

Critical and Biographical Notice

Roger Wolcott (1679–1767)

ROGER WOLCOTT was the son of a farmer, and was born in Windsor, Connecticut, in 1679. During his childhood, schools were unknown in the neighborhood of his birthplace, for the constant irruptions of the Indian tribes rendered it necessary for every mother to retain her infant charge, literally, within her own reach. The vigilance requisite for self-preservation checked the growth of social intercourse between the scattered families of the same town, and it was found incompatible with the general safety, to maintain places set apart for the instruction of youth, and of convenient access to all. The early education of Wolcott,—if that may be called education, which was but an initiation into the rudiments of the English language,—was derived from his father, (himself an untaught man) before he had arrived at the age of twelve years. At this period he was bound apprentice to a mechanic. Hard labor and confirmed habits of frugality enabled him, while yet a young man, to establish himself on the banks of his native river, with bright prospects of future success; and his exertions were finally rewarded by a competency of worldly possessions, the fruits of his honest industry. With strong native talents,—the rich though unwrought ore of the mind,—and a judgment matured by the reading and reflection of his leisure hours, he soon became an object of regard among his fellow citizens, who conferred on him such civil and military honors as were at their disposal. In 1711 he held a commission in the unsuccessful expedition against Canada, and was second in command, with the rank of Major General, at the capture of Louisburg, in 1745. 1

Roger Wolcott's life is interspersed with few remarkable events. After having been installed as a member of the Legislative Council, Judge of the County Court, Deputy Governor, Chief Judge of the Superior Court, and Governor of the Colony of Connecticut,—which last office he held during three successive years,—he retired to private life in 1755, and died in May 1767, in the eighty-ninth year of his age. 2

By a careful economy and improvement of time, Wolcott gained some distinction as a literary man. His writings, it must be acknowledged, are of that homely and unpolished kind which was the fashion in his day, and display as little delicacy in the selection of images, and as slight a degree of fastidiousness in the introduction of figures and language, as the most earthly minded mortal could desire. Yet his poems give evidence of accurate observation, and his powers of description are certainly far superior to those of his contemporaries. A small volume of his poetry was published at New London in 1725, preceded by a long and pedantic preface, written by a friend. 2 Our extracts are from a "*Brief Account*" as it is called, in this collection, "*of the Agency of the Honorable John Winthrop, Esq. in the Court of King Charles the Second, Anno Dom. 1662; when he obtained a Charter for the Colony of Connecticut.*" The poem contains fifteen hundred lines, and the opening scene is at London. The king gives an audience to Winthrop, and, after the usual court ceremonies, addresses the agent. 3

Note 1. It was considered no slight degree of honor to have been concerned in this Louisburg affair. The French, after the peace of Utrecht, built this town to secure their navigation and fisheries, and the advantages it gave their privateers over the English were very great. It was surrounded with a rampart of stone, thirty-five feet high, mounting 150 cannon, a ditch eighty feet wide, and was protected on the sea side by two batteries of 30 guns each. The entrance, on the land side, was by a drawbridge overlooked by a semicircle of 16 cannon. Twenty-five years and thirty millions of livres had been expended in the erection of the city, and its capture by the New England militia, under Governor Shirley of Massachusetts, was one of the most daring exploits on the records of American history. Shirley disclosed his scheme to the General Court of Massachusetts, after they had bound themselves by an oath of secrecy, and carried the resolutions he had offered by a majority of one voice only. Circular letters were then addressed to the other colonies, requesting their assistance. All declined except Connecticut, New Hampshire, and Rhode Island, and the total amount of troops furnished by them was less than 4000, which, with twelve or thirteen small vessels, completed the armament against the Dunkirk of America. The town was attacked, the French driven from their external batteries, and for fourteen nights successively, the forty-two pounders of the enemy were dragged through a morass by the soldiers with straps over their shoulders,—and Wolcott was with them,—they sinking to their knees in mud at every step. In six or seven weeks the city yielded, though it was fully furnished for a siege of as many months. The money, afterwards granted by Parliament to defray the cost of this wild undertaking, was brought to Boston and paraded through the streets. There were seventeen cart loads of silver, and ten of copper, amounting to £200,000.

Note 2. The poems are, oddly enough, followed by a clothier's advertisement, which is introduced in this manner. "I the subscriber having these many years, (even from my youth) been employed in the making and working of cloth; and having seen with regret the errors which some people commit in their preparations about so good and needful a work, am willing to offer a few thoughts to consideration; *and having been something at charge in promoting the publishing the foregoing meditations*, do here take the liberty to advertise my country people of some rules which ought to be observed, in doing their part, that so the clothiers might be assisted in the better performance of what is expected of them, that the cloth which it made among us may both wear and last, better than it can possibly do, except these following directions are observed by us."