

# MEMOIR

OF THE

REV. CHARLES NISBET, D.D.

LATE PRESIDENT OF

DICKINSON COLLEGE, CARLISLE.

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rial of that early and long continued friendship which led to this union and co-operation in erecting an humble monument to the memory of the illustrious dead.

*“ Philadelphia, April 30th, 1839.”*

*“ Rev. and Dear Sir,”*

“ I am now to fulfil a promise which you drew from me, that I would furnish you with some of my reminiscences of the late Rev. Dr. Charles Nisbet.”

“ My first acquaintance with this eminent man was at Princeton, shortly after his arrival from Scotland, in the year 1785. My impression and belief is—although I cannot affirm it as a fact—that before he went to Carlisle, he left his family in Philadelphia, and made a short visit to his old friend Dr. Witherspoon. I was then a professor in the College at Princeton, and was, as a matter of course, introduced to Dr. Nisbet, with whom however I had but little intercourse or conversation. Nearly the whole of what I distinctly remember of him, at that time, is, that Dr. Witherspoon conducted him into the college chapel, where he offered the usual evening prayer with the faculty and students.”

“ It was not till the month of February, in 1786, that I was licensed to preach, and not till the spring of 1787, that I was settled in Philadelphia; and during this period I knew nothing more of Dr. Nisbet than I have already mentioned, except that he was established at Carlisle, as the President of Dickinson College.”

“ Shortly after my collegiate connection with Dr. Sproat, I obtained—but from whom I do not remem-

ber—a copy of a printed sermon delivered at Carlisle by Dr. Nisbet, soon after he had entered on his official duties in that place. So far as I know, this was the only publication that he made in this country. It has been, I find, a prevalent belief, that after he left Scotland, (how it was before I know not,) he never made a publication of any kind: but of the sermon to which I have referred, I have a distinct recollection; and I have a strong impression, yet not amounting to confidence, that the text of the sermon was Acts vii. 22: ‘And Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians.’”

“Dr. Nisbet was in the habit of visiting Philadelphia at the annual meetings of the General Assembly of our church. When he was a member of that body, he came here of course: and when he was not a member, he selected this period to make an excursion for the benefit of his health, and to see and converse with his clerical brethren, from all parts of our country; as well as to enjoy the company of a large circle of friends in this city—friends among other denominations of Christians, as well as his own. He excelled in conversation, and greatly delighted in social intercourse. I well remember to have heard him remark, that at the meetings of our Presbyteries, Synods, and General Assemblies, the private and friendly intercourse of the ministers and elders of our church, was, in his opinion, as useful as their ecclesiastical acts as judicatories; and to me, he added, far more pleasing.”

“It was at an early period of my pastoral life, but the year I do not remember, that at one of his annual visits to Philadelphia, we renewed our former

acquaintance; and from that time till his death, I had much intercourse with him, both in personal conversation and in epistolary correspondence. Most of his letters to me were of great length—closely written, but as legible, nearly, as a well printed book; for his hand writing was beautiful, and remarkably distinct. He very rarely erased or amended a single word that he had first penned. I once asked him how he could do this, as I knew he never used transcription. His reply was characteristic. ‘Your question, said he, is easily answered. I always write what first comes into my head, and leave it to my correspondents to erase and amend just as much as they please.’ I regret to say, that I have lent and given away his letters, till I have not one remaining, of those he addressed to myself. A long one to Dr. Witherspoon has come into my hands, which I hope to insert in his life.”

