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Title: Letter from Montgomery Porter Sellers to Augustine Birrell

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Contact:

Archives & Special Collections
Waidner-Spahr Library
Dickinson College
P.O. Box 1773
Carlisle, PA 17013

717-245-1399

archives@dickinson.edu

DICKINSON COLLEGE,
CARLISLE, PA.

DEPARTMENT OF RHETORIC
AND THE
ENGLISH LANGUAGE
MONTGOMERY P. SELLERS

May 1, 1913.

Hon. Augustine Birrell, M.P.,
London, England.

My dear Sir:

This morning the regular college exercises were suspended for several hours, and Nisbet Day was celebrated. Every year, on the first day of May, the college pays tribute to the memory of the Rev. Charles Nisbet, the first president of Dickinson College. A procession is formed at 10.30 A.M., after services in the college chapel; and, led by the college band, the faculty, in academic costume, followed by the students of the various classes and departments; march to the Old English Graveyard about a mile distant, for a brief service at the grave of Dr. Nisbet, in commemoration of his life and work in connection with Dickinson College. The seniors are in charge of the Sophomore class. An address is delivered by some man of prominence, and then a representative of the Senior class delivers into the charge of the present Freshman class (who as Sophomores the following year will undertake the celebration.) The

good care and proper keeping of the grave and
monument of Dr. Heston. At the conclusion of the exercises
the silent Tribute is paid, when each member of the
college fellowship deposits red and white carnations
(the college colors) on Dr. Heston's grave. To-day is a
brilliant May Day, and the services this morning were
very beautiful. As I stood beside the grave of the
first president of the college, and listened to the
address of the professor-emeritus of Physics, the historian
of the college, filled with allusions to Dr. Heston and
the early days, I could not help thinking of what might
have been the fortune of the elder Hazlett. Naturally I
thought of you in this connection and remembered your
kind letter of a year ago. And this prompted me to
write to you.

I have been unable to find any authority for your
statement that the elder Hazlett was offered the
presidency of Dickinson College, when it was founded
in 1783. Of course he was in Philadelphia at that
time and doubtless met, among other notabilities,
Governor Dickinson and Dr. Benjamin Rush, who lived in
that city. It may be, as would indeed be very natural,
that they talked together about educational matters
and especially about the founding of the new college.

And it may be that Haglitt thought the trustees of the college really desired him to be the first president. But I have not been able to find any record of the fact, and I must confess that a formal offer of the presidency to Haglitt seems impossible. And for these reasons. The college in its founding and for fifty years afterwards was controlled by Presbyterians and under the auspices of the Presbyterian Church. Under the circumstances it hardly seems reasonable to suppose that they would offer the presidency of the college to a Unitarian minister. The kind of men finally chosen tends to prove this: Not that the Trustees were necessarily narrow minded and bigoted; for Gov. Dickinson and Bruj. Rush, and other leaders in the movement for the establishing of a new college on the "frontier," were notably large minded and liberal in their ideas; and American historians have paid tribute to the early settlers of this region for their breadth of view in matters pertaining to church and state, as well as in education. But right along with the blue blood of these genuine Scotch-Irish flowered Calvinistic doctors, and

it would be really too much to expect them to select a president for their college other than one established in their faith. For the trustees of a college controlled by Presbyterians to offer the presidency to a Unitarian is to credit them, I fear, with freedom of the spirit to an impossible degree. If such an offer was really made it shows, to my mind, most remarkable liberality of spirit and freedom in matters of faith, instead of "bondage of spirit" and "slavery". If the offer was really made by the trustees, I can not believe, knowing the kind of men they were, that they meant Haylett to be bond and slave.

The man selected by the trustees for the first president of the college was Dr. Charles Nesbit, of Montrose, Scotland. He was one of the leading scholars of his time and wholly great in character. He was the established minister in Montrose; and when Dr. Johnson made his memorable tour to the Hebrides with Boswell, in 1779 I think it was, he made it a point to call at Dr. Nesbit's home, only to find, and much to his regret, that he was out of town. Dr. Nesbit sailed for America in 1786, and as he approached Annapolis a troop of horsemen went out to meet him and to escort him into the frontier town. Here he lived as president of Dickinson College for nearly nineteen years, dying in 1804. He was probably the greatest scholar in America at that time.

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The coming of Dr. Nesbit to America, his leaving the home-land for the trying experience of a new unsettled region, the nineteen years he spent in Carlisle and the life incidents of the frontier; the trials and difficulties of ^{the} establishments of a new college, with the consequent disappointments and heart sickness, the difficulties between president and trustees - and through all, the good scholarship, the high ideals of education; the truly noble character of Dr. Nesbit dominating the situation - form one of the most romantic; as well as one of the most pathetic; incidents with which I am acquainted. As Nesbit himself says, he had the disagreeable task of digging under ground and laying the foundations; that others later might build the superstructure. So we celebrate the first of May as Nesbit Day, and with all humility of heart pay our tribute to his memory. It is an unique celebration; there is nothing quite like it in the educational world in America. I thought you might be interested in it.

You ask me about religion in America at the present time. Debita Parvella, you will remember, asked the same question in 1769; and Liepelt's

reply that it was a very simple matter, about sums
up the situation for today. Notwithstanding the numerous
sects and creeds, the rather large number of church
bodies are fundamentally not very far apart. Simplicity
of thought prevails, and simplicity of faith with ^{the} ~~the~~ ^{keynote} ~~keynote~~ of
the times. More and more dependence is being placed upon
the simple elements of religion, and church union is very
pronounced. The spirit of brotherhood, and fellowship,
and comradeship, and throughout all the spirit
of Jesus of Nazareth - this is the religious spirit that
prevails the lands; and the simpler the faith, and the
more practical, the better the people like it. It may not
be the spirit, the religion of the formal Church; but it
is the spirit of Jesus, and the simple teaching of Jesus,
working among the people.

Will you pardon my writing to you at such length,
and perhaps pardon my writing to you at all? I
trust you will, for it has given me pleasure to
write to you these lines. And writing to you makes me
think of England, where I hope to spend, as usual, my
summer vacation days, particularly at Oxford, which
has become for me a kind of second home.

With great regard, I beg to remain,

Yours very truly,

Montgomery T. Sellers.