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THE

LADIES' REPOSITORY.

DECEMBER, 1853.

REV. CHARLES NISBET, D. D., FIRST PRESIDENT OF
DICKINSON COLLEGE.

—
BY REV. CHARLES COLLINS, D. D.
—

THE essay on Christian Biography, in the August number of the Repository, was written as an introduction to a brief biographical sketch of the Rev. Charles Nisbet, D. D., the first President of Dickinson College. As, however, it grew so much under the pen, it was thought best to change the title, and give it to the editor as an independent article. Biography is the most valuable species of history. The lives of the great and the good, none may read without experiencing an influence upon their characters somewhat akin to that of daily association with virtue and greatness. Next to the refining influence of superior society it is good for us, therefore, to hold companionship with the pure and the good who have departed hence.

To most readers of the Repository, the memory of Dr. Nisbet possesses an interest derived only from his long connection with one of the most ancient and humble of our American seats of learning, and which, for the last twenty years, has enjoyed the patronage of the Methodist Episcopal Church. Within these twenty years many a hopeful youth has found in Dickinson College a nourishing mother of piety as well as of science; and many of these trophies of the cross are now filling honorable place in the ministry of the word and in the Church. Thus Learning is making worthy discharge of its debt to Piety, and the College is repaying, in spiritual blessings to the Church, the advantage of its patronage, sacrifices, and prayers.

More than seventy-eight years have transpired since Dr. Nisbet came to America, and near fifty since his death. Notwithstanding his reputation for talent and learning, no friendly pen seems to have commemorated his virtues till 1840, when his pupil, Dr. Miller, of Princeton, undertook the task. So long a period, however, had transpired, that most of his contemporaries, on both sides of the ocean, had passed away, and much information respecting his early life and labors had become irrecoverably lost. In Carlisle one only of his an-

cient friends and neighbors still lingers on the stage—a venerable old man of more than ninety winters, whose eye yet kindles with something of the fire of youth, whenever he talks of the “good old Scotchman.” From these sources we gather the facts of this hasty sketch.

Charles Nisbet was born in Hadington, Scotland, January 21, 1736. But little is known of his early life, except that his father was poor. This, however, did not prevent the early development of a strong thirst for knowledge, which found gratification at home till his sixteenth year, in the diligent study of the Latin and Greek languages, and such other branches as were then required as conditions of admission to the University of Edinburgh. In 1752 he entered the University; and, although but sixteen years of age, such was his maturity of scholarship and character that a post of private tutor in the city enabled him to meet all the expenses of his college course. Thus early thrown upon his own resources, he never afterward required pecuniary assistance, but found, in his accurate scholarship, dignified manners, and capacity for instructing, the means of gaining friends and support. Thus Poverty, the “malignant star” of “many a soul sublime,” shed no blighting influence upon his young aspirations, but in all probability became the means of developing talents and forming a character which otherwise had not been possessed. Want of birth and fortune are often *inconvenient*; but aspiring and determined genius finds both birth and fortune *in itself*. No obstacle can withstand the force of a resolute will. It will cut down the hills, or tunnel the mountains. It will find a way or make one.

An example like Dr. Nisbet's is immensely valuable. A great deal is accomplished when it is shown that no impossibilities lie in the path of learning. At the present day the higher walks of professional and literary life are thronged with the heirs of poverty. Poverty gave them its blessing—stalwart limbs, stout hearts, and strong minds. These were their estate. How many of these were inspired by Dr. Nisbet's example! How many of our American youth, coming directly or indirectly within the unconscious sphere of such influence,

have felt the magic thrill of new-born hopes and made the high resolve!

But little is known respecting young Nisbet's university life. He was graduated in 1752, in the eighteenth year of his age. So accurate and extensive scholarship as his after-life shows him to have possessed, gives fair presumption that he ate no idle bread. Exemplary conduct, diligence in study, and a proper appreciation of the value of time and privilege, marked, no doubt, the career which, two years before, was commenced in such hopeful self-reliance.

With a view to the Gospel ministry, he immediately entered Divinity Hall as a student of theology. Here he continued six years. During this time his mind seems to have been very solemnly and earnestly exercised with respect to his personal piety, and the sacred vocation to which he had resolved to devote his life. An interesting paper remains, showing that on the tenth of March, 1756, he recorded an act of solemn dedication to God; and also a similar paper, dated April 18, 1759, but different in form, showing that in the midst of his theological studies he was properly alive to their practical and experimental influence upon his heart.

