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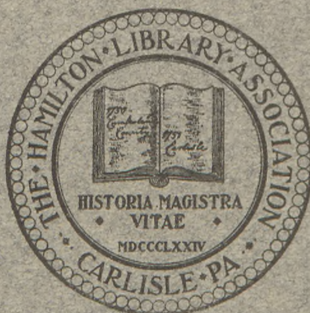
MONCURE D. CONWAY
AND
CONWAY HALL

Historical Address

—By—

Edward W. Biddle

Read before the Hamilton Library Association, Carlisle, Pa.,
on Friday Evening, March 21, 1919



Published by the Hamilton Library Association
1919

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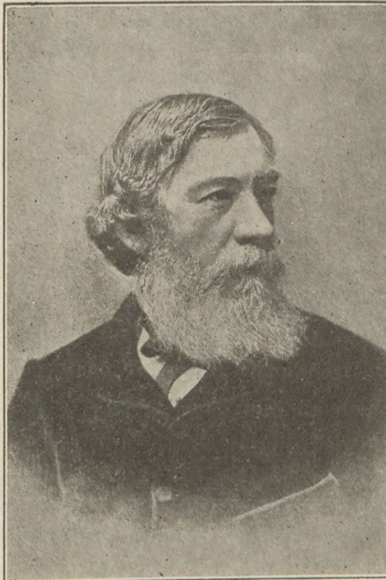

MONCURE D. CONWAY

At noon on the 3rd day of March, 1904, a large and valuable brownstone building belonging to Dickinson College, known as Denny Memorial Hall, was entirely consumed by fire, and that fire through a series of intervening events has brought about this evening's paper. The blow to the college was a severe one, as insurance on the property amounted to only $17,000, and the estimated expense of replacement was upwards of $60,000. Steps were taken at once to rebuild, and to that end thirty-three citizens of Carlisle united in a call for a public meeting to be held in the courthouse on Saturday evening, March 12; and in the meanwhile Dr. George Edward Reed, president of the institution, sent out an appeal to alumni and friends in

different parts of the country. About $9,000 was subscribed at the meeting in the courthouse, which was subsequently increased to $18,000 by additional subscriptions, and contributions of a few thousand dollars came in promptly from other places, yet all combined did not reach the desired amount.

Under these circumstances President Reed conceived the idea of applying for help to Andrew Carnegie, who had been a trustee of the college from 1892 to 1894, and whose recent multifarious and colossal gifts were dazzling the civilized world. He informed Mr. Carnegie by letter of the unforseen calamity and of the resulting financial stress under which the college was laboring, and respectfully requested a substantial contribution toward the new structure. After some correspondence the philanthropist wrote that he would be willing to pay $50,000 toward the expense of a new building; provided it should be named after and stand as a memorial to Moncure D. Conway, who had graduated from Dickinson many years before, and provided further that a like sum be obtained from other sources. The second condition fortunately could be met, but the first one created an awkward predicament, for the site together with other real estate had been conveyed by two ladies of the Denny family, without money consideration, with a stipulation that the structure erected thereon should be forever known as Denny Memorial Hall.

The president, however, was equal to the emergency. He made known to Mr. Carnegie the condition upon which the Denny lot had been given, and at the same time called to his attention the fact that a large college building to be used as a preparatory school was nearing completion at an outlay exceeding $50,000, the money for which had been borrowed on corporation notes, all of which were outstanding. He added that the title was entirely free from restrictions, and asked that the proposed gift be applied to payment of said notes and that the building be named Conway Hall, under which plan not only would the donor's desire be carried out, but the college would be benefited to as full an extent as if the original offer had been accepted. After further exchange of letters, and the submission to Mr. Carnegie of a statement showing the cost of the property to have been considerably above the sum mentioned, he finally accepted Dr. Reed's suggestion and forwarded a check for $50,000.

