AN
ADDRESS
DELIVERED BEFORE THE
M. C. MECHANIC ASSOCIATION,
THURSDAY EVENING, JAN. 13, 1831.

By John Heal.
OUR MECHANICS.

Our Mechanics have been told that if they knew their own power, they might govern the country. The proposition is untrue—it is more—it is insulting. They do know their own power. Every individual mechanic alive, with wit enough to keep himself out of the fire, knows it and feels it, whenever he thinks of the place that he and his occupy in society. Our mechanics, throughout all the land, know their own power. They have newspapers to tell them of it—lyceums and lectures to uphold it—and Mechanic Associations for no other purpose under heaven, it would appear, than to keep them in mind of it: And yet, they do not govern the country—no!—nor do they enjoy a thousandth part of the political power, to say nothing of social consideration, which they are entitled to by their numbers, their value, their wealth and their virtue. And they never will—never—and they never ought, so long as they continue to be what they are now, talkers instead of doers in the great work of reform—a body without a soul—a giant, blind of both eyes, and a cripple in both arms; and this, not from nature, not from the visitation of Heaven, but from sheer wilfulness, or indifference—or laziness.

And why should they govern the country? More numerous they may be—more numerous they undoubtedly are—but are they wiser, or better than the agricultural, the mercantile, or the professional interest?

Are they wiser? Look about you—cast your eyes abroad, not over all the earth, but over this land, over all this great Commonwealth of Empires—count up the thousands and tens of thousands of mechanics—the builders of our cities and our sea-ports—of our colleges, our monuments and our navies—the men that clothe us and shelter us—that level our turnpikes and pour out our canals—that cleave mountains at a blow,
and fling bridges, at one cast, over our mighty rivers—count them all up—they and their families are nearly seven millions out of the whole ten millions of free people, that go to make up this Nation. They are about three times more numerous than all the rest of our free population put together—they are as fourteen to one of the agricultural class—they are as seventy to one of the mercantile class—and more than two hundred to one of the professional class, including parsons, school-masters, doctors, lawyers, idlers and paupers. Now look at the place they occupy in society—they and their families; at the place they are content to occupy in society—they and their families—they and their wives, and their sons and their daughters. Think of what they might be—and of what they are—the hewers of wood and the drawers of water in simple truth, to a privileged few. Think of all this—and then talk of their wisdom!

But social rank it may be said, has nothing to do with political rank. I deny this. I believe that in the very constitution of things they are inseparable. Whoever has in fact political power, has in fact a social power proportioned thereto—in other words, a social rank, a rank in society, correspondent with that political power. And he—or she—who has power at the fire-side, influence about the domestic hearth of a neighbor, has a power that will betray itself sooner or later, in some higher sphere; a growing ascendancy which must be felt in some way or other, at some day or other, in the whole constitution of society—in the machinery of state. And so in the alternative. It is in vain that we pretend—I will not say to dominion, nor to political ascendancy—but to equality, whatever may be our numbers, our wealth, and our importance in every other respect, so long as we occupy a subordinate rank in the social system.

But, say certain of those who belong to the mechanic interest, and are willing to be mouth-pieces for the whole body,—But we have a full share in the govern-
ment of the country now. Are we not represented—
every man of us? And is not the vote of a mechanic
worth as much as the vote of any other man?

To which I say—Ask yourselves. Are you of a truth
represented? Look into your legislative halls—go
into your courts of justice. Have you three legisla-
tors, three judges, three governors and three presidents,
for every one legislator, one judge, one governor, and
one president elected by the other fourth part of our
free population?

You are three times more numerous than all the oth-
er electors of our country; and yet—how few are ye
in the national or state councils, in the distribution
of trust and office, in the ranks of power and privilege.

And as for the worth of your votes—depend upon it,
there is no such equality as you may suppose between
your vote, and the vote of the privileged class. Let me
be understood—I do not mean the wealthy nor the high
born—much less do I mean the idler, who if he labors
not in some way for the advantage of his fellow-man,
whatever may be his rank, is a pauper—the pauper of
a family or of a neighborhood, of the state, or the pub-
lic, if not of a town or a parish—I do not mean these,
nor any of these, when I talk of a privileged class. Nor
do I mean to play the demagogue—to curry favor with
the multitude by abusing the few—no! for I hold
with him who preached better in rhyme by far than
most people do in prose, that—

“Order is heaven’s first law—this stands confess,
Some are and must be—greater than the rest.”

But I mean by a privileged class, a body of men, who
not only are, but who deserve to be the rulers of our
country, as I hope to show before I leave the subject.

