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THE SEMI-CENTENNIAL OF THE PRESBYTERIAN
HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

By the REV. JOHN PEACOCK, D. D.

THE Fiftieth Anniversary of the Presbyterian Historical Society was celebrated in Witherspoon Building, Philadelphia, on December 2, 1902. At 2:30 P. M., a meeting was held in the small auditorium. The Rev. Henry C. McCook, D. D., Sc. D., LL.D., the President of the Society, was in the Chair. At the request of the President the audience arose, and the Rev. David Steele, Jr., D. D., LL.D., of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America (General Synod), offered prayer.

The President called upon the Rev. Samuel T. Lowrie, D. D., the Corresponding Secretary of the Society, to express the welcome of the Society to those who came to join in this celebration.

Dr. Lowrie said:

“Our Society was founded fifty years ago at a meeting of the General Assembly in Charleston, S. C. Its proper anniversary, therefore, coincides with the meeting of that body in May; and this has had some sort of celebration now and then by meetings held in the interest of the Society where the General Assembly

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Breach which separated the Old School from the New School in 1838 would soon be healed in a Blessed Reunion—has not that prophecy already been fulfilled? And are there not other reconciliations to be made, other friendships to be renewed, other reunions to be cemented, under the influence of the sober, friendly, clear-eyed study of history?

The day is already past when a distinction between Rous's Version and Watts's Paraphrases, between the Catechism of Heidelberg and the Catechism of Westminster, between the doctrine of Predestination and the doctrine of Sovereignty, between the *Gloria Patri* and the Long Metre Doxology, can keep us from grasping our brother's hand, joining in our brother's prayer, sharing in our brother's work. The things that unite us are clearly seen, in the light of history, to be more and greater than the things that divide us. And the day is coming when rivalry shall be swallowed up and lost in alliance. The day is coming when we shall have fewer sects and more congregations. The day is coming when the paths that split in the darkness on the rough and stony ground, will reunite in the daylight on the King's High Way. There the tribes of the Lord shall go up, holding the Reformed Faith and the Presbyterian Order, not in discord, but in concord. They shall come together in the Spirit, they shall work together for Christ, they shall march together in joy, they shall flow together in union, conquering and rejoicing, towards that great day when all the rivers of Christian work and worship shall join their waters in the crystal sea,

" And in the Ocean of God's love
We lose ourselves in heaven above."

The most deeply interesting event of the celebration was the presentation and unveiling of a fine portrait of the founder of the Society, the Rev. Cortlandt Van Rensselaer, D. D. It was the gift of his son, Mr. Alexander Van Rensselaer, of Philadelphia. The pleasing privilege of presenting and unveiling it was fittingly conferred upon his son-in-law, the Rev. Edward B. Hodge, D. D., the Secretary of the Board of Education of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, who then made the following address:

Mr. President, Mr. Chairman, Brethren of the Presbyterian Historical Society, Ladies and Gentlemen:

We were told this afternoon by our Librarian, Dr. Ledwith, in his admirable historical discourse, of an article which appeared in the *Presbyterian Magazine* in August, 1851, written by the editor of the magazine, the Rev. Dr. Cortlandt Van Rensselaer, which had an important relation to the history of the Society.

The opening words of that article are as follows: "Many treasures of our Church History are irrecoverably lost, and many more, now accessible, will soon be covered over by the diluvium of time unless gathered up without delay."

The author goes on to show that there could be little hope that effective measures would be taken by the General Assembly for the preventing of such a disaster, inasmuch as sixty years had passed since that body had undertaken to gather historical materials, and at the end of three-score years there was little to show as the result of the effort. He admitted that something had been accomplished by the labors of individuals. Dr. Archibald Alexander had written the "Log College," Dr. Charles Hodge had written "The Constitutional History of the Presbyterian Church," Dr. Davidson the "History of the Presbyterian Church in the State of Kentucky," and Dr. Foote, "Sketches" of North Carolina and Virginia. But the field was too extensive, and the work too vast and varied, to be left to the random efforts of individuals. The only effective means for the accomplishment of the end in view was, in his judgment, an association; and the question was, therefore, thus publicly raised whether there ought not to be a Presbyterian Historical Society.

