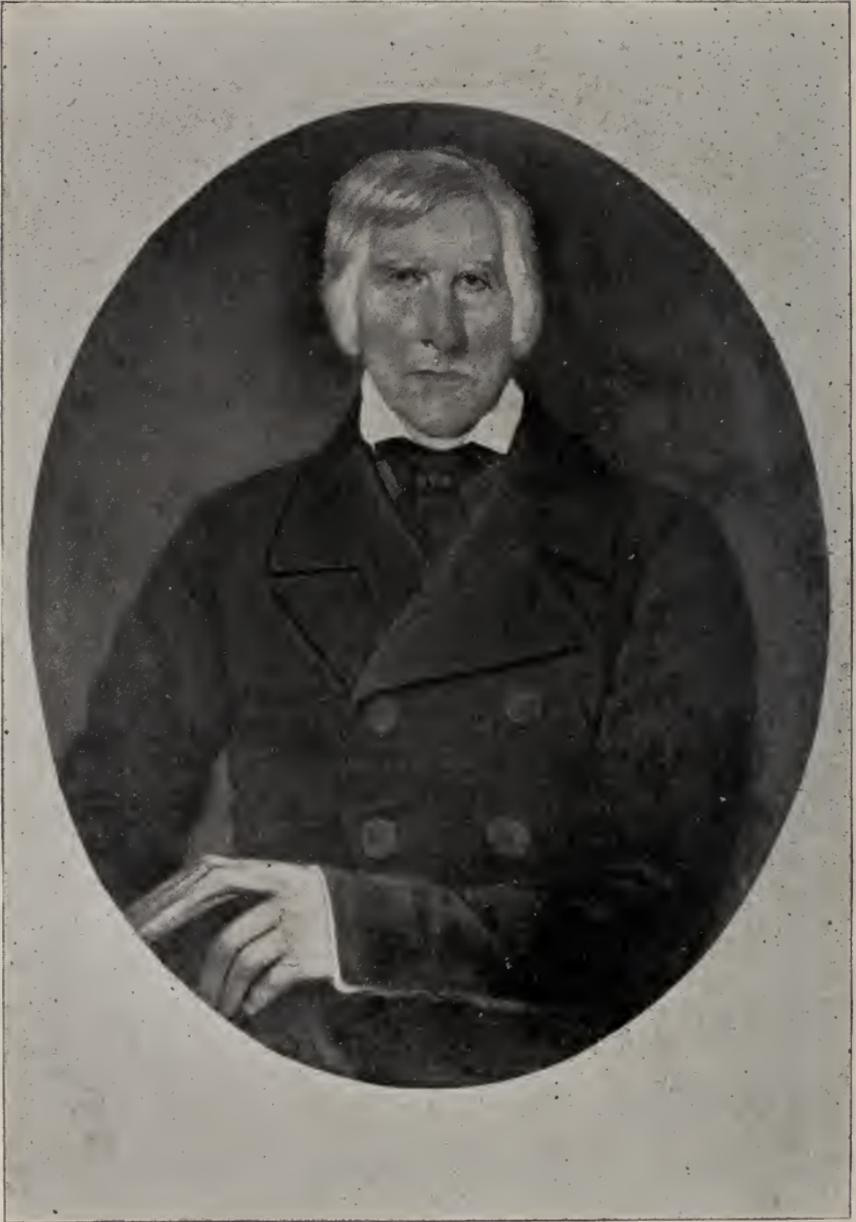


RECOLLECTIONS
OF THE
REV. JOHN McELHENNEY, D.D.



Yours aff^l Brother in Christ
John M. McHenry

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RECOLLECTIONS

OF THE

REV. JOHN McELHENNEY, D. D.

BY HIS GRANDDAUGHTER.

ROSE W. FRY.

“O good gray head which all men knew.”

Richmond, Va. :

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CHAPTER IX.

REMINISCENCES OF REV. JOHN McELHENNEY, D. D.