At present however, there is another question to be
disposed of. It is not true that all votes are of equal
worth in practice, whatever they may be in theory.
The vote of a free colored-man, or the adopted citizen,
who may elect—but who cannot be elected—observe
here that I am dealing with practice, not with theory—
the vote of the day-laborer who may choose, though he
cannot be chosen—of the mechanic who dares not vote
for a mechanic, or who, if he dares, does not—all these
may be of equal worth. But how inferior the moral in-
fluence—the moral dignity—the true value of a vote
thrown by such persons with such feeling—to a vote
thrown by a member of the privileged class—by one who
finds no barrier in his path—who sees every office of
power and profit within his reach; not merely by law—
for by law, mechanics, adopted-citizens, day-laborers,
and free-colored men are eligible to the highest offices
of the country—but by that which is ten thousand times
more powerful than law—public opinion, settled usage.

I would not deny—I am willing to acknowledge, that
for some purposes, the vote of a colored-man, of a day-
laborer, of an adopted citizen, may be just as good as
the vote of any other person—as that of the president
of the United States for example. But is it so for ev-
ery purpose? And for all purposes? May it not be
more easily had—is it as much prized by the voter him-
self—is it as likely to influence others? for these are
the only true measures of value.

So too, I am willing to admit that for some purposes,
the vote of a mechanic is worth as much—not only in
theory, but in practice—not only in his own view, but
in the view of others—as the vote of any other person
whatever. But for what purposes? For the election
of any other person whatever: for the choice of any
body except a brother mechanic.

And what are we to conclude from all this? Three
things. First—that physical power is not moral pow-
er, and that numbers do not prevail over worth in our
country. Secondly—that as our mechanics do not gov-
ern the country, nor even participate, at all in proportion
to their physical strength, in the government of the coun-
try, they prove themselves thereby to be deficient in wis-
don—I might say in common sense; and therefore,
do they prove that they ought not to govern the coun-
ry. And thirdly—that the fault is their own—that they 

deserve to occupy the place they do, in the social and 
political system established here, notwithstanding their 
numerical force and private worth.

This may seem to you a severe judgment. But I 
appeal to yourselves. Were you to be told of a re-
public, established upon the great principles contended 
for in our Declaration of Independence—where all men 
were considered equal—taught to believe in their equal-
ity from the cradle to the grave—where every man was 
at the same time an elector and a candidate for any 
and for every office—by law; where the population con-
sisted of ten millions—seven millions of whom (includ-
ing their families) were in the habit of using their glorious 
privileges, not in upholding their own class—not in 
choosing from their own body—not even the great body 
of the people at large—not in selecting from the other 
two millions and a half—but in upholding for office to the 
exclusion of all others, candidates selected from anoth-
er body, and amounting to not more than a thou-
sandth part of the whole population*—should you not 
say that the seven millions were unfit to govern them-

Do you not say so of the men of Europe—when 
looking at their humility—at their subordinate social 
and political rank—at the long-established power of 
their office-holders and office-claimers? Yet the men 
of Europe have no such equality secured to them by 
law, as you have—it is not by their free choice that they 
are ridden by the few—it is no fault of theirs that they 
and their families continue to be regarded as the hew-
ners of wood and the drawers of water for a privileged 

But who are the Privileged Class in your country, 
where all men are equal—where we have no kings, no 
princes, no nobility, no titles! Look about you, I say

*Being but a small portion of the better-educated—and chiefly lawyers. And even there it is confined to a 

few of the highly-distinguished—a few of the very few therefore.
again—look about you, and judge, every man for himself. Are they not the better-educated everywhere—and the children of the better-educated—throughout the land? Go abroad among your neighbors, let all your acquaintance pass in review before you—and see if those who are better off in the world, more influential and happier than the rest, other circumstances being equal, are not all—all without one exception, better-educated than the rest. It is not a college-education that I speak of here; it is not even a school-education obtained before a man sets up for himself—but it is education at large—in the broadest and best sense of the term—the education that anybody may give himself, by devoting one or two hours a day to it—anybody, at any age. Again therefore do I appeal to yourselves—call to mind any man of your acquaintance who has got ahead of his brethren—who is more respected than they are—who is looked up to, not only by them, but by others—and my life on it that you find him a better-educated man, self-educated or otherwise, I care not—better-informed about some things which they do not consider of importance. I go further. So perfectly satisfied am I of the truth of this doctrine—of the importance of things which the uneducated regard as trivial, that I would have this taught as a fundamental truth—namely—that if two persons were to begin the world to-morrow—both of the same capacity—both of the same age and same character—having the same friends, the same prospects, and the same health—he who was best acquainted with the multiplication-table would beat the other in the long run. I would have it generally understood as another fundamental maxim in morals, if not in religion, that every sort of knowledge is of some value to every person, whatever may be his character, station, or prospects. I do not say that it would be of equal value to every person, nor that every sort of knowledge is alike necessary. I merely say that we cannot acquire any useless knowledge.

