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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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curtain rise. Let it rise! Methinks I see it swinging up and catch glimpses of the faces of Livingston, the Alexanders, Chas. Hodge, Albert Barnes, John Chambers, Cortlandt Van Rensselaer, and around them gathered the foreign missionaries who have dared and died for Jesus; and above them the countless crowd of witnesses. Listen! Listen! from above all breaks that majestic voice in tones of thunder to the children of Israel that they go forward! forward! forward!

Dr. Cuyler was followed by the Rev. Henry van Dyke, D. D., Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, who delivered the following address upon

THE VALUE OF HISTORY.

That most suggestive critic, Thomas De Quincey, divided literature into two great departments: the literature of knowledge and the literature of power. History, if it be true and wise, belongs to both departments. It aims, first, to widen our field of knowledge by bringing before us the vanished past; rebuilding, as if by magic, cities and civilizations that have long since crumbled into ruins; tracing again the pathways of human races and tribes across the unrecording deserts; calling back to visionary life the faces and the forms of great men lost in the common dust of earth; and making silent voices speak to us again. In this great service history addresses itself to the intellect alone. It feeds that deep hunger of the mind which we call curiosity. It adds immensely to the range of things that men may know.

But the Muse of History has never been content to rest in this service to knowledge, any more than the Muse of Poetry has been content to rest in a mere service to beauty. Beyond the presentation of the facts of the past, history has been impelled by the vital spirit which animates it, to aim at the exercise of power in the present. Not merely to add to the things that men may know, but to make this addition count for something in lessons of warning, of encouragement, of reverence, of fear, of admiration, and of hope: this is the ethical impulse, deeper far than mere curiosity, which inspires and sustains the patient

study of musty documents, the collection and comparison of forgotten books, the excavation of buried ruins, the weary sifting of old dust-heaps, the cunning hunt for the meaning of ancient pictures and inscriptions graven upon dumb coins and silent stones. It is not merely that men may know more, but that they may receive something from the increase of knowledge,—wisdom, guidance, inspiration for the future.

"I do not in the least want to know what happened in the past," said Mr. John Morley, a few years ago, "except as it enables me to see my way more clearly through what is happening to-day." "History," wrote Lord Bolingbroke, two centuries earlier, "is philosophy teaching by examples." Mr. Morley's lack of purely scientific curiosity is perhaps expressed with some excess. Lord Bolingbroke's epigram goes too far in making history merely a branch of philosophy. The historian who writes to prove a doctrine is too apt to run his record into the mould of his theory. Facts are often interesting even when they cannot be clearly translated into lessons. I like to know how George Washington traveled, how Benjamin Franklin wrote to his wife when he was in France, what kind of a wig John Witherspoon wore, though this knowledge has no direct application to the problems of my present life.

But after all allowances for excessive or inaccurate statement have been made, it still remains clear that history, in its right development, in its ultimate and noblest exercise, belongs to the literature of power. The value of history resides not only in the light which it rekindles

"In the dark backward and abysm of Time,"

but also in the fire which it brings

"From the fountains of the past
To glorify the present."

Therefore it is that thoughtful and high-spirited races, self-respecting and progressive nations, and generous institutions, dedicated to the advancement of human welfare, have **always** been faithful cherishers and studious disciples of history.

Oliver Wendell Holmes advised that the education of a boy

should begin with his great-grandfather. In one way or another, it always does. Self-knowledge is the basis of wisdom; but there is no such knowledge of self without a knowledge of the generations that have gone before. Every city that hath foundations hath also founders, whose names it knows and whose deeds it honors. Every church that endures, has church-fathers whose records and relics it is devout and loyal to cherish. The Bible itself owes its preservation, under God's Providence, in large part to the pious resolution, first of the Hebrew, and then of the Christian Church, not to suffer the story of a wondrous past to fall into forgetfulness. It is mainly a collection of historical books permeated with a heavenly revelation; a precious vessel of human memories sanctified by the treasure of a divine hope; a narrative of the *yesterday* of men, translated by the Spirit of Inspiration into a rule of faith and conduct for every *to-day*, and so made the Word of God *forever*.

Where, then, should respect for history, and a profound sense of its double value, prevail more deeply or more constantly than in the Christian Church? Where should men be more careful to preserve historical material and to promote true historical study than in a Church like ours? We believe that the sovereign purpose of God runs through the web of human events unbroken and untarnished. We believe that His dealings with men, His most holy, wise and powerful works of Providence, are a constant revelation of His will from generation to generation. We believe that the most significant, the most important of all histories, is the history of religion.