BY REV. J. C. BARR, D. D.

THE writer, having stood in the relation of co-pastor to the Rev. John McElhenney, D. D., for nearly ten years, takes pleasure in recording a few reminiscences of his venerable and beloved colleague.

Leaving the seminary at Allegheny City, he reached Lewisburg, Virginia, on Saturday evening before the third Sabbath of May, 1857, on his way to the mission field in Pocahontas county, of which he was to take charge. Having a letter of introduction from Dr. Plumer to Dr. McElhenney, he went at once to his house to seek his acquaintance. He knocked at the door, and in a few moments an elegant-looking old gentleman, whom he knew to be the veteran minister, met him. The impression of his fine personal appearance and frank, cordial manner is as fresh to-day as it was at the time. He was then seventy-five years of age. He was about six feet in height, perfectly erect, and with frame finely proportioned. Though time had whitened his locks and drawn wrinkles on his brow, his voice was clear and strong, and the fire was still in his eye. The writer handed him his letter of introduction, but, instead of reading it, he asked, "Who is this from?" "Dr. Plumer," was the answer. "And

what is your name?" was the next question. When the name was given, he said, "Come in, come in," and he introduced him to the members of his family, who were seated around the supper table, and gave him a seat with them. All this was done in half the time that most men would have taken to read the letter of introduction.

One of those seated at the table was the Rev. William T. Price, who, like the writer, had just left the seminary to enter upon the work of the ministry. Dr. McElhenney was proverbial for getting work out of every Presbyterian preacher who came into his congregation, whether on the Sabbath or the week-days. If a minister arrived in Lewisburg at any time during the day, the pastor engaged his services for the night. He sent out notices through the town, and had a congregation assembled "at early candle-lighting." Having two young ministers on this Saturday evening, the first thing he did after reseating himself at the supper table was to assign them their work. He had already engaged Mr. Price to preach twice on the Sabbath. Turning to his newly-arrived guest, he said: "Brother Price will preach at 11 A. M. and at 7 P. M.; and you will address the Sunday-school in the morning, and preach at 3 o'clock in the afternoon." The Sabbath turned out to be one of those bright, charming days in the mountains in the month of May, when all nature seems to be calling the people together for praise and prayer. The house was well filled at all of the services through the day, numerous as they were, and the venerable pastor was present, manifesting his zeal and interest on each occasion. On Monday the writer set

out to his field of labor in Pocahontas county, where he spent nearly two years in mission work. He was then called to the Lewisburg Church as co-pastor with Dr. McElhenney. Some of his friends told him that the aged pastor had been in the church for more than fifty years; that he had an indomitable will; that he was born to command, and that, therefore, any young man would find it a very difficult relation to sustain. Believing, however, that it was his duty, he accepted the call, and entered upon his work on the 22nd day of May, 1859.

He determined at the outset always to regard and treat his venerable colleague as his superior; to defer to him in all matters where there might be a difference of opinion, and to take no step forward without consulting him. He carried out this purpose, but soon found that the senior pastor was just as much determined to encourage him and hold up his hands in every effort to advance the cause of Christ. He made his junior colleague feel that he had as much liberty as if he had been sole pastor. So, like father and son, in affection and harmony, these two men lived and labored together for nearly ten years. When the younger took leave of his venerable and beloved co-pastor, the elder seemed to feel deeply his loneliness. He said, "Brother Barr, there has never been a word of variance between you and me?" "No, Doctor, never a word." "Nor a thought, I suppose?" "No, Doctor, nor a thought." "Well," said he, "that shows that the Lord has been with us."