The finances of the institution at the time were at a very low ebb, and the receipt of this splendid donation cleared away so many dark and lowering clouds that its

coming seemed to be in the nature of a special act of Providence. Well do I remember the bright morning, the air bathed with glorious sunshine, on which the letter from New York arrived freighted with the anxiously-hoped-for check. Shortly after breakfast Dr. Reed came up to my residence to see me, and we chanced to meet on the High Street pavement in front of the house about nine o'clock. An envelope was immediately produced from his pocket, and his hand noticeably trembled as he drew forth its contents and handed to me for inspection the precious piece of paper which conveyed the gift.

Some months later when the dedication date drew near, and the time had come for inserting in the front wall a stone inscribed with the name of the structure, the president wrote to the same kind benefactor seeking permission to add the words "the gift of Andrew Carnegie." To this came a response that he never allowed his name to be placed on a building unless he had paid for it in full, therefore in the present instance such course would not be satisfactory to him. Again the president wrote, stating that the actual expense of construction had been $63,480, and suggesting that as the difference between said sum and the amount of Mr. Carnegie's previous gift was not great, perhaps he would generously contribute the balance and thus overcome the objection he entertained to having his name cut upon the stone. Ultimately Mr. Carnegie acquiesced in this proposal and forward a check for $13,480, coupled with which was his consent that the inscription should include the supplemental clause. A large block of brown sandstone was then set into the upper part of the building immediately over the front entrance containing these words: "Conway Hall, the gift of Andrew Carnegie." The two checks combined made up the largest individual donation of money ever received by the college.

The main structure is 78 feet wide, 183 feet deep, and four stories in height, affording ample accommodations for more than a hundred students and the necessary teachers. In addition to spacious dormitories it has an administration office, recitation rooms, halls for literary societies, a large dining room, and a chapel with seating capacity for 300 persons; throughout it is heated by steam and lighted by electricity, and the sanitary arrangements are excellent. There is now attached to the rear a two-storied annex 40 by 30 feet, containing on the first floor a commodious kitchen, and on the second floor a suite of rooms for the resident matron, making the building complete. Located on an elevation in the middle of a lot 161 feet wide by 500 feet deep, its white

walls with brownstone trimmings present an imposing appearance. In the summer of 1917 it was closed finally as a preparatory school, owing to decreased enrolment because of the war, and hereafter will be utilized by the college for other purposes.

At this point it is suitable that we should review some of the leading features of Dr. Conway's life, and ascertain what it was that induced Mr. Carnegie to establish for him at Dickinson College a handsome memorial. What had been his connection with the college? What with Mr. Carnegie? What had he done in a literary way to merit this testimonial?

Conway's acquaintance with Dickinson College began when he came to Carlisle in the Spring of 1847 from his home in Stafford County, Virginia, and entered the Sophomore class at the age of barely fifteen years. He was the offspring of a slave-owning family of high social standing, possessed of substantial wealth. At that time Dr. Robert Emory was president of the college, our distinguished townsman Spencer F. Baird was professor of zoology at the age of twenty-four, and associated with them was a faculty of exceptionally able men. Among these was the learned Dr. John McClintock, professor of Greek, whose name is famous in legal annals because of his alleged participation in an attempt to rescue three runaway slaves for which he was afterwards indicted. The "McClintock Riot", as it is popularly called, took place at the public square in Carlisle on June 2, 1847, about two months after young Conway had matriculated, and in the evening of the day on which it occurred he and most of the other southern students indignantly packed their trunks with the determination to leave the town forever.

The excited young men appointed a meeting in chapel for the next morning, in order to give suitable expression to their feelings. What occurred there has fortunately been preserved for us by Conway in his Autobiography in the following passage:

> "At this meeting (June 3) we were all stormy until the door opened and the face of McClintock was seen, serene as if about to take his usual seat in his recitation room. There was a sudden hush. Without excitement or gesture, without any accent of apology or of appeal, he related the simple facts, then descended from the pulpit and moved quickly along the aisle and out of the door. When McClintock had disappeared there were consultations between those sitting side by side, and two or three Seniors drew up resolutions of entire confi-

dence in the professor, which were signed by every one present (ninety) and sent to leading papers for publication. Being then little over fifteen, I could not appreciate all the reasons why thenceforth McClintock was to me the most interesting figure in Carlisle. The calm moral force of that address in the chapel, the perfect repose of the man resting on simple truth, I appreciated; to this day whenever I think of him there arises that scene in the chapel."

