

CENTENNIAL BIOGRAPHY.

MEN OF MARK

OF

CUMBERLAND VALLEY, PA.

1776—1876.

ALFRED NEVIN, D. D., LL. D.

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1876.

DAVID ELLIOTT, D. D., LL. D



R. ELLIOTT spent his whole life in Pennsylvania. His grandfather, Robert Elliott, was a Scotch-Irishman, who came to this country in 1737, and settled on a farm about seven miles north of Carlisle. His father, Thomas Elliott, who was at that time about seven years old, afterwards, at the close of the Indian war, purchased a farm in Sherman's valley, now Perry county. He was first married to Catherine, daughter of William Thomas, of York county, and afterwards to Mrs. Jane Holliday, of the same race, who was born in 1745. David, one of the five children of this second marriage, and the subject of this sketch, was born at the Valley Home, February 6th, 1787.

He was not an exception to the providential law, by which a pious and faithful mother's character is reflected in the life of her son. Such a mother early taught him to repeat his prayers, as well as Catechetical and Scripture questions, and also gave him his first lessons in spelling and reading. From the age of six years onward he was sent to such schools as a rural neighbourhood, in those uncultured times, afforded. In all these schools Dillworth's Spelling Book, the Bible, and Gough's Arithmetic were the standard class books. Every morning the pupils were required to repeat one or more answers to the questions of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, and on each Saturday to recite the whole. It was partly due to this training at school, but still more to the maternal fidelity which set apart a portion of each Sabbath afternoon to religious training at home, that the future distinguished Professor of Theology, "at a very early period," could both "ask and answer the whole of the Shorter Catechism without the aid of the book."

Whilst he was attending one of the primary schools just referred to, at the age of seven or eight years, he experienced a remarkable providential deliverance from instant death, which not only made a powerful impression upon his youthful mind, of the sovereign goodness of God, but, through his whole life, was associated with his grateful memories of the unseen hand which, as he never doubted, both led and covered him. Passing through a grove of lofty oak timber, with his companions, on his way to school, a heavy storm of wind arose, which soon blew a perfect hurricane. During the sudden violence of one of the gales which swept through the woods they all stopped suddenly, as though

apprehending danger. While thus stationary he heard a crash like the breaking of timber, but such was the noise produced by the tempestuous fury of the wind that he knew not whence it came, nor whether it was near or far off. At this moment, and without any assignable reason for doing so, he made a step forward, and as he moved, a large limb of a tree, six or eight inches in diameter, and of great weight, passed down behind him, brushing his shoulders and the skirts of his coat in its descent to the earth. Had he not moved when he did, at that very moment, it would have struck him directly on the head and killed him in an instant. Every thought of this providential escape, at the time, and long afterwards, brought him to tears, in remembrance of the mercy which snatched him from destruction.

In 1802, young Elliott entered a classical school in Tuscarora valley, Mifflin county, Pa., which was twelve miles distant from his home, and under the care of the Rev. John Coulter, pastor of the Presbyterian Church at that place. In 1804 he became connected with a school in Mifflin, which was in charge of Andrew K. Russell, afterwards a tutor in Washington College, and then a popular teacher and preacher in Newark, Delaware. The happiest of all the influences of the year spent at that place grew out of his residence in the family of the Rev. Matthew Brown, then pastor of the Presbyterian Church of Mifflin, and afterwards the distinguished President, first of Washington, and then of Jefferson College. In 1805, Mr. Brown having received an invitation to become at once the first pastor of the Presbyterian Church of Washington, Pa., and principal of the Academy at that place, secured his young friend as assistant instructor. This arrangement continued for one year, with great acceptance and benefit to the community and the pupils.

In April, 1806, Mr. Elliott left Washington for his home. His journey homeward, on horseback, owing to changes of weather for which he had not provided, brought on sickness and debility which hindered his entrance into college until January of the next year. But this was the most profitable interval of his life, as it was the crisis of his spiritual birth. At the end of his first session as a student in Dickinson College, the prostration following hard study induced him to pack his books, determined not to return. But the vacation inspired him with hope. Exercising great care, he was enabled to hold such a position in his class that on his graduation, September 28th, 1808, by the unanimous selection of his classmates, to whom the Faculty left the distribution of honours, he delivered the *valedictory*.

Dr. Elliott's first preceptor in theology was his pastor, the Rev. John

Linn, with whom he spent two years as a student. His last year was spent with the Rev. Joshua Williams, D. D., of Newville, Pa. He was licensed to preach as a probationer by the Presbytery of Carlisle, September 26th, 1811. Having preached several times to the congregation of Upper West Conococheague, at Mercersburg, Pa., he received a call, dated February 19th, 1812, to settle as pastor of this large, intelligent and influential church, which, a little while before, had been left vacant by the resignation of the Rev. John King, D. D. The call having been approved by the Presbytery, in April the young minister at once entered upon his labours, though he was not ordained until the next meeting in October, in his own church. In the meantime he was married, May 14th, 1812, to Ann, daughter of Edward West, Esq., of Landisburg, Pa. He laboured among the people of his charge with great energy, efficiency and success. As a specimen of many public movements in which the young pastor took an active interest, the Franklin County Bible Society may be cited, which, in 1815, originated in his appeal through the newspapers, was carried to great success largely through his exertions, and had the honour of representation in the Convention at New York, in 1816, which formed the American Bible Society.

