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CHARLES NISBET

First President of Dickinson College

HIS BOOK

1736 -- 1804





**A BOOK OF PLAGIARISM?
NAY,
RATHER A FEW
A VERY FEW
OF THE
MANY, MANY FACTS,
COLLECTED FROM VARIOUS SOURCES,
THROUGH THE PAST YEARS.
BY ONE WHO MUCH ADMIRES
THIS "TRULY"
GREAT AND GOOD MAN.**

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SARAH WOODS PARKINSON

DICKINSON-COLLEGE FOUNDED A.D. 1785
BURNT DOWN 1803 REBUILT 1804

1783--

Stone in "Old West" College

--1908

BENEATH Scotland's skies, January 21st, 1736, a baby was born that was to link its life with far off America in a town not then in existence. This baby was Charles Nisbet, son of William and Allison Nisbet, of Haddington. At the age of eighteen (18) he met and became engaged to Anne Tweedie. After an engagement of twelve (12) years they were married and lived happily for thirty-eight (38) years. As his brothers left no sons and his children left no sons of the name of Nisbet, the family name has passed away both in Scotland and America.

His
Birth-place.

The years between 1736 and 1783 made many changes in America. The colonists had become rebels; the rebels, patriots; the patriots, free Americans. To hold in subjection the Powers so lately their masters, brain as well as brawn were necessary. The youth must be educated to take their place as wheels in the "machine of civil government." It was the choice of Carlisle, Pa., as the site for an educational centre that gave it the honor of being the home of Charles Nisbet. In 1783 the Charter was granted that founded Dickinson College. "Carlisle was chosen for good and solid reasons. The situation is healthy, scenery picturesque and beautiful. The inhabitants of the place, as well as of the neighborhood in general are remarkable for the decorum of their manners, the purity of their morals, and their uniform observances of the duties of religion. Advantages like these are invaluable to an academical establishment to prepare youth to become great men or good and useful citizens." "We can secure some good brick buildings on the edge of

His
College Site
Chosen.

the town from the government and are sure of financial support." Governor Dickinson gave "two plantations i. e., 300 acres in Adams County and 200 acres in Cumberland County, and above all his name." "The seal of our College? The device consists of a Bible, a Telescope and a Cap of Liberty—the two last placed over the first. 'The motto is, Pietate et Doctrina tula libertas.' They destine our College to be the first in America under your direction and government."

His
Call.

"It will be expected, nay more it will be required of you for the benefit of your pupils, to preach every Sunday at Carlisle. Dr. Davidson who has the pastoral charge will fill a subordinate Professor's chair in the college and preach alternately with you." "Indeed, sir, every finger of the hand of heaven has been visible in our behalf." Such were some of the items that were in the letter that came to Dr. Nisbet, calling "to leave Scotland for America." In the "meridian of this worthy man's life" came the conflict. Of his eight children four "slept in the city of silence." He had a comfortable home and easy access to libraries and lecture halls. His vast number of friends gave him contradictory advice. Dr. Witherspoon and Dr. Nisbet's friendship was of the strongest—so strong that when on account of Mrs. Witherspoon's unwillingness, Dr. Witherspoon hesitated to accept Princeton Presidency he suggested "You call Dr. Nisbet as the *fittest* man of all my acquaintance to be head of a college." At the time of the suggestion Dr. Nisbet was only thirty-one (31) years old. Dr. Witherspoon with whom he had kept up a correspondence urged him "to come to America. You are needed." Lady Huntington wrote him "Dr. Rush is over sanguine, as he always was." Dr. Martin sent the message "think of the danger for your family; weigh it well." The Countess Levan wrote "let young men go, you are too settled." Rev. John Erskine of Edinburgh, urged him to accept. Dr. Erskine was an acknowledged sympathizer with

His
Friends.