“Dr. Nisbet, was, beyond comparison, a man of the most learning that I have ever personally known. Of this learning, however, he was *never* ostentatious. It discovered itself in his conversation and letters, but without any thing like intentional display. In my hearing, he never even adverted to his various attainments. Yet from what I observed, and what I have learned from others, I believe it may be safely stated, that beside his own language, he was skilled in Hebrew, including the Chaldee, Greek, Latin, French, Italian, Spanish, German, and probably Erse. Whether he was, or was not, acquainted with the Arabic, Syriac, Persic or Sanscrit, I do not know. With the ancient classics, and with the modern tongues I have mentioned, his familiarity was great

—in each, he had read a considerable portion of the best authors. When he left Europe, he was supposed to be among the best Greek scholars it contained. While at the University, I have been credibly informed, that, during one of the vacations, he read all the Homilies of Chrysostom. Of the Iliad of Homer, he could repeat by memory a great, if not the greater part. But he was not merely a linguist. There was scarcely a subject, or topic, in any department of liberal knowledge, and even in some of the mechanic arts, with which he was not acquainted—doubtless with some, more accurately and extensively than with others. Of what are usually called the exact sciences, I think his knowledge was only general. I have reason to know that he was an anatomist. Being greatly afflicted, in the early part of my ministry, with weak eyes, and observing that, at the age of about sixty, he never used spectacles, I asked him what means he had used to preserve his eye-sight, in what appeared to me a state of perfection. He took up the subject at once, and after explaining the structure of the visual organs, with anatomical exactness, he applied the explanation to the means which he had used, and which others might use, to preserve them in a healthy state. By following his directions, in connection with the use of some additional means of my own devising, the complaint of my eyes was gradually and entirely removed; so that now, in the latter part of my seventy seventh year, my vision is far better, than is common, in men of my age.”

“In stating my reminiscences, this may be as proper a place as any other, to mention a remarkable oc-

currence in the life of Dr. Nisbet, relative to an affection of his sense of tasting, the state of his stomach, and probably of his whole corporeal system; a description of which I received from his own lips. He said that at one period of his life, he was, for several years, without any sensation of hunger, any desire of food, or any relish of it, when it was taken; so that if he had been starved to death, he thought he should have died without any craving of sustenance. His general health, however, did not suffer much; and he took his meals, both as to time and quantity, as his judgment dictated, and without loathing, but without any sensible gratification. At length, having occasion to go to a distance in a stage coach, he resolved to make the first stage, of some twelve or fifteen miles, without his breakfast; and that, on calling for it at the stage house, he, for the first time in twelve years, ate a part of a beef-steak, with appetite and relish. The whole time I was acquainted with him, he was, in his person, fleshy, without being corpulent, very active, and quick in all his muscular motions. He dined with me a number of times; and I remarked nothing peculiar in his eating or drinking, except that he always refused gravy with his meat."

"Dr. Nisbet's extensive reading in the principal languages of modern Europe, had rendered him well informed of the state and tendencies of society, in the several nations of that quarter of our globe. Hence it was, that from the very origin of the French revolution, he foresaw and predicted its desolating course, and denounced it with as much decision and bitterness as Edmund Burk himself. With the most

of my countrymen, I thought favourably of it at first; and, in one of my letters, told him, that I hoped it might be the design of God, in this providential dispensation, to make use of the rough hand of infidelity to prostrate the barriers of Popish ignorance and superstition, and then to pour out his Spirit on the immense population of that kingdom, and produce a glorious revolution, in favour of pure religion, and the liberties of mankind. He answered me by saying, that if it was a desirable thing to pull down the Pope, and set up the Devil, it must be confessed that a glorious revolution was going on in France; and that if it was the design of God, in his providence, to make the enormities perpetrated among that people productive of any immediate good, we could only say, 'How unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out!' My partiality to the French revolution was terminated at an early period of its progress, and the Doctor, from that time, had no hesitation in giving me his whole mind on the subject. From some cause or other, he was able to predict coming events at that period, even in opposition to existing appearances. Thus, at the time when the Constituent Assembly had decreed that France should remain a monarchy, and the people were enthusiastically swearing fealty to their king, Dr. Nisbet wrote to me, as near as I can recollect, in these words: 'Poor Louis, he will have a sham trial, and a real execution.' When I complimented him on the sagacity manifested in his prognostics, he told me, that he deserved no other credit for his predictions, than what was due to his lucky interpretation of the prophetic enigmas of the