If the conclusion reached by the students on that eventful morning had been of an opposite character, Conway would have departed with many others to return no more, and of course there would not be in Carlisle today a Conway Hall. It is pleasant to record that no mistake of judgment was made in the matter, for when Conway came back in the fall as a Junior, it was to find that Dr. McClintock had been triumphantly acquitted by a jury.

Early in 1848 an event of prime importance in his life took place, namely, he became converted at a revival and two weeks later joined the Methodist Episcopal Church. He was graduated from Dickinson College in 1849, the youngest member of his class, at the immature age of seventeen years and a few months. It may be mentioned as an illustration of the vagaries of youth that he selected as the theme for his Commencement oration "Old Age". In 1850 he read law for several months in Virginia, but during that period passed through a spiritual crisis which made the idea of settling down as a country lawyer repugnant to his sense of duty. The conviction seized him that his life ought to be devoted to promoting the welfare of humanity, and accordingly in December he wrote to his father the surprising intelligence that he had abandoned the study of law, and that soon he would make application for admission to the Baltimore Methodist Conference as a minister. Three months later—on March 17, 1851, his nineteenth birthday—he entered the Methodist ministry and was assigned to preach in the Rockville Circuit of the Baltimore Conference. In the summer of the next year, 1852, he came back to his Alma Mater to receive the degree of Master of Arts and, although only twenty years of age, preached the Commencement sermon on Sunday in the Methodist Church, a circumstance probably without a parallel in the history of the college.

Already he had done considerable literary work. In the last few months of his Senior year he was editor of "The Collegian", and wrote five articles for a Fredericksburg newspaper on Old Writers of Fiction. Upon returning home he continued to write for the newspapers, and before

he was nineteen delivered a public lecture in the town hall of Fredericksburg, Va., on Pantheism. In his twentieth year he prepared an elaborate pamphlet addressed to the Constitutional Convention of Virginia, urging that a provision be inserted in the new constitution making the support of free schools for white children throughout the State compulsory. Five hundred copies were printed at his own expense, and were sent broadcast to editors, professors, preachers and all others in Virginia who he thought might influence the convention. A reprint of this pamphlet fills fifty-three pages. In his twenty-first year, just after his return from the Dickinson College Commencement, he wrote an extended plea for religious tolerance which was published by the Christian Advocate and Journal in seven instalments.

The bare recital of these activities shows that he was a very precocious and extraordinary young man, already impelled by a stern resolve to work earnestly for the benefit of his fellow-men. The prime influence which determined his career came accidentally from Emerson, the great New England thinker who had started a new era in the religious and literary life of this country. One morinng before he had abandoned the intention to become a lawyer, he picked up a gun and a copy of Blackwood's Magazine and idly wandered out along the Rappahannock River. Sitting down by a spring at the roadside he turned to the opening article in the magazine, which was entitled "Emerson", a name unknown to him. The article referred to contained the following extract from Emerson's essay on History:

> "It is remarkable that involuntarily we always read as superior beings. Universal history, the poets, the romancers, do not in their stateliest pictures—in the sacerdotal, the imperial palaces, in the triumphs of will or of genius—anywhere lose our ear, anywhere make us feel that we intrude, that this is for our betters, but rather is it true that in their grandest strokes there we feel most at home. All that Shakespeare says of the king, yonder slip of a boy that reads in the corner feels to be true of himself."