America in its struggle for freedom. In pulpit and press he boldly expressed his views. Just before the Revolution he wrote, published and circulated a pamphlet entitled, "Shall we go to war with our brother Benjamin?" Lord Buchan, another staunch American ally and Dr. Nisbet's most intimate friend, wrote him "go, take your St. Paul in one hand and your Seneca in the other." Lord Buchan had a connection with General Washington that is rather interesting. General Washington had two gifts of which he was very proud as personal tokens. One of these was given him by Lord Buchan. It was "a box made from the oak which sheltered General Wallace after the battle of Falkirk." General Washington willed the box "back to its donor not feeling able to select a man worthy of it." The other gift was a sword from Frederick the Great, inscribed "From the oldest General in Europe to the greatest General in the World."

These and scores of men and women like them freely expressed their views. Dr. Nisbet finally decided to accept the call and sailed from Greenock, April 23rd, 1785. With fear, not cowardice; anxiety, not worry; hope, not buoyancy and above all feeling God called him to hew stone for the educational building in America. On the 9th of June they reached Philadelphia and "rested at the home of Dr. Rush." After a long ride, not in "rubber-tired" vehicles, they drew near Carlisle on July 4th. The surrounding country was celebrating "Independence Day." They sent a deputation, escorted by the "Troop of Horse," to welcome the "Scotch family." On the 5th of July Dr. Nisbet took his oath of office and also allegiance to America. "Dr. Nisbet's mental gifts were of the highest; they had been increased and disciplined by study and thought. At the age of sixteen (16) he had attained a reputation that placed him at the Edinburgh University not only as a pupil but as tutor. Judge Brackenbridge said "Dr. Nisbet possessed nine languages and was

His
Acceptance
and Arrival.

His
Scholarship.

His In-
fluence as
a Teacher.

acquainted with and used others." Judge Gibson states "as a scholar he had no superior in America." In Scotland his name was the "Walking Library." A learned lawyer of Carlisle, one day quoted some lines of the original Greek from the Iliad. Dr. Nisbet said, "Well, mon, go on, what you left is just as good as what you gave." The lawyer said he knew no more. Dr. Nisbet, thereupon rapidly repeated the remaining lines. It took him but a third as long to read a book as the ordinary individual, and, as David Watts said, he had it then pigeon-holed in his brain, ready for use when he needed it." This same David Watts was one of his many pupils that found him a disciplinarian to be obeyed and respected. His pupils loved both Dr. Nisbet and his Scotch wife. They could not clearly understand her dialect but felt her motherly interest. Every student enjoyed his society; when his black eye began to sparkle they knew the intellectual lightning would soon flash. If reproof came it was so cutting that no repetition was needed; if praise the recipient would immediately determine to deserve it. The best was developed and a student with "*no best*" soon left Dickinson College. Dr. Nisbet's first class graduated Sept. 26th, 1787, nine young men and each his sincere friend. As a teacher one of his pupils said, "Dr. Nisbet seems to open a new mine of knowledge on every subject to which he turns his attention." In December, 1785, is given an illustration of the effect ague has on mind and body. Were it not for the strength of character Dr. Nisbet displayed after his sickness one would wish the chills had shaken the ink from his pen ere he wrote those letters to which reference is so often made. Can we blame him? For three (3) months fever and chills had been in the household; his talented oldest son had fallen in "evil ways." In the only weak moments of Dr. Nisbet's life he hastily resigned his position. Why preserve the one poor record unless to show how strong are the others.

His
Sickness.

Brave when he retracted, braver when he asked for re-election, bravest when he so nobly filled his position. A few opening lines of his address after his re-election show his moral courage.

His
Re-election.

“My young friends:—

After despairing even of life and renouncing all hopes of being useful to this seminary, it has pleased God to restore me to my former health and office. I hope it will be unnecessary to say anything to convince you of my good will to this country and to this college in particular. If abandoning an honorable and independent station, and renouncing the society of many valuable and long tried friends; if my crossing the vast Atlantic and exposing my life to the perils of a new clime are not sufficient to persuade you of my good wishes; it will be needless to use any words to that effect. The troubles and distresses of my family and the pains I have endured both in body and mind, since my arrival in this country, I shall *cheerfully* forget, if I be subservient to the conducting of your studies and forming your taste and morals so that you may fulfill the hopes of your parents and prove useful citizens to your country.”

