

CENTENNIAL BIOGRAPHY.

MEN OF MARK

OF

CUMBERLAND VALLEY, PA.

1776—1876.

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REV. FRANCIS HERRON, D. D.



REV. FRANCIS HERRON was born near Shippensburg, Cumberland county, Pa., June 28th, 1774. He belonged to that honoured and honourable race, the Scotch-Irish, memorable in the history of the world, but especially in our country, for a thorough devotion to evangelical truth and constitutional liberty. The training of his early years bore rich fruit at a subsequent period of his life, making him so eminent among his brethren as an effective preacher and an orthodox divine.

Receiving the careful training indicative of his parents' high regard for knowledge, he entered Dickinson college, Carlisle, Pa., then under the care of that distinguished Presbyterian, Rev. Dr. Nisbet. Here he completed his classical course, and graduated May 5th, 1794. The prayers of his pious parents were answered by the influence of grace upon his heart, and he was led to study for the ministry of reconciliation. He studied theology under Robert Cooper, D. D., his pastor, and was licensed by Carlisle Presbytery, October 4th, 1797.

He entered upon the service of his Divine Master as a missionary, going out into the backwoods, as it was then called, passing through Pittsburgh, Pa., then a small village, and extending his tour as far west as Chillicothe, Ohio. Stopping for the night in a tavern at Six Mile Run, near Wilksburg, Pa., the people prevailed upon him to stay till the following Sabbath, which he did, and under the shade of an apple tree did this young disciple break the bread of life to the people.

His journey was resumed the next day, and with a frontier settler for his guide, he pushed on to his destination, through an almost unbroken wilderness, his course often guided by the "blazes" upon the trees. Two nights he encamped with the Indians, who were quite numerous near what is now the town of Marietta, Ohio.

On his return from Chillicothe, Ohio, he visited Pittsburgh. The keeper of the tavern where he lodged proved to be an old acquaintance, and, at his request, he consented to preach. Notice was sent, and in the evening a small congregation of about eighteen persons assembled. The house he preached in was a rude structure built of logs, occupying the site of the present First Presbyterian church. And such was the primitive style of that day, that, during the services,

the swallows, who had their nests in the eaves, flew among the congregation.

At this time, the churches in that portion of our country were visited with a season of refreshing grace, and Mr. Herron entered into the revival with all the ardour of youth, filled with hopefulness and zeal. He preached for Rev. Dr. John McMillan, at the Chartiers church, during a revival season. He also preached at the Buffalo church, where his fervid eloquence made a deep impression, and the people presented him a call, and strongly urged it upon his attention. He, however, concluded to return to the vicinity of his home, especially as a call from Rocky Spring church was awaiting him. This call he accepted, and he was ordained and installed as pastor of that church by Carlisle Presbytery, April 9th, 1800.

Here his life work commenced. The season of revival through which he had passed during his journey to and from the west, had given a spiritual unction to his preaching, which soon manifested itself among his people. His efforts in behalf of their true interests were systematized. Prayer meetings were inaugurated. He established the Bible Class, together with meetings for catechetical instruction. He devoted a large portion of his time to the "little ones of his flock." In scenes like these the first decade of his ministerial life passed away, the people grew in piety and spiritual strength, and the pastor in that power to influence the people, and to instruct and edify them.

During a visit to Pittsburgh, in 1810, he was invited to occupy the pulpit of the First church, then vacant by the recent death of Rev. Robert Steele. The people were charmed with his discourse; his ripening intellect, modified by that refined spirituality which was a prominent element in his ministration, had a powerful effect upon his audience. They urged him to preach for them a second time, which he did; the result was, a unanimous call was made out and presented to him in the usual manner.

The Presbytery of Carlisle dissolved the relation that existed between Rocky Spring church and Mr. Herron, and he was dismissed to Redstone Presbytery, April 3, 1811, and was installed pastor of the First Presbyterian church, Pittsburgh, Pa., the following June. In a few weeks he removed with his family to his new home, traveling in a large wagon with his wife, children, and all his household goods.

He joined Redstone Presbytery, June 18th, 1811. The importance of his new position was fully and truly felt. The commercial importance of Pittsburgh had given all kinds of business an impetus, and prosperity was advancing rapidly, but this outward show referred only to

worldly affairs; the religious condition of the people was cold and almost lifeless. The church to which he was called was embarrassed with debt, and the piety of the people manifested a degree of conformity to the world which nearly appalled the preacher's heart. But the experience of his ten years' pastorate was to him invaluable, and girding himself, he entered upon his duties with a true heart and an earnest purpose. His preaching was the simple exposition of the truth as it is in Jesus—pointed, clear and unwavering—revealing the enormity of sin and pleading with the fidelity of one who loved their souls. This style of preaching was sustained by his efforts to establish the prayer meeting, which, strange as it now appears, met with much opposition, even among professors of religion; but this young pastor knew the holy influence of communion with God, and that God favoured a praying people; he therefore went forward, and, in connection with Rev. Thomas Hunt, who was pastor of the Second church, they persisted, though to avoid collision with the people the meetings were not held in the church, and a small room was used for that purpose in which Mr. Hunt taught a day school. The first meeting consisted of the two pastors, one man, and six women; and thus, for eighteen months, did these meetings continue without adding a single person to their number.

The chilling indifference of the people soon grew into a downright hostility, and husbands and fathers prohibited their wives and daughters from attending, and, finally, when the continued efforts of these pious people could be no longer borne, they waited upon Mr. Herron and told him that it must be stopped. His reply was the turning point in the spiritual condition of that people. He said, "Gentlemen, these meetings will not stop; you are at liberty to do as you please, but I also have the liberty to worship God according to the dictates of my conscience, none daring to molest or make me afraid." From that time a spirit of piety manifested itself among the members of the church, several gay and fashionable persons were hopefully converted, and an impression was made upon the whole community at once hopeful and healthful.