Precisely why this passage so deeply moved him he was never able to explain, but it mysteriously brought a revelation to his restless and hungry spirit. He went home and laid aside the gun, never again to be taken out, and through a bookseller sent for a copy of Emerson's Essays. It was what he read in them that occasioned the sudden resolution to become a preacher, notwithstanding that he had advanced far enough in the study of law to be entitled to admission to the bar. He became possessed by an overwhelming yearn-

ing, which he afterwards expressed in these words: "O that I could be even in a small way able to uplift fainting hearts and guide the groping, as that great spirit had uplifted me and was now opening a fair horizon before me."

During his twenty months' itinerancy on horseback as a preacher, he carried in the saddle bags along with a few other books a copy of the famous Essays, which he found to be filled with elevating thoughts and ideals that made the world appear beautiful. At length in the fall of 1851 he summoned up courage to write to Emerson, his revered inspirer, saying that he had studied his writings sentence by sentence and had shed many burning tears over them. To this letter soon came a gracious reply which filled his heart with joy. The final result was that he again astonished his parents by announcing that he had decided not to continue in the Methodist ministry, and that he intended to enter Harvard Divinity School. His father strongely disapproved of the project, and having said positively that he would not support his son while there, early in 1853 Moncure departed "for conscience sake" from the luxurious home in which he had been reared, nevermore to return as a member of the household. He had just one hundred dollars in his pocket, and from that day forth was self-supporting.

His subsequent experiences were so varied and so filled with incidents of interest, that it will be impossible within the limits of an address to do more than briefly touch on some of their most salient phases. He entered on his theological studies at Cambridge in the latter part of February, 1853, and in the summer of 1854 received the degree of Bachelor of Divinity and went forth into the world as a full-fledged Unitarian clergyman. By officiating as organist in chapel, and by preaching on Sundays during his Senior year, he managed to meet the necessary moderate expenses of a course through the school. While there he had become well acquainted with Emerson, Longfellow, Thoreau and other distinguished men. Almost immediately after graduation he received a trial call from the Unitarian Church at Washington to preach during September, which he accepted, and in October was elected permanent pastor. With a profound conviction that slavery was our special national sin, he announced that conviction in a sermon prior to his election so that no misunderstanding might arise concerning his attitude on the subject.

Two years later (October, 1856) the feeling between the North and the South had become so intense that, succeeding the delivery by Conway of several anti-slavery sermons,

the congregation on a closely contested vote asked for his resignation. A call then came to him from the First Congregational Church of Cincinnati, where he began service as minister in November, 1856, and remained until June, 1862, when he left for Boston to become editor of a new journal called "Commonwealth" which was being founded in support of emancipation. Before arriving at his Eastern home, however, he went to Washington, hunted up his father's slaves who had just arrived there, and at a good deal of risk to himself conducted them through Baltimore to the land of freedom in Ohio.

In January, 1863, having been sent with Wendell Phillips and others to Washington on an anti-slavery mission, he preached by invitation on Sunday morning in the Senate Chamber before the United States Senate and an assemblage of outsiders who crowded the chamber and galleries to hear him. He was leading an extremely busy life—editing the "Commonwealth", preaching every Sunday, and delivering addresses once or twice a week in various parts of the land. But a vital change in the situation took place in April, when he was sent by a group of abolitionists to Great Britain to lecture in order to impress upon the English that the cause of the North was just.

In conjunction with work in that line he soon found time to begin preaching at South Place Chapel, Finsbury, London, before a liberal Unitarian congregation, and in February, 1864, started upon a regular ministry there which continued for twenty years. Under his charge the membership grew to be large and influential, and he became a well-known personage of London; yet in the meantime he had entirely rejected the prevailing doctrines of Unitarianism, just as before leaving Virginia he had ceased to be orthodox as a Methodist. The abandonment of all creeds, however, apparently did not interfere with his influence as an ethical teacher, or with his prominence in urging lofty social and spiritual aspirations. Here we are reminded of Leigh Hunt's beautiful poem "Abou Ben Adhem", wherein it is related that Ben Adhem having said to the recording angel:

> " 'I pray thee, then,
> Write me as one who loves his fellow men.'
> The angel wrote, and vanished. The next night
> It came again with a great wakening light,
> And showed the names whom love of God had blessed,
> And lo! Ben Adhem's name lead all the rest."