In 1803 the College was destroyed by fire—yes, say College—for building, books, globes, seats, tables and all were burnt. Within twenty-four (24) hours after the fire a subscription was started “by the inhabitants of Carlisle, the surrounding country assisted.” Phoenix-like from its ashes rose “Old West” staunch and true as it stands today. Dr. Nisbet at this time wrote Lord Buchan “I consider myself as engaged with others in the inglorious but useful labour of digging underground and laying the foundation of a building that may make some figure in a future age.”

His
Great Loss.

Dr. Nisbet as a lecturer attained great success. On alternate days he lectured on Moral Philosophy, Mental Philosophy, Belle Lettres and Logic. These lectures were

His
Lectures.

prepared the night before, merely a few notes jotted down and enlarged on by the speaker. Some divinity students asked Dr. Nisbet's advice as to further studies in theology. For them he prepared, wrote out, and delivered, slowly, in order that the hearers could take them down four hundred and eighteen (418) lectures, one every term day from Oct. 31st, 1788 to Nov. 5th, 1791. Fortunate enough to have seen a set of the lectures taken down by one of the nine students, one can see they are marvels of thought and study. "This is the first set of lectures on Systematic Theology prepared in the United States." Dr. Nisbet was asked to give these lectures for publication. He refused saying, "I have drawn too largely from approved sources to call it original work." Dr. Nisbet during his college life gave but two things for publication. One the address delivered after his re-election; the other "The Usefulness and Importance of Human Learning—a sermon—preached before the Trustees and Students of Dickinson Collège, met at Carlisle May 11th, 1786 and published at their desire—by Dr. Charles Nisbet." The text given was "And Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was mighty in word and deeds." The sermon is thirty-two (32) pages long and every page is worth reading. It closes, "If Moses needed diligent application and various studies, though he had the gift of prophecy and working miracles; diligence must be much more necessary for you, who have no reason to expect supernatural gifts, Your parents expect that you will be diligent and much of their happiness depends on your success, and good conduct. May God Almighty incline your minds to the love and study of true wisdom, and turn all our labors to your benefit and that of the public that you may be qualified to fulfill and adorn every station and like Moses mighty in words and in deeds." As a preacher Dr. Nisbet had great power of thought and consecration. Among his private papers was

His
Sermons.

found, after his death, a solemn vow dated March 10, 1756, dedicating himself to preach the Gospel. His texts were often chosen with a directness that "left no doubt of application intended." On taking leave of the congregation he had served two years, he was to preach a farewell sermon. This church had promised, when Dr. Nisbet was called to furnish him with a house, this promise had not been fulfilled. The consternation can be imagined when he gave out this text—"And Paul dwelt two whole years in his *own* hired house, and received all that came in to him." For a "Public Fast" service ordered during the American Revolution he selected this text—"In the same hour came forth the fingers of a man's hand and wrote over against the candlestick * * * and the king saw the part of the hand that wrote * * * and this is the writing that was written, *Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin.*" The introduction ran thus, "we are this day called by our superiors to fast and afflict ourselves: and they have not called us to this duty until they have given us abundant reason to do so." On another "Fast Day" the town council of Montrose had as usual attended service in a body. Not liking the opening remarks they left the building, immediately Dr. Nisbet selected and announced this text, "The wicked flee where no man pursueth. "This second charge—Montrose, was the gift of the King. It seems a strange coincident that exactly twenty-one years after Dr. Nisbet received the royal signed manual, he took the oath of allegiance at Carlisle. During the Whiskey Insurrection Dr. Davidson and Dr. Nisbet decided to preach to the insurgents. Dr. Davidson in the morning gave a mild and judicious sermon; in the afternoon Dr. Nisbet preached from the text—"And that ye study to be quiet and to do your own business, and to work with your own hands as we commanded you." His meaning was so plain that his house was in danger of being burnt. Once in a sermon he said that "some people

His Mont-rose Charge.

are like a man driven by every wind of doctrine, having no stability of mind." Dr. Nisbet's charge at Montrose was so large that it took fifteen (15) tables to serve the Lord's supper. Often he walked twenty (20) or thirty (30) miles before breakfast in order to cover the parish. Dealing with these people, one of whose number prayed, "Oh Lord set me right, for Thou knowest, O Lord, that if Thou set me wrong, even Thou, O Lord, canst not turn me back," Dr. Nisbet learned the "habit of force and conviction" so needful to a College President.