In 1829, Dr. Elliott received an earnest call to the pastorate of the Presbyterian Church, Washington, Pa., where he laboured with great acceptableness and success. To him, during this period, more than to any other man, was due the resuscitation and prosperity of Washington College after its complete prostration. The trustees elected him president of the institution, in connection with his pastoral charge, less than four months after his arrival in Washington. This appointment he declined under the impression that the church demanded his whole time. He consented, however, to become "Acting President and Professor of Moral Philosophy," until a permanent president could be secured. The college was opened, accordingly, November 2d, 1830, with two additional professors, and some twenty boys of the vicinity exalted into students. And yet by means of extensive correspondence and other agencies abroad, and vigorous internal management, the third session under the administration of the temporary president ended with one hundred and nineteen young men enrolled, and the regular classes respectably filled. At that stage of progress he handed over the institution, in the spring of 1832, to Dr. McConaughy, by whom the presidency had been accepted.

In 1835, Dr. Elliott was called by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, to take a professorship in the Western Theo-

logical Seminary, at Allegheny City, Pa. By an arrangement, this was the chair of Theology. In 1854, he was assigned by the Assembly, with his own cordial approbation, to the department of Polemic and Historical Theology. To this institution he devoted his best years and powers. To a Divine blessing upon his fidelity as much as to all other agencies, does the church owe the preservation of this school of the prophets, through a hard contest of fifteen years for its very life. "His great life work," said his colleague, Dr. Jacobus, in an address delivered at his funeral, "was his headship of this Theological Seminary during thirty-eight years. He came in his full prime—fifty years old—ripe in experience, and rich in solid resources for his generation. He found here only this venerable father who survives him, (Dr. Luther Halsey,) and who had taught the first regular class, and acted as the sole Faculty (a whole Faculty in himself) during seven years, and who, after a year of joint labours, gave up the charge to his hands. What labours! what struggles! what conflicts! what prayers and tears he gave early and late to this service! what a work to look back upon! Nearly a thousand men have gone forth from under his hand, a large majority of whom are to-day labouring as ministers of Christ throughout this land and in various foreign fields. Nearly a quarter of a century ago I came to his side, when his only associate Professor was commonly understood to be *in transitu*, and everything struggling up the hill. I have seen him in times of great darkness, but always his resource was in God. What dignity! what gravity! what simplicity! what suavity and urbanity! what fidelity in the most trying hours! As an instructor in Theology, in Church Polity, or in the Pastoral care, the church knew him to be wise and true, and all his pupils revered and loved him. As an ecclesiastic, he shone in the church courts, and lifted his voice most effectively in the administration and guidance of her affairs." Chief among his publications was a volume of "Letters on Church Government," which was well received at the time it appeared, and the work in which he rescued from oblivion in sweet biographical sketches the labours of Elisha McCurdy and the other noble pioneers of the Presbyterian Church in Western Pennsylvania, and which generations to come will read with interest and profit.

Dr. Elliott had many and marked evidences of the confidence and respect of his brethren in the ministry. He was frequently sent as a Commissioner to the General Assembly. He was Moderator of the Assembly of 1837, which held its sessions in Philadelphia. He was returned to the next Assembly, 1838, over which, after preaching an able opening sermon, he presided, under the rule, until its organization

by the election of his successor. It was during this brief space that the rupture of the Presbyterian Church into the "Old School" and "New School" divisions was finally accomplished.

Dr. Elliott's private character was one of peculiar excellence. "This, after all," says Dr. Brownson,* "was the real stronghold of his influence. Vigorous and cultured intellect, superior wisdom, unflinching energy, and a life-long service, all came to proportion and power in *the moral excellence of the man* to whom they belonged. In person he was above the medium size. He was genial and sympathetic in his feelings. His manners had the simplicity, candour, politeness and attractiveness of a true Christian gentleman. He was magnanimous and courteous, even in difference and contest. As he scorned unfair advantage in carrying his point, so he was ever able to detect and expose it in others. The law of uprightness ruled him both in public and private dealing with his fellow men. I have often heard from his lips the confidential story of his annoyances, and yet I never heard from him a purpose, or even suggestion, at war with the highest standard of truth and honour. He held the confidence of his brethren and the world, in full proportion to the intimacy which opened to their view the secret springs of his action. If even a foiled antagonist would attempt to cover his own confusion with the insinuation of artifice, where others saw only the sagacity of a man as truthful as he was wise, no words of defence were needed to beat back the base insinuation. His continued defence was in the estimation of good and discerning men. His friends were life-long in their trust and attachments. Both in secular and religious association, one principle animated him whose sure crown was the unqualified reliance of his fellow men upon his integrity. He did truth, and thereby ever came to the light.

"In *social sympathy*, Dr. Elliott's character deepened with advancing years. His home was always a centre of hospitality, even to serious encroachment upon his substance. So also poverty and sickness, trial and misery were sure of the offerings, at once, of his heart and hands. His thoughtful attentions to persons in humble life, his visits of tender affection to the abodes of distress, his letters of Christian comfort to the bereaved—enough to fill volumes if published—his constant fidelity in turning social opportunity to the end of the soul's salvation—all these habits of his active life grew upon him more and more as conscious infirmities foretokened 'the night, when no man can work.'

* An Address commemorative of the Life and Character of David Elliott, D. D., LL. D.

“On the eighteenth day of March, 1874, he gently fell asleep in Jesus—as gently as an infant upon its mother’s breast. The sun of his life set in a cloudless sky, giving, in its lengthened rays, a sweet token to all who beheld him, of the glorious day without clouds or tears, upon which his immortal eyes were then opening. We could not weep, but only praise God, as we bore his precious body to the beautiful city of the dead, and reverently laid it down to rest by the side of his sainted wife, glad that even then their spirits were holy and happy together in the vision and fellowship of the glorious Redeemer.

“ ‘There no sigh of memory swelleth ;
There no tear of misery wellet ;
Hearts will bleed or break no more :
Past is all the cold world’s scorning,
Gone the night and broke the morning
Over all the golden shores.’ ”