps security) of the dollar. From what can be deduced from the early letters, Webster had to work hard to make ends meet. Exchanges between Webster and his brother, Ezekiel, often turned to and focused on money. One of the considerations he carefully analyzed before turning down a New Hampshire court clerkship was that the income would help ease his family's financial problems. Webster undoubtedly well-remembered his early struggling days as a student and aspiring lawyer. Perhaps the most revealing comment on this situation came in 1804 when Webster noted that "(t)here are many young men of my own age with whom it would be easy to associate; but a young man who has a fortune to spend, is not a proper companion for another who has a fortune to make."

Mr. Lewis has basically selected well. And he has provided us with an ample narrative to connect many of the letters, and introduce the speeches. His transitions are crisp and to the point and for the most part provide sufficient background material. Probably the best example of Mr. Lewis' talents is in the chapter on the Salem murder of Captain Joseph White. One gets more than a simple sense of continuity as Mr. Lewis' explanations comprise the most of the chapter and make for particularly interesting reading. But, as Mr. Lewis no doubt intended, it is Daniel Webster, as he speaks for himself, that makes the book worthwhile.

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