Besides his talents as a preacher, and his loveliness of character as a pastor, Dr. Herron was a practical man and a good manager. The debt which hung as an incubus upon the church increased the difficulties of his situation, and after various efforts to remove it or stave off the issue, the natural result arrived, and the church was sold by the sheriff in December, 1813. He attended the sale and bought the property in his own name for \$2,819. In a short time he disposed of

a corner lot to the Bank of Pittsburgh, whereon to erect a banking house, for \$3,000. With this money he paid off the debt of the church, and placed the surplus, \$180, in the treasury.

The church started on a new era of prosperity. Dr. Herron's intellect was in its full strength, and his influence was felt throughout the whole community, and his fame throughout the whole Church. The church became crowded with hearers, and the membership rapidly increased, so that an enlargement of the building was rendered necessary. This was done by removing the side walls and enlarging the width, so as to admit an aisle and an additional row of pews on each side. This alteration was completed in December, 1817, and on a resale of the pews, enough funds were realized not only to pay all the expenses of the alteration, but to alter the pulpit and erect a session-room in the rear of the church.

As a token of gratitude of the congregation to the pastor, and of the high estimate they put upon his practical efficiency and ministerial excellence, they raised his salary to fifteen hundred dollars—a large salary at that time.

Dr. Herron was a fine representative of a minister of the olden time. He was fond of the good old paths. He based his success, as a minister, upon catechetical instruction, Bible Classes and Sunday Schools. He believed, and acted out his belief, that the good old Presbyterian usage of drilling the children in the family and in the church, in the letter of the Shorter Catechism, is the best of all methods for impressing evangelical conviction, and for training a generation of sound, orthodox, intelligent Christians. This system, at first confined to the children, he extended, in 1823, to the adult members of his congregation. These meetings were conducted by the minister every Sabbath afternoon, and were, of course, highly blessed.

In 1825, the General Assembly resolved to establish a Theological Seminary in the west, and appointed a committee to select a place. Rev. Dr. Herron, with his naturally quick preception, in connection with the Rev. Dr. Swift, urged the claims of Allegheny city, Pa. He entered into the enterprise with his whole heart, and by much laborious and skilful effort, obtained a decision in favour of locating it there. Dr. Swift took charge of the instruction of the pupils, whilst Dr. Herron assumed the toils and anxieties of its sustenance. Though this involved a vast amount of time and labour, still Dr. Herron never for a moment withdrew from his post, but for every additional burden he seemed to be specially sustained by his Divine Master. Such a superabundance of toil suited the man, and with unwearied assiduity he

laboured on for years, and to no one does the Western Theological Seminary of the Presbyterian Church, owe its influence, and success, too, in a greater degree, than to Dr. Herron.

In 1827 he was elected Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, at its session in Philadelphia. During the autumn of that year a revival of religion manifested itself among his people, and eventually throughout the community. His ministrations were also blessed with outpourings of the Spirit in 1832 and 1835.

In 1850, Dr. Herron, having reached his seventy-sixth year, felt like the prophet Elijah, that he must soon depart. He therefore pressed his resignation upon his congregation, which they accepted with the understanding that he would accept a thousand dollars per year for life. He fell asleep in Jesus, and entered his rest on the 6th day of December, 1860. Though he had retired from active life for some years, his death was felt to be a public loss. A meeting was held of the ministers of the city of Pittsburgh, and the adjoining city of Allegheny, to give expression to their feelings. The Court of Common Pleas and the District Court adjourned, and the news spread as though a public calamity had befallen the city. The funeral was attended by all ranks in life.

The Rev. William M. Paxton, Dr. Herron's successor, delivered a memorial discourse in which he thus presented the aged patriarch as a man, a Christian, and a minister :

“As a man he was made for the times—a man of nerve, will, power, moulding rather than being moulded, breasting the current rather than floating upon its surface. Such men are generic forces, originating thoughts, creating circumstances, and propelling society in their own way and for their own purposes, stamping their impress upon the community in which they live, work reformation and originate eras of progress and improvement.

“As a Christian, he was distinguished by the vigorous growth and uniform development of the whole circle of Christian graces. His character was symmetrical, admirably adjusted, and equipoised in all its parts. His chief distinction as a Christian was his love for the person and his devotion to the glory of Jesus Christ. Secondly, his love for souls. Thirdly, he was eminently a man of faith. Fourthly, with a pure evangelical faith he combined a liberal catholic spirit, and fifthly, he was magnanimous in the highest and noblest sense the word can be used.

“As a minister, first, he was an experimental preacher ; second, he was

doctrinal ; third, he was an awakening preacher ; fourth, his preaching was tender and affectionate.

“As a presbyter, he was attentive, regular and prompt; thoroughly acquainted with rules of order, he very often presided over the Presbytery and Synod.

“As a public man, he was interested in every enterprise to promote the comfort of the people and the adornment of the city of Pittsburgh. He was one of the city’s fathers, and no man loved it better or did more to advance its highest welfare. He not only loved his city, but also his state and nation. Patriotism was a part of his religion, and his heart was alike true to his country as to his God. He knew the worth of human liberty, and believed that these United States are a peculiar heritage of freedom.”

Dr. Herron married in February, 1802, Miss Elizabeth Blain, daughter of Alexander Blain, Esq., of Carlisle, Pa. She died in 1855.