celebrated Nostrodamus; that when he wished to know what was to come next, he had only to consult Nostrodamus, (no doubt, in his 'Centuries of Quatrains,') and employ his skill in solving his prophetic symbols; in which he had hitherto been very successful. I told him, that since Nostrodamus was so sure a guide, I should like to know how the French revolution was to terminate. 'O,' said the Doctor, 'it will all go to the Devil at last.' How much, or how little, of *exact truth* there was, in this statement about Nostrodamus, I pretend not to determine. Dr. Nisbet never trifled with truth, when the subject was serious; but he both hated and ridiculed the French revolution, and that incessantly. I could fill more than this second sheet of my reminiscences, with his ludicrous allusions to the events, and the language to which it gave rise. I will mention but a single instance. While the General Assembly of our Church was in session, in May, 1796, a very valuable horse was stolen from me, out of a pasture-lot in the vicinity of the city. Dr. Nisbet, who was paying us his annual visit, on hearing of this occurrence, hastened to my house, and something like the following colloquy ensued: 'So,' said he, 'I understand you have lost your horse.' Yes, Doctor, I replied, the night before last, a thief fancied him, and I fear I shall never see him again. 'No doubt,' said he, 'it was done by one of the sovereign people; he was taken, without your leave, by a pure act of sovereignty. But, sir, it was only a forced loan; it was an act of practical Liberty and Equality; the rascal thought that you had been riding long enough, and that, by all the laws of equality, it

was his turn to ride now; and so he made use of his liberty to appropriate to himself a part of your property, without your consent.' ”

“ Lord Kames, in his *Elements of Criticism*, says, ‘ Memory and wit are often conjoined, sound judgment seldom with either.’ Of the justice of at least the first half of this dictum of his countryman, Dr. Nisbet might be referred to, as a striking example. In memory and wit, I always viewed him as a prodigy. I do not mean to say, that his memory was without a parallel; for both in ancient and modern times, I have read of those who equalled him in this faculty. But I can truly say, that I never myself have known an individual that could pretend to be his equal. Every thing that he had read, heard or seen, seemed to be immovably fixed in his mind, and to be ready for his use. Not only could he refer to any fact or reasoning, in the numerous authors which he had perused in various languages, but all the incidents in the newspapers of the day, and in other ephemeral publications that fell under his notice, he never forgot. His letters to me sometimes referred to occurrences in this city, which, although on the spot, I had not observed, or had entirely forgotten, till he called my attention to them. He told me, however, in one of the last interviews that I had with him, that he found his memory was less faithful and tenacious than it had formerly been. In regard to his wit, it seemed to be instinctive, and to gush out, almost involuntarily, on all occasions. Sometimes it showed itself in that pleasant play of the fancy which is denominated Humour; and sometimes and oftener, it might be called broad Wit, irresistibly

provocative of agitating mirth, or laughter. Too often for his own quiet, it was satirical, or sarcastic; causing loss of friendship in some who could not make allowance for an overbearing propensity. For truly, in him, satirical remark or allusion was not prompted by a misanthropic or malignant spirit, or disposition. On the contrary, he was benevolent, compassionate and kind, in no ordinary degree. Seldom have I known a man, more easily or certainly melted by distress or misfortune; or more ready to do all in his power to relieve it. After the dreadful calamity, the yellow fever of 1793, his sympathy was so awakened by the death of his friends, that on his next visit to our city, he exhibited little else than sadness in his demeanour and conversation. I once took the liberty to say to him, that it seemed to me, that whether in the communications of others, or by his own observation, his attention was drawn, with somewhat more than ordinary force, to an object, he speedily saw it in some obliquity of aspect, in some grotesque or ludicrous form, that rendered it ridiculous, or the fit subject of satire. He frankly replied, 'I think there is something in that.' I thought it an evidence of deep conscientiousness, that, as far as possible, he restrained himself from saying what would cause levity and laughter on the Lord's day; and that he did not intentionally admit any effusion of wit into his sermons. You will notice the qualification with which I have expressed myself in the last sentence; for the truth was, he was sometimes witty, and caused a smile, without intending it, or probably being conscious of it himself. Thus, he once made me smile, while preaching for me in my own pulpit; by comparing a man who is

‘carried about by every wind of doctrine,’ and apparently afraid to trust his own understanding to fix him steadfastly in any article of his religious creed, to a man who should make the experiment of tying up his own eyes, to see how he would walk blindfolded. Expressions of this character were so common with him, both in conversation and writing, that I think he probably often used them, without being at all sensible that they were ludicrous.”