Mrs. James M. Longacre of Philadelphia, the accom-

plished daughter of Dr. John McClintock, has kindly permitted me to copy the following letter which was written by Conway to her father, then pastor of the American Church at Paris, about a month after Conway arrived in England:

"Aubrey House, Notting Hill,
London W. May 26 (1863)

"My dear friend,

As you judged, I did not receive your first letter. I have lectures here lasting to the middle of June, & though it is impossible to say exactly, I hope to see Paris about that time. I would like much to come earlier but fear I cannot.

I wish much to see you & Mrs. McC., having never lost sight of you since the sunny old Carlisle days floated up into the Past & Paradise.

Yours cordially,
M. D. Conway."

The protracted residence abroad constituted a momentous epoch in his life, enabling him to come in contact with the leading literary and scientific minds of England, and thereby imperceptibly but certainly to have his own vision widened. Of the opportunities then presented he took advantage to the fullest extent, and we have from his pen an entertaining account of his personal relations with such brilliant lights as Thomas Carlyle and Jane Welsh Carlyle, Darwin, Tyndall, Herbert Spencer, Tennyson, Browning, Gladstone, George Eliot, G. H. Lewes, Max Muller and many others. It may be truthfully said that he came to know nearly all who were worth knowing in the field of letters, both in England and America.

In 1885 he returned with his family to this country and continued to reside in Brooklyn and New York until his sudden death in Paris on November 15, 1907, during one of the numerous trips he made to Europe. At the time he passed away at the age of 75, he was engaged in collecting materials for a life of John Calvin. In 1892 Dickinson College conferred on him the honorary degree of L. H. D., and he was present at Commencement in that year to receive it and to deliver the annual address before the literary societies.

Dr. Conway was unquestionably the most voluminous writer that ever emerged from the halls of Old Dickinson, for writing and making addresses were his two absorbing occupations from 1849 to 1907, a stretch of fifty-eight years. During that long period, in addition to preaching and lecturing and writing books, he was a constant contributor to newspapers and magazines, and for many years was on the editorial staff of the London Daily News. A large num-

ber of his sermons and addresses were carefully revised and printed. Blessed with a remarkably vigorous constitution, he did the work of two or three ordinarily busy men and did it well.

Twenty-three books came from his active brain, the most important one being his Autobiography in two volumes which was published simultaneously in Boston and London in 1904. It is a notable fact that this is one of the longest works of its kind in existence, if length is computed on the basis of original writing without including letters and other documents copied into the text. That a man of seventy should have been able to recall or to gather together the details there given, especially of his early years, is simply amazing. The contents are of permanent value, because the author had a phenomenally wide circle of prominent friends and acquaintances on both sides of the water, and his reminiscences of them are recorded in a clear and agreeable way. In the preface he says that he sat nearly four years assiduously at the task of composition, sparing no pains to be exact and just. Mentioning the fact that in his ministry of a half century he had placed himself in advocacy of conflicting beliefs and ideas, as would be disclosed in his reminiscences, he makes this interesting observation:

> "One who starts out at twenty to think for himself and pursue truth is likely to discover at seventy that one-third of his life was given to error, another third to exchanging it for other error, and the last third to efforts to unsay the errors and undo the mistakes of the preceding two-thirds."

As an indication of the quality of the book, it may be mentioned that it contains *fac simile* letters to the author from Walt Whitman, Oliver Wendell Holmes, George William Curtis, Robert Browning, John Stuart Mill, Thomas Carlyle, William E. Gladstone, Matthew Arnold and Ralph Waldo Emerson. With a number of these men, as well as others of their type and kind, he was on intimate terms. He was himself a great man, a strong, original thinker, filled with enthusiasm for the True and the Beautiful. From the pulpit he unceasingly urged men to assert themselves against oppression, injustice and wrong, and in his own conduct never failed to set them a good example. Those of his books which I am fortunate enough to own in addition to the Autobiography are "Thomes Carlyle", "Emerson at Home and Abroad", "Life of Nathaniel Hawthorne", "The Sacred Anthology", and a phosthumous volume containing reprints and a few previously unpublished addresses.

