

4th July 2021

Independence

**“Hail! Independence, hail! Heaven's next best gift,
To that of life and an immortal soul!”**

James Thomson, Liberty (1734)

When American poet James Russel Lowell sought to define independence, he chose some interesting criteria. He wrote in *The Biglow Papers* in 1848:

*We've a war, an' a debt, an' a flag; an' ef this
Ain't to be inderpendunt, why, wut on earth is?*

A war, a debt, a flag, all important for the USA in the mid-nineteenth century, were Lowell's measuring sticks. Cynical, sarcastic, truth, a piece of satire? Who knows? But reading his words on July 4th, Independence Day in the US and other places, got me thinking. How would we define independence now? What might be the criteria we would use today?

Tobias Smollett, a 18th century Scottish novelist, translator, historian and editor, has these as the opening lines of his *Ode to Independence*:

*Thy spirit, Independence, let me share!
Lord of the lion-heart and eagle-eye,
Thy steps I follow with my bosom bare,
Nor heed the storm that howls along the sky.*

I take three thoughts from that – none of them political. The first: preserving independence needs people who have the “lion heart” and “eagle eye”. When our independence is eroded by those who wish to constrain our liberties, we need to be bold, to be strong in our pursuit of what needs to be safeguarded. The second: independence needs to be based on solid principles. “Lord” and “Thy steps I follow” seem to indicate that Smollett had an external guide – a faith, perhaps? – to be his resource. Whatever influences us, we must remain rooted in what is fundamentally right. And the third: the cause of right demands the resolve to keep going, no matter what. There will be always “the storm that howls along the sky” that might threaten us severely. But every storm has to be overcome.

Would your criteria for independence be determined by Lowell, or Smollett, or some other set of definitions? However you define it, let's “hail independence” as a gift that is still valued as precious.

A prayer for today

Lord, give me a mind that's independent, and a heart that's dependent on you. Amen.

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