When the relation of co-pastor was established, the Lewisburg church was one of the best organized

churches in our country. There were twelve elders in all, though some of them were becoming superannuated. Among them were such men as the Hon. Samuel Price, Johnston Reynolds, Mark L. Spotts, Thomas Mathews, James Withrow, John McPherson, and James Montgomery. There was also an efficient board of deacons. About one-half of the congregation came from the country,—some on horseback, some in carriages, and others on foot. The summer session of the Court of Appeals of Virginia was held in Lewisburg, which brought among the hearers in the Presbyterian church such men as the Hon. Peachy R. Grattan, the Hon. John Randolph Tucker, Judge Moncure, Judge Daniel, Judge Leigh, Judge Allen, and many other distinguished men in the State. In few places was there so much intelligence and culture brought together in one congregation on the Sabbath as in the old church at Lewisburg.

As we have seen Dr. McElhenney hold the attention of such a congregation fixed throughout his sermon, when he was bordering on eighty years of age, we have felt that even then he was no ordinary preacher. His voice was clear and musical, his delivery free from monotony. His thoughts were expressed in simple, but forcible, language. Frequently we have seen him, even in his old age, assume the attitude of the orator, and pour forth strains of as pure eloquence as we have ever heard. He always kindled as he advanced with his subject, and before he was through with his sermon his whole soul seemed to be on fire. He was peculiarly happy in his addresses at the communion table, and when he sat down, after portraying the suf-

ferings of Christ, and telling of his wonderful love, his people were melted to tears.

It has been a marvel to many of us how Dr. McElhenney could conduct a classical school; build up the church at Lewisburg; preach at Union or Mt. Pleasant, twenty miles away, on the same day that he preached in the home church, and at the same time plant the church in Pocahontas county; at Falling Spring; at Anthony's Creek; at Muddy Creek, and go on missions to Christiansburg, across the mountains into Nicholas county and into Kanawha Valley. The man who carried on such a work was peculiarly fitted for it. For one thing, he economized his time. If he called to see any one on business he did not lose a moment in stating his object, or in leaving as soon as the matter was attended to. He never waited for tardy members of his congregation, or tardy elders or deacons, but opened the meeting the moment the time arrived. In making calls with him from house to house in the village, the writer noticed that he would always make for the front door and knock and then return to the mat to clean his shoes, that no time might be lost in waiting for the door to open. In every thing he saved his moments, and thus added many days, perhaps weeks, to the year. He was a fine horseman, and knew how to take care of his horse, and in this way he could accomplish much more in the same time than other men. When he preached at Union in the morning, and at the home church at night, he rode the twenty miles in from three and a half to four hours. He told us once of having preached at Union when his dinner was delayed, so as to make a rapid ride

necessary in order to reach home in time for the service. When he had ridden about six miles, he saw an old lady riding very slowly before him. She had been creeping along at a snail's pace, from the time that the congregation had been dismissed. He disliked to pass her, but it was a necessity. He loped by her, saying, that he must hurry on for his evening appointment. She called after him, "Mr. McElhenney, isn't a merciful man merciful to his beast?" With his quick wit, he answered, "It is more merciful to ride your beast home and feed him than to sit on him in the road all day."

The horse he rode in the latter years of his life was presented to him by some of his people, and he named him "Donum." After Donum had served him for many years, and carried him thousands of miles, he would sometimes stumble. Once the two pastors were riding together to attend a service west of Lewisburg, when Donum suddenly tripped and went down on his knees and threw the Doctor forward on his neck. As he was holding with both hands to his mane to prevent himself from slipping forward his weight held the poor animal's nose to the ground and disabled him from rising up. The younger pastor jumped from his horse and ran to the Doctor to relieve him from his painful and perilous situation. To his surprise, he found him shaking with laughter. When he lifted him back into his saddle, and the horse recovered himself, he said, with some merriment, "Donum and I would have been a fine subject for a comic picture."