“He never showed a note in the pulpit; and whatever he might have done in the early periods of his ministry, I am persuaded that while I knew him, he rarely, if ever, wrote a sermon. His mind was so stored with ideas on every topic of a religious kind, and his acquaintance with the holy Scriptures was so accurate and familiar, that with his ready utterance, he could preach on any subject without much labour of preparation. His public discourses abounded in thought, and thought that was pertinent, useful, and often striking; but he was loose and miscellaneous, rather than close and methodical. He always, indeed, adhered to a general method, in the treatment of his subject; but he was not solicitous to put each expression in its most proper place, or to exclude matter merely collateral, if it fell in his way. His voice in preaching was articulate, but not powerful; not loud enough to reach the remote parts of a large and full church, so as to be heard without a painful listening. He was not aware of this, till he heard of it in the way of complaint; and then he altogether refused to attempt a public service in the larger churches of our city. ‘I cannot preach in your mammoth houses,’ was his reply to every invitation, after he had formed the resolution I have

mentioned. Yet he was always ready, and apparently gratified to preach in any place or circumstances, in which he could be easily and fully heard. I once accompanied him when he went, I believe on his own voluntary offer, to preach to the convicts, in the public prison of this city; and I was never better pleased with any sermon that I heard from him, than that which he delivered on this occasion."

"In Theology, Dr. Nisbet was a decided Calvinist, of the old school, and deeply read in the writings of its most distinguished masters. Yet he was not intolerant of other denominations, if they held what he regarded as the fundamentals of religion. I never heard him speak with severity of any religious sect, except the Universalists. Of an individual of that sect, whom he believed to be a very bad man, I once heard him say, 'His is the only good rogue's religion. He knows, if that dont save him, he has no chance at all.'"

"Of his general character as the President of a College, I know but little. Living at the distance of one hundred and twenty miles from Carlisle, and having visited it but once during his presidency, and that at a time of vacation in the College, I had no opportunity to make any observations for myself. I have always understood, that in the business of instruction, he never failed to perform with ability, diligence and punctuality, every duty to which he was pledged. I also know that he was greatly dissatisfied with the hasty and imperfect course of study, which he found himself obliged to tolerate; and that he gave great umbrage to some of the Trustees of the Institution, by the severity of the remarks which he made, on the disposition which he believed they

cherished, to favour a superficial system of education."

"In like manner, I must state, that I know but little, from personal observation, of Dr. Nisbet's domestic character. I have uniformly heard him represented as peculiarly amiable and kind, not only in his family, but in all his intercourse with others, in private life. When the General Assembly met at Carlisle, in 1792, he invited a company to dine with him, of whom I was one; and this, as far as I recollect, was the only time, except on the following Lord's day, that I ever made a part of his domestic circle. The dinner party to which I have referred, was received and treated in a handsome style; and at its close, the Doctor indulged his witty and satirical vein, beyond any thing that I had before witnessed. At other times, it had broken out by flashes, with distinct intermissions; but it now blazed forth in a coruscation, with only fitful abatements, for more than an hour."

"I conclude my reminiscences of Dr. Nisbet, with stating, that he was a man of as much genuine integrity as I have ever known. Whatever were the subject, he abhorred, and denounced in unmeasured terms, all hypocrisy and all disguise. His own sentiments and feelings he disclosed with the simplicity of a child. Had he been more reserved, perhaps he he would have been more happy; but he had no talent for concealment."

"Respectfully and affectionately,"

"Yours,"

"ASHBEL GREEN."

"*Rev. Dr. Samuel Miller.*"

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