Mr. Chairman, the interest of to-day's proceedings is centred in the fact that, as a result of this suggestion, and in answer to a call for a meeting, signed by Dr. Van Rensselaer and other prominent ministers, such a Society was organized fifty years ago, at the time of the meeting of the General Assembly, in the city of Charleston, S. C.

The prominent part taken by Dr. Van Rensselaer in the proceedings which resulted in the organization of our Society,

viewed in connection with his own original suggestion on the subject, leads us very naturally to consider him, more properly than any other person, *the founder of the Society*.

It seems eminently fitting, therefore, that a portrait, worthily representing his features, should have a prominent place among the pictures of distinguished men by which we wish our walls to be adorned.

It is a special satisfaction thus to honor one who, in the most whole-hearted manner, consecrated his social position, his scholarly attainments, and his days and nights of toil, as well as his wealth, to the very end of life, to the service of Christ and the Church; first as a missionary to the plantation negroes of Virginia; then as the founder, first pastor, and constant friend of the church in Burlington, New Jersey, where he had his residence; then, in an exigency, as agent for the collection of the funds necessary for the firm establishment of the Church's Theological Seminary in Princeton, New Jersey; and finally, by voice and pen and personal effort, and I may add, even to the sacrifice of his life, for the promotion of a very extensive, well-considered scheme of Christian education, designed to embrace the whole Church.

It is probably known to some at least of those present this evening that the General Assembly of 1860, which met in the city of Rochester, N. Y., bestowed upon Dr. Van Rensselaer an altogether unique mark of esteem and affection. When they learned that he would not be able to attend the sessions of the Assembly on account of an illness which would probably have a fatal termination, they directed that a letter should be addressed to him expressive of their devout thankfulness to God for the eminent wisdom, fidelity and efficiency, and the noble, disinterested liberality which had marked his arduous labors in the service of the Church, and thanking him, in the name of the Church, for all his toil and sacrifice.

The letter was signed by the Moderator of the Assembly, as well as by the other officers, by the individual members, and by many others who happened to be present in attendance upon the sessions of the Assembly. When prepared it was read, according to the testimony of an eye-witness, in the midst of

tears and sighs, and adopted by the whole Assembly rising to their feet, the unprecedented scene being closed by a prayer in which the oldest minister present gave utterance to the feelings which swelled every heart.

Mr. Chairman, one great object of our Society is to preserve in the minds of succeeding generations the services of men like this minister of Christ, whose character and work were so much appreciated by his contemporaries, and thus to stimulate others to like zeal and to inspire them for similar services.

We are confident that the proceeding in which we are now engaged will exert no inconsiderable influence in the promotion of this object.

We are all placed under great obligations to Mr. Alexander Van Rensselaer, of this city, by the gift which he has made to the Society, of a most excellent portrait of his father which he has given me the privilege of unveiling. (The portrait was here unveiled.)

He was good enough to select as the artist Mr. David Neal; a man who has won distinguished honors in his profession during his long residence in Munich, and who has, in this country, lately added to his already great reputation by producing most admirable portraits of the late Prof. William Henry Green, of Princeton Theological Seminary, the late Prof. John T. Duffield, of Princeton University, the late Dr. George T. Purves, of the Fifth Avenue Church in New York City, and the Hon. White-law Reid.

It affords me the greatest pleasure, in behalf of Mr. Alexander Van Rensselaer, to present this portrait of his father to The Presbyterian Historical Society.

In accepting the gift on behalf of the Society, the Rev. Louis F. Benson, D. D., thus responded:

Mr. Chairman and Doctor Hodge; Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is more blessed (we all know it) to give than to receive. It happens, however, that in the make-up of our nature Providence has left ample room for very comfortable satisfactions on the part also of the recipient of a gift. To give is the gracious thing. But gratitude, none the less, is a grace. It is the