His Prophecy.

Dr. Nisbet was a keen observer of the American nation and his letters are interesting, to a friend he wrote—"though every man here is a politician, true politics is little understood." In 1786 to Lord Buchan went the prophecy, now fulfilled—"You ask if there is any truth in the rumor of a war. *We* are not disposed to make war with any power except Spain, whose possessions are too far distant to be in any danger for a century to come." The Spanish-American war took place in 1898. Dr. Nisbet's letters look like printed matter so clear and beautiful. No erasures or amendments appear—"I never read over or erase, my correspondents can erase and amend as much as they please."

His Views on the French Revolution.

In a letter to Dr. Miller at the beginning of the French Revolution he wrote, "Poor Louis, he will have a sham trial and a real execution." One day, in Philadelphia, some one asked him, "What do you think of the French Revolution?" "I can best tell you by relating a dream of a poor old woman in Carlisle. She had been much troubled over her soul's welfare, a thing by the way, that no politician ever thinks of, and dreamed she died and went to the bad place * * * . She knocked at the gate and his Satanic Majesty himself opened it. She expressed her surprise that he should stoop to such an office and asked, "why he did not send one of his imps or understrappers to open the door." Satan said "the

devil, an imp, or understrapper have I left in all my dominions Hell is completely empty. They have all gone to help on the cause of liberty in France." Dr. Nisbet's social qualities were greatly appreciated by all who knew him. His tongue was as quick to speak as his brain to think. Dr. Witherspoon and he had many an intellectual duel and generally Dr. Nisbet excelled. This is an example, Dr. Witherspoon asked Dr. Nisbet for his health.

His Wit.

Dr. N.—"I don't feel very well, I have a ringing in my head."

Dr. W.—"Don't you know what that is a sign of?"

Dr. N.—"No sir, what is it a sign of?"

Dr. W.—"It is a sign, that it is hollow."

Dr. N.—"Why sir, does yours never ring?"

Dr. W.—"No indeed, never, never."

Dr. N.—"And don't you know what that is a sign of?"

Dr. W.—"No, what is it?"

Dr. N.—"It is a sign it is cracked."

Dr. Mason, afterwards a President of Dickinson College, asked Dr. Nisbet if he attended General Assembly. "Yes," said Dr. Nisbet, "sometimes I go in for the benefit of hearing, and then again I come out for the benefit of not hearing." Dr. Mason then asked, "Why Doctor which is the greatest benefit?" Dr. Nisbet's reply was "Indeed mon, its hard to strike the balance." In General Assembly a report was handed in decreasing the educational requirements. A prominent divine asked that it be approved. Dr. Nisbet arose and in a perfectly respectful manner, but sarcastic voice said, "Mr. Moderator, I congratulate the friends of the report in having found in Dr. Green so able and eloquent an advocate of the precious rights of ignorance." A change of form in the marriage ceremony was being discussed. One advocate said it should be more courteous and less abrupt. Dr. Nisbet said, "that makes me think of a new translation of the Bible

I have seen. The polite translator made one verse read, 'now a certain opulent gentlemen had two sons' just as if opulent gentlemen, only, possessed two sons.' In a Magazine published by Dr. Mason we find a definition of Modern Philosophy given by Dr. Nisbet in answer to a request. "It consists of believing everything but the truth and exactly in proportion to the want of evidence or to use the words of a poet, in making windows which shut out the light and passages that lead to nothing."

His Death.

January 1st, 1804, Dr. Nisbet had a severe cold. It rapidly grew worse. His wonderful mental powers were unimpaired. On the 17th he tenderly called his wife's name and raised his hands as if in supplication and began a prayer, "Holy, Holy, Holy, —" God let him finish it beyond.