His first engagement as a preacher was at the "Gorbals" of Glasgow, where he continued two years. The congregation failing to pay his salary, he accepted a call to the Church of Montrose, a large and flourishing town on the east coast of Scotland, and a place of considerable importance for its maritime trade and valuable manufactures. In this position he was surrounded by affluence, cultivation, and intelligence. Though at this time but a licentiate in the ministry, so fine was the reputation already acquired, that the Rev. Dr. Gillies, of Glasgow, recommended him to the congregation of Montrose as "the most able and promising preacher he could think of." Here he was ordained to the Gospel ministry by the Presbytery of Brechin, the 17th of May, 1764, and entered upon the duties of his new and responsible charge. And here also he continued to labor with great usefulness and still increasing reputation up to the time of his departure for America.

The materials for biography in this part of his life are exceedingly scanty. But the following circumstance will show the estimation in which Mr. Nisbet was held by one of the master-minds of his country at that time. In 1766 Rev. John Witherspoon, then pastor of a Church in Paisley, afterward celebrated as the President of Princeton College, New Jersey, and as a signer of our Declaration of Independence, was unanimously chosen President of that institution. Feeling, at that time, unwilling to accede to the call and thereby sever himself forever from the Church and land of his fathers, he wrote to his young friend, Mr. Nisbet, offering to recommend him for the office, and pronouncing him "of all his acquaintance, the fittest person for it." Dr. Witherspoon was undoubtedly one of the most

sagacious and intelligent men of his time, and such a declaration coming from him, may be received as a testimonial to Mr. Nisbet's reputation for scholarship of a most remarkable kind.

Says his biographer, "The truth is, Mr. Nisbet was now regarded as among the most learned men in Scotland, and was proverbially called 'the walking library.' Nor was this wonderful. His thirst for knowledge was insatiable. His habits of study were singularly diligent. His memory was not only excellent, but bordered on the prodigious. The libraries within his reach were large and rich. And his access to the society of literary men, both in and out of the Church, was such as seldom falls to the lot of one so youthful, and who could boast so little of what is called worldly patronage."

Our brief limits will not permit us to follow him through the growing labors and successes of his ministry previous to his call to America. As illustrative of character, we simply add that in 1770, the preaching and doctrines of Mr. Wesley began to attract the attention of the people of Scotland, and to draw forth, as might have been expected, the active opposition of the ministerial successors of Knox. In a contest of this kind it was impossible for Mr. Nisbet to be idle. His strong Calvinistic prejudices, lively wit, and patristic learning, all urged him to stay the spreading "heresy," and he seems accordingly to have plunged into the strife with less of the unction of charity than of the zeal of a partisan. He wrote and published a review of Mr. Wesley's system, and from the temper of his correspondence, at that time, with Lady Huntingdon, we may infer that it was conducted in no gentle spirit. To the friends and admirers of that eminent man of God it seems harsh language to pronounce him destitute of "sincerity," as well as of "orthodoxy;" to charge him with "seducing the ignorant and unwary;" "throwing off the mask and inculcating the old Popish doctrine of the merit of good works," and boldly asserting that Mr. Wesley is a person of "too great learning and ingenuity to be supposed to err through ignorance," etc. But we let this pass as an infirmity, springing from his place and time. Both he and Mr. Wesley are now where prejudice neither darkens the vision or misleads the understanding.

In the mean time the reputation of Mr. Nisbet as a scholar and divine had crossed the Atlantic, and in 1783, at the Commencement of Princeton College, the honorary degree of Doctor of Divinity was conferred upon him by the trustees of that institution. His old friend and brother, Dr. Witherspoon, had been for several years in America, as the head of that institution, and gladly, no doubt, cooperated in bestowing this testimonial on one whom he so well knew and so highly esteemed. It was this celebrity as a scholar and divine which, no doubt, caused the Trustees of Dickinson College to turn their attention to him as the most competent person to form and guide the destinies of their then infant institution. He was known also

to be strongly republican in his tendencies, and, therefore, all the more likely to sympathize with the state of feeling in the young republic. The earnest call of the Trustees, after due inquiry and deliberation, was accepted, and on the fourth of July, 1785, Dr. Nisbet, with his family, arrived in Carlisle amid the jubilations, bonfires, and general rejoicings of a people celebrating their independence, so recently achieved.