But say those who appear to have understanding in these matters—We have no time for study—we, the
mechanics. No time for study! What—have you no time, when a huge, ponderous body is to be lifted—no time to fix the lever and the fulcrum; to prepare the inclined-plane, or hitch the tackle? Is it economy of time for you to do that with your hands, which might be done by the simplest piece of machinery? Would you set your apprentices to work—your journeymen and yourselves, to lift and carry by main strength, what a child might push forward on a roller, if you would but take time enough to fix the roller? What would you say of a man, who instead of using the plough where others do, should persist in digging a large field with a fire-shovel, because he had never been brought up to the plough? What of a man who instead of splitting his logs for fire-wood, with a beetle-and-wedge, were to saw them in two lengthwise with a key-hole saw—declaring all the while, that as for him he did not pretend to know much about mechanics; that a key-hole saw was good enough for him—and as for the beetle-and-wedge and other out-of-the-way contrivances, for his part he had no belief in them.

Would you not laugh at him as a poor economist of time—and a very poor reasoner? And would he not be likely to continue a very poor man? Yet he would say no more than you say—every man of you—when you declare that you have no time for reading—no time for study—no time to improve yourselves, each in his own particular trade, by stepping out of the circle he was brought up in. How do you know but there is some shorter and easier way of doing all that you do in your workshops and factories? Be assured that there is a shorter and easier way for all of us—that there is no one thing we do, in which improvements may not be made. Have you not the proof continually before your eyes? Are not the master-workmen, the owners, and the employers of other men—are they not those who have made the best use, not of their fingers, but of their thinkers? Are we not finding new ways every hour for the abridgment of sheer manual
labor—the downright drudgery of life? Take two or three examples in proof. Time was, when all the printers alive were satisfied that no improvement could be had in two branches of their trade. Errors would always creep in—letters would be displaced or withdrawn by the balls, do what you might to hinder it; even though you were to revise the form anew, every time a sheet was struck off, still you could never be sure of a correct copy. So too with the compositor. In spelling a word, it was not in the nature of things that there could never be an abridgment of his labor—just so many times to spell the same word, must his fingers dip into the multiplied apartments of the case; and all the advantage that one compositor could possibly have over another, would be confined, as every body said, to manual dexterity. But lo! somebody blundered upon stereotype, and the first difficulty was at end forever—Once right, always right, is the motto now: another took it into his head to combine two fss in a cast, and some other letters of the same sort, which are frequently found coupled together. Strange that nobody went further—and cast other letters which are inseparable in orthography, the q and u for example, and some others, which are nearly so: why not throw a-n-d together, a word which occurs in every other sentence of our language? And are these improvements to stop here? No indeed. The time is not far off, when whole words—whole phrases and sentiments, it may be, will be cast at a throw. Think what a saving to the compositor, in seasons of great political excitement—in recording a Fourth-of-July dinner—a speech in Congress—or a criticism on a fashionable author.

Take another example. For ages, men have been quarrying and picking stone, and in a country like this where labor is high, the picking constitutes upon an average about 9-10ths, and in some cases 19-20ths of the whole cost. Yet nobody, not even the managers of the prison-discipline-society, ever thought it possible that stone might be picked, if not quarried, by machine-
ry instead of men. Yet if a premium of one hundred dollars were offered to-morrow, there would be fifty models, and efficient models, in the market before three months were over. It is already done over sea. Hundreds—yea thousands of other cases might be mentioned—and other cases where patents have been secured at considerable expense for inventions that had been tried out-and-out, and thrown aside as mischievous or useless, half a century before. And how do these things happen? Simply because we do not take the trouble to understand our own business thoroughly—because we consider it a waste of time to see what others are about, who follow the same trade in other parts of the world. We begin at the wrong end. We begin to build our bee-hives at the bottom—we teach before we are taught—we take apprentices to a trade we have never half learned—a trade which the more enterprising and inquisitive will run away with, by the time the others are ready to set up for themselves. If our chimneys all smoke—or so large a proportion of them, that we regard it as sheer good luck if they do not—and as utterly hopeless if they do—if our partition-walls are so contrived that next-door-neighbors may participate in each others family-secrets—if our legislative-halls, even to the senate-chamber and representative-chamber at Washington, if our churches, our court-rooms and our lecture-rooms are so contrived as to swallow up, instead of conveying—as to scatter, instead of concentrating the wonderful harmonies of the human voice—if our public buildings are thrown together in utter defiance of the laws of architecture, and loaded with incongruous or barbarous ornament—and if our mechanics are reproached for these things, their answer is that they have no time for reading; they have done as well as they know how—they don’t pretend to be well acquainted with the rules of gingerbread-work, &c. &c.—not they.