The facts here presented in regard to Dr. Conway personally have been obtained mainly from the Autobiography, to which one naturally also looks for light in regard to his connection with Mr. Carnegie, a matter into which we will now inquire. The only reference to the latter is on pages 426 and 427 of the second volume, where it is stated that in 1888 some literary people, including Conway, were invited by Mr. Carnegie to dine with Sir Edwin Arnold, who was a guest in his house. After dinner Sir Edwin argued that the retaining of Latin and Greek in a college course was essential to the preservation of an elegant style of expression. To this Mr. Carnegie entered a vehement protest, saying that Shakespeare and Burns wrote well enough without having learned those languages, and that the modern world was ignoring the existence of the classicists. Conway comments thus on the occurrence:

> "I knew but little of Andrew Carnegie, but being substantially on his side was impressed by his vigor—even eloquence at times—and thought to myself that had Carlyle been present he would have taken a hand . . . . I do not believe that any very rich man ever lived before him, with so much and such genuine enthusiasm for literature as Andrew Carnegie."

The dedication of Conway Hall and of the new Denny Memorial Hall took place on the same day, Tuesday, June 6, 1905, during Commencement week, and in connection with the Conway Hall exercises Dr. Conway delivered an address on Public Service in which he said, referring to Mr. Carnegie: "My personal acquaintance with him is slight." On April 25, 1907, he paid his last visit to the college and spoke at an anniversary celebration of the granting of a Frame of Government to Pennsylvania by William Penn. At that time, in the course of quite a long talk, I asked him what had moved Mr. Carnegie to have the Hall named in his honor. He replied that he supposed it was because of his (Conway's) efforts in behalf of world peace, as he had known Mr. Carnegie very slightly; but that since the dedication they had been to some extent in touch with each other, and that he expected to visit Mr. Carnegie at Skibo Castle, Scotland, in the coming summer.

Having given much consideration to the problems of international arbitration, he published a pamphlet on the subject in 1900, which was translated into French and German and distributed to the members of the Peace Congress which met at Paris in that year. Previously he had covered the same ground in an address at Boston in 1898. In a note

appended to a reprint of the pamphlet it is stated that "the elimination of war by both natural and methodical means was, perhaps, the chief aim of Conway's later life."

Here then probably was the thing that particularly attracted the attention of the alert philanthropist to the scholarly, industrious and altruistic worker. Doubtless Mr. Carnegie had read at least a portion of the recently issued Autobiography of Conway, as well as some of his many previous books and contributions to magazines and newspapers, and realized that he was one of the big men of his generation. That Mr. Carnegie knew a good deal about him through some source appears from a letter the former wrote requesting that the building be designated Conway Hall "in honor of Dr. Moncure D. Conway, a distinguished alumnus of the college, in recognition of his great services in the realm of letters, of reform, and of humanitarian effort"; yet it is a reasonable conclusion that at the time said letter was written the two had never met except upon the occasion of the dinner to Sir Edwin Arnold.

When Dr. Conway was here in 1907 he looked like a patriarch, with his massive frame and long gray beard and hair. His conversation proved to be as impressive as his appearance, for in it was displayed that rare quality which marks the very gifted and cultured man. It was quickly made evident to those who met him that the world of mammon and frivolity possessed no attractions for this serious thinker, who had voluntarily dedicated his energies for nearly threescore years to dealing with the gravest moral problems of the age. Truly the associations and habits of a lifetime made it impossible for him to contract any alliance with forces that stand for fleeting pleasure only. In conclusion, it should be borne in mind that he never swerved a particle from his early determination to devote his life to promoting the welfare of humanity—a determination which caused him to trample on temporal interests at the time he entered the ministry, and which steadily remained as a guiding star amidst the diversified temptations of an unusually eventful career.

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