He was now about fifty years of age, and with the cares of a large family upon him. If his views of life, feelings, and modes of action were formed on a state of things greatly different from what he found in the new world, and friction and disappointment were, in some degree, the result, this is no more than ought to have been foreseen and provided for, both by himself and those at whose solicitation he came. The sanguine and glowing representations made by Dr. Rush, one of the original trustees, had fixed in the mind of Dr. Nisbet ideas of a college of liberal endowment, an ample salary secured to himself, a new and most extensive field for usefulness, both as a teacher and divine, with the society of intelligent and educated men around him warmly sympathizing in the new enterprise. The truth is, at that time the College hardly had an existence, except in its corporate character, and had no funds, except in the *expected* liberality of its friends and of the state Legislature. To those practically acquainted with this sort of dependence it is amusing to see with what confidence Dr. Rush wrote to Dr. Nisbet the year before his arrival. "Our Legislature," says he, "has patronized the new college, inasmuch that *we expect* an endowment from them at their next session of *five hundred pounds a year*. From the plans which have been adopted for obtaining funds for our college, we have little doubt but what we *shall have* ten thousand pounds in the *course of a year or two* from public and private donations. Indeed, sir, every finger of the hand of Heaven has been visible in our behalf."

It is hardly necessary to add that these expectations were only partially realized and ought never to have been indulged. The country had just emerged from a long and exhausting war. Carlisle was very much of a frontier settlement, and the population, throughout the districts expected to patronize the college, was sparse and poor. There was not even a general conviction that a new college was at that time *demanded* by the wants of the people. Money was scarce, and but few were able to give their sons the advantages of a liberal education. The men who had embarked in the enterprise, no doubt, were honest and patriotic; but experience proved their expectations delusive. How painful, therefore, was the disappointment of the venerable and distinguished stranger on arriving in America and discovering the actual condition of the country and of the institution over which he had come to preside, may be inferred from the condition of things which he had left. In Scotland

he had filled a very important sphere of usefulness as a pastor; was greatly respected and beloved by a large circle of friends; his temporal support was ample, and ample also the means of gratifying every literary and pious taste. He was, moreover, neither fitted by nature or education to be a pioneer in a new country, or to overcome the difficulties of a new and yet dubious educational enterprise.

Finding things so different from expectation, and depressed by sickness, with which both he and his whole family were prostrated soon after his arrival, he determined to return to Scotland, and accordingly sent in to the Trustees a resignation of his office. The approach of winter, however, prevented the fulfillment of this purpose till the ensuing spring, and in the mean time returning health and other considerations induced him to change his plans and determine to remain. The nineteen following years of his presidency seem to have been years of arduous labor and incessant struggle with the difficulties of his position and the financial embarrassments of the College. The reputation, however, of its distinguished head drew many students, and from 1787 to 1804, the year of his death, with the exception of one or two years, classes were regularly graduated. Among the graduates of those times we note the names of some since distinguished by eminent station in both Church and state—the Hon. Roger B. Taney, present Chief Justice of the United States; Charles Huston, late Chief Justice of Pennsylvania; Hon. Jesse Wharton, senator of the United States; Hon. James R. Black, late Chief Justice of Delaware; Rev. Robert G. Wilson, D. D., formerly President of the University of Ohio; Rev. Matthew Brown, D. D., President of Washington College; Rev. Henry L. Davis, D. D., President of Saint John's College, and several other senators, college professors, etc.

After Dr. Nisbet had made up his mind to remain in the country, he seems to have entered upon the duties of his station with a vigor and alacrity which none but a man of his extraordinary resources could have displayed. His labors were incessant. At one time, in addition to the prescribed duties of his office, he prepared a course of lectures on systematic theology for the benefit of a small band of pious students. This course was continued for more than two years, and embraced *four hundred and eighteen lectures!* "These lectures," says Dr. Miller, "are deserving of special notice, as the first course on systematic theology ever prepared and delivered in the United States.

The limits of this brief sketch will not permit a more extended notice of his labors as the head of the College. He died on the 18th of January, 1804, in the sixty-eighth year of his age, and his end was peace.