If you press them further and ask them if they intend to bring up their sons and apprentices in the same way:
the answer is—that as for their sons, they have other views for them; and as for their apprentices, they intend to give them a good knowledge of reading, writing and arithmetic; a good trade, and a good suit of clothes when they are out of their time, to begin the world with. If this is not the very language of our mechanics—the mechanics of our whole country—the only country upon the face of the earth where mechanics have the power to be whatever they deserve to be—if it is not the language of their mouths, is it not the language of their behaviour? *Actions speak louder than words.*

They pretend to respect themselves—yet they are content to occupy a very subordinate place in the political and social system of a country where they are as two or three hundred to one—over their equals—whom they have established in perpetuity, as rulers.

They pretend to respect their own class in society; and yet, instead of bringing up their sons to take their place when they are in their graves—instead of bringing them up to respect that class, and to uphold its dignity and influence with the advantages of superior education or superior talents—do they not try to make lawyers, or shop-keepers, or parsons, or doctors of them—to put them above their fathers—to make gentlemen of them, or in the language of truth and soberness, genteel paupers—who are to be supported, not by their own labor, but by the labor of others—by the voluntary or involuntary contributions of society?

They would have you believe that they are proud of the station they occupy—proud to get their own living, and to get it honestly by hard work—and yet, they never continue at their trade any longer than they can help it—they leave their business the moment they have become fore-handed enough to be respectable—they embark all they have earned by hard work, in some new business, which they persuade themselves to be easier and more profitable, only because they know nothing about it, and more respectable only because they choose
to make it so by their own folly—they risk every thing, and almost always lose everything; and then to finish their history, return to their work-shops only to degrade the class to which they belong—or die upon the parish. Nay more—with all their pride as mechanics—as independent mechanics—to whom a good trade is as a good fortune—they never allow their own class to be recruited out of their own families if they can help it—never certainly after they get a little forward in life, so as to give their boys a good education—but they depend upon the poorer and the more ignorant for a supply to their work-shops. As if education were not as available there, as any where else on earth—as if an ill-educated man must be a better black-smith, a better tailor, a better ship-wright, or a better butcher. As if to be well-educated would disqualify one for building a ship, for shoeing a horse, for cutting a coat, or for killing an ox.

But our merchants and farmers are guilty in the same way. So much the worse for them. If they educate their children, not with a view to make them better merchants and better farmers—no—but to set them above the business of their fathers—above merchandize and above farming—so much the worse for them. Is their example any excuse for the short-sighted, mistaken ambition of the mechanics?

And what are we to infer from all these facts? if they are facts—and whether they are or not, I leave you to decide. We may infer first, that all mechanics, all farmers, all merchants who leave their own business for some other, or no other, as soon as they are able—who educate their children to be something else than mechanics, farmers, or merchants, are ashamed of their own calling and of their own class, whatever they may say to the contrary. And we may infer secondly, that the mechanics have no worse enemies on earth than they are to themselves. But for their own consent, their class could not be kept down. If instead of making a lawyer, a parson, or a doctor of a boy, because he had uncommon talents, or took
readily to learning, they were to teach him their own trade, or some other trade—leaving those to be preachers and doctors and shop-keepers and lawyers who were good for nothing else—they would have the government of this country in their hands before twenty years had gone by; and what is more, they would deserve to have it.

Now, the effect of their short-sighted, unworthy ambition is, to keep down their own class, and to keep up the others—every other class in which they are striving to obtain a foothold for their posterity.

Why are the members of the house of commons in England, as fast as they become greatly distinguished, called to the peerage, and translated into the upper-house? It is to keep down the house-of-commons—and to keep up the house-of-lords. Do you not perceive the analogy? Yet the house-of-commons, like you, are proud of the honor—an honor which makes it unsafe for them to trust the only members that can exalt the class to which they belong—an honor, which instantaneously creates a new and opposing interest in every distinguished or promising member of their class. Like you too, they boast of the privilege—a privilege that does more than any other thing to weaken the lower-house and to strengthen the upper-house; a privilege that keeps renewing the wall of separation forever—that widens and deepens every hour the difference that has been established between them, the Lords and the Commons of that country, not as it has been established here, by the consent of the Commons.