The College—the town—the country mourned. The local Poetess, Isabella Oliver "strings her lyre"—

"Alas! another Luminary's gone!
Whose rays of truth and science lightly shone,
Great Nisbet's dead.
O Providence supply his vacant chair
O bless this Seminary, may it be
The nurse of morals and of piety
As well as science, may these all combine
Send forth its sons a blessing to mankind."

His Epitaph.

Prof. James Ross, the compiler of the first Latin Grammar published in America, composed a Latin Ode in honor of Dr. Nisbet which is often confused with the epitaph on his monument. This monument at his grave in the "English Graveyard" at Carlisle was erected by Mr. Alexander Nisbet; the epitaph was written by Dr. Mason. The translation here given is that of Chief Justice Gibson who says, "it is a modest but faithful delineation of the qualities of Dr. Nisbet's mind and the virtues of his heart."

SACRED TO THE MEMORY
OF CHARLES NISBET, DOCTOR OF SACRED THEOLOGY

Who by the unanimous invitation
Of the Trustees of Dickinson College,
That he might undertake the duties of Provost,
Emigrating from Scotland, his native country
Came to Carlisle in the year of our Lord 1785
And there through nineteen years
With the highest approbation
Discharged his office.
A man, if such exists, of integrity and piety,
In all learning most accomplished,
Of reading immense, memory faithful,
In real acumen of wit, pleasantry and satire
By universal acknowledgement, truly astonishing;
But to no mortal offensive, except to those
Who under the cloak of philosophy, insult religion
But to his family and friends,
For manners, sweet, benign, cheerful and social,
Beloved without a rival.
He gently breathed out his life on
the 17th of Jan. 1804

This epitaph leaves nothing to be said of what he gave America and Dickinson College but go to Princeton Seminary, see his library, and you will feel the pathos of his American home. His two grandsons, Right Rev. Bishop McCoskry of Michigan, and H. C. Trumbull, Esq. of Maryland, presented it to the Seminary Library. It is small, curious and select—Latin, Greek, French, German, Spanish, Italian and English. What deprivations in the way of literary advantages this man must have suffered. Lord Buchan said, "in giving up the personal companionship of Dr. Nisbet to assist develop America I made one of the greatest sacrifices possible." What this companionship was, can be judged by the fact that after Dr. Nisbet returned from a visit to Governor Dickinson he received notice that five hundred dollars had been deposited in the bank to defray his ex-

His Library.

His Social
Qualities.

His Pupils
Tribute.

penses for further visits. Once a year he made a visit at the Governor's expense, and the host and guests felt amply repaid. Our customs and times are so different that we cannot appreciate the sacrifice made by this cultured man and woman. What they founded stands today to show how well they builded. Read the beginning and ending of a tribute from a pupil. "The life of a mere man of letters is seldom rich in incidents; yet a well written life of this gentleman would not be destitute of interest even in this respect; it would at least abound in literary anecdotes growing out of an intimate intercourse with the most distinguished scholars of Europe * * * To those who were strangers to Dr. Nisbet this may seem a mere fancy sketch; but they who knew him truly will recognize the sober delineation of truth."

His
Character-
istics.

It is said "a tree is known by its fruit." Fruits decay as soon as they ripen; autumn leaves retain long years their brilliancy and suddenly crumble; even pine needles break when old and brittle, but the heart of a tree unless diseased while growing, lasts forever. The dignity of walnut; the granduer of mahogany; the durability of oak; the polish of rosewood; the depth of ebony; the smoothness of satinwood; the softness of palmetto; the color of tulipwood; the glow of sycamore; the grain of pine; the spice of fir; the variety of maple; the fibre of arborvitæ; all these traits and more are found in the heart of the sturdy Scotch tree transplanted to America.

The dust of years may apparently obliterate all traces but accidently brush it away and clear and distinct as the finest mosaic shine out the characteristics of

CHARLES NISBET.



“Men may come and men may go,
Noble Dickinsonia;
Yet in deep and peaceful flow,
Noble Dickinsonia,
Shall thy stream of learning wide,
Through the ages grandly glide,
Ever to thy sons a pride,
Noble Dickinsonia.”

*Used by courtesy of
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