A great burden was added to Dr. McElhenney's other labors, which no ordinary man could have borne,

by the funerals he attended throughout his wide field. Even after other ministers were settled around him in the churches he had planted he was often sent for by the people to whom he was so much endeared, to minister to them in their bereavement. He must have had an average of thirty funerals in a year, to some of which he rode five, ten or twenty miles. He was a man of tender sympathies with the sorrowful, and he knew just how to speak words of comfort without saying anything to open the wounds which were already bleeding. The first week after the writer entered upon his labors at Lewisburg, the Doctor made a mistake in conducting a funeral service, which was the occasion of some humor at his expense among his people. A messenger came one evening to ask him to attend the funeral of Mrs. T—— the next morning, about four miles from the town. As usual he consented to go, but understood that it was Mr. T—— that was dead. When he arrived the next morning at the farm house in which the service was to be held Mr. T—— took his seat near his stand, but he did not recognize him, especially as he thought he was dead. He opened the service, and after some appropriate remarks, he spoke at some length of the excellent character of his worthy old friend who had just passed away. He then spoke of the sad fact that with all his noble traits of character he had never made any profession of religion. A woman sitting near, fearing that he might say something that would be painful to the bereaved husband, touched him and whispered "Doctor, it is Mrs. T—— who is dead." With that readiness, which could never be balked, he cleared his

throat and said, "all the remarks made in relation to the old gentleman are equally applicable to the old lady," and continued his address without being in the least disconcerted. That evening the young pastor met him and asked him if he really had been preaching a living man's funeral. With his characteristic humor, he answered, "Yes, I have been preaching dead men's funerals for fifty years, and it hasn't done much good, and I thought I would try a living man's."

He was frequently called upon to go a long distance to perform a marriage ceremony. Many came to his home in Lewisburg to have the marriage relation consummated, and saved him the long ride on horseback. But the winter after he preached the sermon on the fiftieth anniversary of his pastorate, he went over fifty miles to marry one couple, and thirty-five miles to marry another. We have seen him entertain a company of young people in his own parlor by giving the most amusing descriptions of some of the backwoods weddings at which he had officiated.

In his social relations he was uniformly cordial and open-hearted. He made few professions, and never flattered, but proved the genuineness of his friendship by his self-forgetfulness and self-sacrifice for the welfare of others. Those who knew him longest and most intimately prized his friendship most highly.

He retained a strong attachment to the men whom he had prepared for college and for business life. One of his pupils, whom he cherished with strong affection as long as he lived, was Dr. William S. Plumer. He generally addressed him as "William." In the spring

of 1865, soon after the war was over, Dr. Plumer accepted an invitation from Thomas Mathews, Esq., of Lewisburg, to visit him. As soon as he arrived, the writer, being one of his old students, called to see him. He seemed to be under restraint, and not like himself. It occurred to the writer that, as Dr. Plumer had just come from the North, where he had been during all the war, he had an impression that the feelings of his old friends had changed toward him. He proposed to drive him up to see Dr. McElhenney, to which he readily assented. As we entered the front gate at the lower end of the lawn in front of the Doctor's residence, he recognized from his door his dear old pupil, and came walking down the lawn, with his venerable head uncovered, and holding both arms wide open. Doctor Plumer, taking off his hat, walked on into his arms, and laid his head on his shoulder, and wept. The old teacher said, in his clear, strong voice, "William, how are you?" The younger could only sob out, "God bless you, Doctor McElhenney." Of all meetings that we have ever witnessed between two venerable friends, that was the most touching and affecting. The visitor was taken into the house, where the Doctor's family, as well as himself, bestowed their warmest affection upon him. He seemed like a new man, and from that time on, during his visit of ten days, he realized in the fullest degree that he was among his old friends again.

It is not strange that Dr. McElhenney was so universally beloved and esteemed. He was one of the best specimens of true manhood. He was noble-hearted, just, true, honest, pure, and generous towards men.

He was humble, trustful, faithful, and devoted as a servant of God. Standing near the old church in Lewisburg is a beautiful marble monument, erected to his memory by his devoted people. Yet the monument which most grandly perpetuates his memory is the wonderful work of his own hands—the churches he built up, and the men whom he educated, whose influence will live forever.