Is it not inevitable, then, that Christians holding such a faith as that which belongs in common to the Reformed Churches of the Presbyterian Order in the United States of America, coming to self-consciousness and to self-respect, under a realizing sense of their duties and privileges, should unite their efforts to preserve and use the precious historical material which God has entrusted to their keeping?

Yes, it is inevitable, and, therefore, it has come to pass in the foundation of this Presbyterian Historical Society, now fifty years old. But the strange thing is that so few of the men and women of the church, even now, seem to understand the need, the dignity, the value of this work.

Such weight as belongs to the office which I hold in one of the great branches of our Presbyterian communion, such personal influence as I may have won with a few friends and readers by trying to speak the truth and to do honest work, I would fain use to the full to-night to endorse and promote the purposes of this Historical Society.

Can it be that any one fails to see the necessity of such a society? Modern History has greatly enlarged our conception of the materials which are necessary for thorough historical research. Biographies and memoirs and chronicles no longer fill the field, nor even hold the first place. The autobiography, in which the portrait of the lion is painted by himself, and the "ought-not-to-biography," in which the too-friendly photographer makes his subject assume a pleasant expression and then touches out all the wrinkles in the negative, fail to supply those most interesting features of reality which are essential to a convincing picture of the past. We turn nowadays to more candid and less conscious sources. A coin, an inscription, a charter, a receipted bill, a will, the record of a baptism, a marriage or a funeral, a bundle of old letters, a map, the minute-book of some meeting long since adjourned *sine die*, the roll of some congregation all of whose members have been dismissed from the church militant to the church triumphant,—these and other like things belong to the most precious materials of history.

But they are frail and perishable stuff. Fire devours them; the church mouse nibbles them; thieves are not likely to steal them, but moth and rust are sure to consume them. The sexton puts them away safely in a place where they never can be found again. Churches dry up and blow away and all their heirlooms are scattered to the four winds of earth. How much costly and invaluable material has already vanished beyond recall.

Our motto should be "Gather up the fragments that remain that nothing be lost." A central depository for the safe keeping of these treasures, surrounded by the books and pamphlets which will throw light upon them and make their meaning clear, is an absolute necessity. In such a place, guarded against the fire that consumes and the folly that forgets, easily accessible to all who have an interest in them, the sacred, silent witnesses to the

struggles and the sacrifices, the heroism and the fidelity of our fathers in the faith, may be assembled in security and kept in honor. From this Hall of Noble Memories, filled with "the quiet and still air of delightful studies," as from a shrine of knowledge sainted by service, the voice of history may speak to us in clear and tranquil tones, recounting the true glories of our race, our country, our church, and putting us in mind of the chastisements and rebukes, the deliverances and rewards of Almighty God,—

"Lest we forget, lest we forget."

It should be regarded then as a matter of necessity, practical and imperative, that the Churches holding the Reformed Faith and the Presbyterian Order in this country should have such a Hall of Records and Relics. Already this Hall is in advance of anything of the kind that has yet been provided in Scotland or England, and, so far as I know, in Germany or Holland or Switzerland. A distinguished Scotch advocate, Mr. Charles J. Guthrie, Q. C., who visited this Hall in 1899, bore testimony, with surprise and delight, to its pre-eminent worth and success. Its maintenance and support, its enrichment and enlargement, its ultimate establishment, I hope, in a permanent home of ample size and adequate dignity, is an object for which Presbyterians should count it an honor and a duty to bestow gifts with the living hand, and to make bequests with the thoughtful prescience of those who desire to leave behind a token of good to the world from which they are departing. For my part, I wonder that so few of us have realized the strong claims or listened to the modest requests of this institution. It has asked for little; we have given it less. My own negligence I would fain repair at this moment by begging the treasurer to enroll my subscription as a life member of the Association.

It is not a mere matter of sentiment. There is a positive and definite value in the contributions which this society aims to make to the study of history—a value for the present age—a value which can be estimated and expressed in clear and practical terms. Bear with me for a few moments more while I make an attempt at such an expression.

1. The history of our Presbyterian Church has a great value of inspiration and encouragement. There are glorious pages in that history. Going back to Geneva and Holland and Scotland, we find the foundations of our civil and religious liberty laid by the men who held the Reformed faith and the Presbyterian order. Crossing the ocean, we find the disciples of these men foremost among all religious bodies in the hard struggle for the vindication of human rights, which resulted in the birth of our great Republic. "There was but one minister in the Synod of New England," says Dr. Robert Ellis Thompson in his History, "who embraced the British side of the controversy." And the Synod promptly deposed him. Councils of Presbyterians in Virginia and North Carolina passed the earliest declarations of independence. Presbyterian chaplains served in the Continental Congress and in the army. Presbyterian elders led the hosts of freedom on the field; five of them in one battle—at King's Mountain—were colonels. And when the strife was ended, with their churches burnt and wasted, their dwellings plundered, their fortunes diminished and in many cases destroyed, the Presbyterian Synod of New York and Philadelphia in 1783 called upon their congregations "to render thanks to Almighty God for all his mercies, spiritual and temporal, and in a particular manner for establishing the independence of the United States of America."