Yet more—you pretend to respect the body to which you belong, not merely while you are in the habit of forsaking it as soon as you are able to do so—while you recruit your work-shops, and that body, not from your own but from poorer families—but while you are satisfied with giving your apprentices, who are to uphold the dignity of that body hereafter, an education, which though it may be as good as you yourselves had—perhaps much better—is, in point of
fact, altogether behind the advance of the age and the requisitions of society. Reading, writing and arithmetic are not enough now, even for an apprentice-boy: much less for one who has a desire to excel in the mechanic arts. You may add grammar, and geography, chemistry, natural philosophy and mechanics; ay, and another language, and after all, your apprentice-boy will not be so well-educated as you were twenty-five years ago, with reading, writing and arithmetic.

Another language! I hear somebody whisper. What on earth would another language be good for to an apprentice-boy! Of what use would it be? Of more use it might be, than his reading, writing or arithmetic—but I only mentioned that by way of example, to show the advance made in education. We talk of the use of learning to read—but of how much use do you find it, you that have no time to read, and who are never called upon to read a paragraph aloud. We talk about the use of writing—and yet, of all our mechanics, how many are there able to write a good hand, or a good plain letter of business, such as they would be willing to have read aloud in public? We talk about the use of arithmetic—and these are what old-fashioned people doat upon as the useful branches of education—without which nobody is prepared even for the work-shop. And yet—of our thousands and tens of thousands of mechanics, there is not probably one who would not have more use for the French language, that vain and frivolous accomplishment as it is called, than he ever had for the rule of three, for writing well, or reading well. The French are the best writers in the world on mathematics, chemistry, surgery, anatomy, mechanics and the mechanic arts. The British are indebted to them for their best dyes, for whole systems of natural philosophy, and for some of their most complicated and beautiful machinery; and if we would profit by the example of the French government and offer prizes to our mechanics for every improvement, as the French do—even though it were no more than the alteration of shape in
the bellows of the black-smith, or the scissors of the tailor, which cut a button-hole of the right length by a single effort, the advantages would be felt where they are never thought of now—in the high places of society; far away from the shop-board, the forge and the anvil.

But enough—I did intend to touch upon several other matters connected with what I believe to be your interest—our interest I should say—for your interest is the interest of our whole country—but the time will not allow me to do more than allude to them now; and that shall be done very briefly.

I would urge you to satisfy yourselves upon the subject of education—I would ask you if a good education is not of itself a good fortune for any body—anywhere—and the safest fortune? if a good education is not as necessary for a mechanic, as for a preacher, a lawyer, or a physician?—if you know a single case where a good education has not been a help to a man?—or where it has cost more than it was worth?

I would ask you moreover if you know a single individual who has got ahead of others in society, without deserving to get ahead of them, by some process of self-education?

I would ask you, upon whose judgment you would sooner rely, if you heard two men disputing together about the value of this or that branch of education—upon his, who knew nothing of the subject, or upon his, who was master of it? Whether after making all proper allowances for the proneness of one to exaggerate the value of what he himself was distinguished for, and the proneness of the other to depreciate the value of what he himself was ignorant of; you should not be inclined to believe the former in preference to the latter—the man who knew, instead of the man who did not know, what he was talking about? or in other words the educated man instead of the uneducated, upon the subject of education?

And having led you thus far, I would then put the whole question before you in a new shape—in a shape
that would be sure to work out a true answer from each man's own experience. I would ask you if you ever knew a man, or if you believe there ever was a man, who, after he had become familiar with any one branch of human knowledge—however useless or childish it may have appeared to others—would have abandoned it—given it up—and gone back to what he was before he entered upon it, for ten times the money it had cost him, added to ten times the value of his labor?

And if you never knew such a man—if you have no reason to believe there ever was such a man, what have you to fear in devoting a portion of your time even now, to the learning of that which nobody looks upon as either useless or childish? One or two hours a day, wisely employed, would be enough. Few indeed are they, even among the studious, who average more than two or three hours a day—wisely employed—for any number of years together. What excuse have you in withholding such a source of comfort and respectability from your children and your apprentices? I leave you to find a reply, every man for himself, when he is at home with his family about him.

To conclude—I do not say as others do, that if our mechanics knew their own power, they might govern the country—I do not even say that they deserve to govern it now—for they do not. But this I do say, that if they were just to themselves, and to their children, and to their apprentices—they not only would govern the country before twenty years were over, but they would deserve to govern it forever.