A few remarks respecting the character of Dr. Nisbet will conclude these observations. The traditions of the old inhabitants of Carlisle represent him as a man of keen and pungent wit. He had a

quick eye for the ludicrous. The luckless wight who exposed himself to the shafts of his ridicule was sure to be transfixed. This talent, granted to but few, though useful for the castigation of folly, is, nevertheless, a weapon often dangerous to the hand that uses it. The pungency of his satire often left a smart which the general conviction of his kindness of heart was not sufficient to mollify.

As a scholar his attainments were extraordinary. He was undoubtedly one of the most learned men of his time, and perhaps the best scholar then in America. He is said to have mastered nine different languages; and so prodigious was his memory, that he could quote, by heart, nearly the whole of the Iliad of Homer. Rev. Dr. Brown, one of his pupils, and afterward President of Jefferson College, states that he was so perfectly familiar with the Latin and Greek classics usually studied in colleges, that "without book" he could hear a recitation and correct the slightest error. "The Task" of Cowper, he committed to memory perfectly by two readings. But his learning was not confined to the languages. There was scarcely a branch of liberal knowledge in which he was not likewise thoroughly versed.

In theology Dr. Nisbet was a decided Calvinist of the old school. In addition to all his other labors, he preached, for the most part, stately, as one of the pastors of the Presbyterian Church in Carlisle. Serious in manner, plain and perspicuous in style, he eschewed all pomp and affectation, seeking not the applause of the multitude, but the glory of God in the salvation of souls. Toward other denominations of Christians he was perhaps somewhat uncharitable. 'Tis said that in his pulpit supplications he was in the habit of praying, "*The Lord have mercy on the poor ignorant Methodists!*" a petition from the pulpit which, in these days, would sound rather queer, and which, it may be piously hoped, has been answered.

As the President of a college, Dr. Nisbet undoubtedly was called to experience great and trying difficulties. If his success was not in proportion to the expectation of his friends, or his own reputation for superior scholarship, an explanation may be found in the condition of the country at that time and the poverty of the College. Besides this, superior administrative ability is not always the concomitant of superior learning. Many a man, in his position, with half his attainments, would have achieved more. Amidst all his difficulties, however, as the head of a seminary of learning, he maintained an honorable standing in the estimation of all sober and competent judges. The College, under his hands, still continued to grow in means and reputation, and at the time of his death, with new and enlarged buildings and greatly-increased appliances of instruction, was about to start on a new career of prosperity.

CUNNING is but the low mimic of wisdom.—*Bol.*

VISIONS OF THE FUTURE.

—
BY WILLIAM HORATIO BARNES.

WHEN a vision of the future,
As some far-off sunny isle,
Drifting shoreward on the ocean,
Lingers for a little while,
Then floats backward to its station,
In the future's pathless sea,
We regard it as but dream-life
Fancy that shall never be.

But how often in the real
Coming of the future strife,
When we join in the true battle
Of the earnest active life,
Do we meet with some adventure,
Which seems acted long before!
Do we hear some strains of music,
Which we heard in years of yore!

These are but the golden hours,
Wafted by us long ago;
Fragments of the beauteous flowers
On life's coming path that grow.
O, how often in our childhood,
Happy faces on us smile,
Which return again in manhood,
Glimpses of the olden while!

O, how oft we meet with angels,
Like the patriarch of yore,
And know not that they are evangel
From the future's far-off shore!
In our journey out we meet them,
Or their footsteps in the sand,
And they seem to lure us onward,
To the happy future land!

THE WINTER FIRESIDE.

—
BY ALICE CARY.

Now gathered about comfortable fires,
Men tell their children stories of wild woe;
Of travelers haply lost in drifts of snow;
Of how they struggle until hope expires;

When far away from all sweet homes they die,
And robins come and cover them sometimes
With the dry leaves, and poets make sad rhymes,
That tell their piteous story intertwined;

With pictures of the sea's long reaches blown
To rough cold wrinkles, and of wintery boughs,
Dropping their weights of snow on upturned
brows,

And of the dark way man must tread alone.

Even brighter than your blazing hearths may be,
Whose blest children climb your knees to hear
Stories of woe that suit the winter drear,
Be in your hearts the glow of charity.