Four years later we find the same Synod striking the same keynote of "universal liberty" and calling on "all the people under their care to use the most prudent measures consistent with the interest and the state of civil society * * to procure eventually the final abolition of slavery in America." And to-day, wherever there is a movement which looks to the betterment of human society, the enlightenment of the ignorant, the care of the sick and wounded, the protection of the helpless and the oppressed; there we find Presbyterians playing a leading part as givers and workers in Christ's name.

Surely the history which preserves the record of these things must be of value to us for inspiration. Too long have we forgotten them. Too often have the men of our church failed in that sober, steadfast pride of descent which is a bond of loyalty

and an incentive to noble service. Let us refresh our spirits and renew our confidence in our ancient faith and order by drinking at the fountains of the past. Let us have no more half-hearted, shame-faced Presbyterians, but whole-hearted Presbyterians, proud and glad to be members of that Old Guard of the great Church Militant.

2. The study of the history which this Society is intended to preserve and promote ought to have a great value for instruction and guidance. The problems which lie before our churches to-day were before our fathers in a different form. We may learn much from their experience.

Take the question of the revision of the doctrinal standards of the Presbyterian Church in the U. S. A., which we have long considered and lately answered, much to the relief and comfort of the church. A knowledge of the history of the Westminster Assembly and of the other creeds of the Reformation, and of the Adopting Act in this country, and of the many debates and conferences which have followed, was of inestimable worth in finding a fair and just solution of this question.

Or take the problem of the order of worship, to which, in my judgment, we ought soon to address ourselves seriously. The history of our Reformed Churches will help us here. We can learn something of value from the liturgies of Knox, of Calvin, of John a Lasco. Even so simple a thing as a knowledge of the acts of our own Assembly approving the use of the Lord's Prayer, the Apostles' Creed, and the Psalter read responsively, as elements of common worship, ought to be a guide to us in our movement toward unity, simplicity, beauty and the participation of all the people in the services of confession, praise and prayer.

Or take, again, the great problem of evangelistic work. Surely it must enlighten us in our present duty to read, in the records of the past, of the earnest labors and of the splendid success of the Presbyterian churches in preaching the Gospel to the Gentiles. They were ardent Christian evangelists—those old Presbyterians. They believed in the power and willingness of the Holy Spirit to revive His work. They prayed and preached for revivals. They went out into the highways and hedges to compel men to come in. They would rather preach to sinners than

to saints, because they knew that the fruits of that kind of preaching fill heaven with joy and strengthen the church on earth. Read the narratives of the Great Awakening in the beginning of the 18th century, of which Princeton College was the monument; of the Great Revival in the beginning of the 19th century, which checked the flood of atheism and indifferentism sweeping in from France; of the earnest evangelistic campaigns in the years from 1820 to 1840. You will find there the candid record of errors and excesses which will serve us for warning. But you will find also clear proof that the vital strength of the Presbyterian churches has come from the evangelistic spirit; that they have prospered most when they have gone out with Christ's Gospel to seek and to save the lost; and that, as the 18th century began with the Great Awakening, the 19th century with the Great Revival, so our hope and efforts should be to begin the 20th century with the Great Advance.

3. There is one more point in which the study of our history must be of value to us, and that is in deepening the sense of fellowship, of unity, of co-operation among the brotherhood of the Reformed Churches represented in this Society. True, we shall read in the pages of that history the veracious account of many dissensions and subsequent divisions. Presbyterians have always taken the life of faith as a "strenuous life," and people who live strenuously, frequently find it difficult to live together. But I am convinced that to look back upon those ancient stories of strife with a clearer, steadier vision—

With an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,—

will not put us further apart, but draw us nearer together. We shall see the mountains of division sink, in their true perspective, to mole-hills of difference. We shall see that the causes of separation were not conflicts between good men and bad men, but misunderstanding and mistrust among good men. Was there a man on either side in the great schism of 1741 whom we would not welcome with joy into our fellowship to-day? Has not the noble prophecy made by Dr. Robert Davidson in an oration before this Society in 1853, that the Sorrowful

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: