

A Scotch-Irish Neighborhood

BY

F. B. McDOWELL.

BEFORE THE

Mecklenburg Historical Society.

AT CHARLOTTE N. C.,

MAY 23RD, 1888.

—*—*—*—

CHARLOTTE, N. C.
Published by the Mecklenburg Historical Society.
1888.

A Scotch-Irish Neighborhood.

BY F. B. McDOWELL.

Prof. Agassiz says: "The crust of our earth is a great cemetery, where the rocks are tombstones on which the buried dead have written their own epitaphs." There is a large graveyard in this county, ten miles from Charlotte, at Big Steel Creek Church, peopled with many generations of dead. The space is enclosed by massive cemented stone walls 400 x 800 feet, is well cared for, and is replete with patriotic reminiscences of peculiar interest. The inscriptions on the memorial stones are but the reflections photographed by the lights and shadows from life.

Who were these silent sleepers? Whence came they? What influence did they exert upon society, upon the State, upon the country at large? These are pertinent questions, which, impel attention from the surroundings and the character of the place.

The early settlers were of Scotch-Irish origin. A majority emigrated to this point from Pennsylvania during the latter part of the Eighteenth Century, while a few came direct from Scotland and Ireland. In some instances this sturdy extraction was blended with the peaceful adherents of William Penn; and such is the stock that planted itself upon Steel Creek soil. "Breed," says George Eliot, "is better than pasture." This is only an apt phrase that heredity is stronger than environment.

Twenty-odd tombstones in the older portion of the ground have sculptured upon their faces, coats of arms of

elaborate and ornate designs. It is not probable that work of such high order could have been secured here at that date. The execution bears the stamp of skilled stone-cutters and experienced artisans. As confirmatory of this theory, among other intricate devices, a fac simile Scotch thistle is delicately outlined upon one of the tombs. The stones were doubtless imported to Charleston, and hauled from that point by wagon, as was the custom at that period. Books on heraldry state that crests were conferred by royalty in recognition of daring exploits on the field of battle, or for conspicuous services to the State, the supporters representing an especial mark of favor. The figures of the animals are emblematic of strength, courage and fleetness; and the swords, pillars, stars and other heraldic symbols stand out in graceful and fitting relief. The mottoes are matchless in conception, and are peculiarly appropriate to those who adopted them.

Herewith is given a list of the escutcheons in the order as furnished by Dr. E. W. Roach, to whom the credit is due for copying them personally from the stones, and for spending much time in the research.

CAMPBELL—1795.

Arms—Gyron and Galley, quartered.

Supporters—Two Lions, rampant.

Crest—Coronet.

Motto—Vixia Nostra Voco.

NEELY—1788.

Arms—Horse, displayed.

Supporters—Two Falcons.

Crest—Hand Clasping a Book.

Motto—Ready, Aye, Ready.

BIGHAM—1784.

Arms—Thirteen Stripes, Bayonet and Pistol, quartered.

Crest—Crossed Swords.

Motto—Signa Libertatis.

HART—1775.

Arms—Three Mullets and Chevron.

Supporters—Two Stags.

Crest—Stag's Head.

Motto—Probitas Verus Honos.

NEEL—1788.

Arms—Three Crescents.

Supporters—Two Unicorns.

Crest—Stag's Head.

Motto—Virtute et Labore.

MAXWELL—1785.

Arms—Gyron.

Supporters—Two Swans.

Crest—Man's Head.

Motto—Sola Virtus Invicta.

M'DOWELL—1795.

Arms—Chevron and Three Mullets.

Supporters—Two Lions, guardant.

Crest—Stag's Head.

Motto—Vivit Post Funera Virtus.

ATKINS—1785.

Arms—Scotch Lion, Armed Hand Grasping Axe.

Supporters—Two Horses.

Crest—Two Swallows.

Motto—Time, How Short.

CAROTHERS—1785.

Arms—Galley, full sail.

Supporters—Two Falcons.

Motto—Follow Me.

VANCE—1800.

Arms—Three Mullets and Chevron.

Supporters—Two Lions, displayed.

Crest—Stag's Head.

Motto—Sola Juvat Virtus.

GILMOR—1784.

Arms—Stag.*Supporters*—Two Falcons.*Motto*—Ready, Aye, Ready.

BARNETT—1785.

Arms—Pheasant, Hand and Scythe, Crossed Arrows and Eagle, quartered. Mantling.*Crest*—Coronet.*Motto*—Vain World, Adieu.

M'LEARY—1791.

Arms—Three Rapiers.*Supporters*—Two Lions, displayed.*Crest*—Mailed Hand and Dagger.*Motto*—Gardez, La Foy.

WHITESIDE—1772.

Arms—Double-headed Eagle, displayed.
Mantling.

DAVIS—1780.

Arms—Chevron and Three Mullets.*Supporters*—Two Stags.*Crest*—Bunch of Broom.*Motto*—Probitas, Verus, Honos.

GRIER—1788.

Arms—Shield, checkered.*Supporters*—Two Trees.

Mantling.

The Grier crest is so curiously wrought and intricate as to be difficult to properly describe with the pen. And in cases where certain families appear to have more than one motto, there is such an uniformity in the arms, supporters and crest as to leave no doubt as to the family's unity concerning the particular coat of arms as a whole.

The letterings over many of the graves contain tender sentiments and touching Scriptural allusions, but there is

a noticeable absence of the platitudes and commonplaces found in most cemeteries. Of the buried, probably the most conspicuous figure in history is Gen. Robt. Irwin. He was a signer of the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence, a Revolutionary officer and a distinguished statesman. Gens. Robt. McLeary and David Hart, both brave soldiers and zealous patriots of the Revolution, also repose there. This epitaph is inscribed to Hugh McDowell, who is still remembered by a few who can connect this generation with the past :

" Who broke no promise, who served no private end,
Who gained no title and who lost no friend;
Composed in misfortune and in joy sedate,
Good without noise, without pretension great."

According to dates, Jean Cathey and Jno. Blackwood were born respectively in 1692 and 1694. Those two were each 85 years old when they died, and could date their births as far back as the Seventeenth Century. John Price was evidently an enthusiast, if not an ex-soldier, for the American coat of arms and the national motto, "E Pluribus Unum," appeared on his tombstone in 1794, only a few years after their ratification by congressional act. "Virtue lives beyond the grave," is the motto of the McDowell family as seen at the headstone of John McDowell, a Revolutionary soldier; yet its observance has been so strictly adhered to by the families of the township as to label it the common property and the heritage of all. And while "virtue and labor" has been the standard of the Neels for many generations, it has always been the acting, leading principle of their neighbors and friends.

Of these dwellers in this city of the dead it may be said, in the spirit of the beautiful Catholic legend, that "they have left their image upon their winding-sheet." "If you seek my monument, look around." This is the epitaph of Sir Christopher Wren, architect, in the Church of St. Paul, which he had designed and erected. The deeds

that follow men who have passed out of life furnish the most trustworthy evidence as to the manner in which they lived and worked. The memorial of these dead is the impression they have left upon other lives, as is attested by the standing of their posterity wherever they locate.

A charm about these pioneers is, that their heads were not turned by ancestral distinction. They were self-reliant, and mastered the primeval forest with its hardships and disadvantages. They became adepts in handicraft, fought heat, mud and hail, and combatted the unknown foes of husbandry in an unsettled region. They were the silent heroes who shaped destiny and imbued unborn generations with their flawless characters and indomitable wills. They despised nothing honorable in itself, no matter how lowly its source.

In the State House at Boston, over the Speaker's chair, is a codfish, the emblem of Massachusetts' rise before the invention of the spinning jenny or the trade with the ships from India. The leather apron of old Gao, the blacksmith, is covered with jewels, because its owner was the leader of a successful revolt, and that insignia of his humble occupation is the royal standard of Persia. Most of the Steel Creek settlers were of necessity their own blacksmiths and carpenters. If it would not mar the symmetry of their Scottish coats of arms, the axe and the helve, the plane and the compass, the anvil and the hammer, might with appropriateness be superadded; for these were the prime implements of America's prosperity and the trusted weapons of her earliest heroes.

Lieutenant Maury, speaking of the Gulf Stream, says: "Its banks and bottom are of cold water, while its current is of warm." This is typical of the Scotch-Irish race, for while their manner and exterior may be forbidding and reserved, the heart current is generous and warm. This branch of the human family is the synonym of thrift, sturdiness and resoluteness wherever known, and their

hatred of sham, hypocrisy and oppression is proverbial. The cardinal virtues form the warp and woof of their moral existence, and their principles have remained steadfast through the most violent upheavals and radical revolutions. With them the laws of Mt. Sinai are written upon something more enduring than tables of stone—they are carved in living characters upon the tablets of the human heart. And over their lintels and door posts, and on their phylacteries are read the perpetual words, facts, not fiction; substance, not semblance.

Probably the most marked characteristic of this notable people is their plain everyday sense; and of all the qualities, old-fashioned bottom judgment is the hardest to out-argue, outwit or get ahead of in any way. The best thing ever said about the Duke of Wellington was that "He did his duty as naturally as a horse eats his oats." So this strong background of level-headedness causes them to understand, as it were, from instinct and intuition. The innate love of frolic and excitement is so masterful in a genuine Irishman that he will take sides in a controversy, whether he is personally concerned in the outcome or not; but be it said to his praise, he nearly always favors the under man in the fight. The Scotch-Irishman, being more prudent, will not take part until he sees there is injustice, then he proceeds to umpire the game with a mailed fist.

Another prominent feature in the make-up of this community is a frankness that savors of bluntness. This, no doubt, accounts for their simplicity of habits and distaste to ostentation in society and much formality in religious observances. They are essentially Presbyterians; and the late Gen. D. H. Hill, an ardent believer in that faith, oft quoted the remark of an astute and observing king, that "Presbytery and Monarchy could no more be reconciled than God and the Devil." Considering their convictions, their intelligence and their patriotism, would it be an exaggeration to borrow the words of Madame De Stael, "Your

character is a constitution for your country and your conscience its guarantee" ?

This writer has cause to remember a religious training imported in part from this locality. In fact, he can never forget it. The Catechism ! Oh, the Catechism ! He was made to learn every question and answer from beginning to end, though he did not and could not then understand their meaning. His boyhood Sundays were not considered by him as models of peace and rest. His constitution was not impervious to cold fevers and hot chills, induced by wrestling with the problem, "What is the chief end of man ?" and trying year after year to solve it. I have often had a kindred sympathy for the child who told his mother that the Catechism was so hard, and, pleadingly asked if "there was no Kittychism made for little boys ?"

Whatever may be the result of early indoctrination of this character, there is evidence that it entails no harmful consequences. And many maintain that the inculcation of rigid principles is as helpful to weak minds as stays are supporting to feeble bodies. The test of a school is the scholars it turns out. "Religion," says Matthew Arnold, "is conduct." Froude thinks that the foundation and superstructure of all religion is—duty. With the pure in heart, conscience is the voice of the soul ; passion the voice of the body. One of the sublimest qualities of this people is reverence. They act up to the Arab proverb which says "It is not good to jest with God, Death or the Devil—for the first neither can nor will be mocked ; the second mocks all men one time or other ; and the third puts an eternal sarcasm on those that are too familiar with him."

An early recollection is of a visit to a country home. The head of the house was a splendid specimen of physical manhood and robust health. At the supper-table he drank his coffee from the largest cup I had ever seen. Cups had some size about them in those days. After the meal was finished he lighted his pipe. That was about his only

stimulant, and his enjoyment was evident, for it revealed itself in a contentment of manner and a benignity of countenance that could not be counterfeited. The mother soon came in with her knitting, and we all took our places before a roaring and cheerful log fire. The old folks laughed heartily at our childish amusements and encouraged our games till the clock on the mantle pointed to nine. Then the wife reverently took up the family Bible and handed it to her husband, who opened its lids. To quote the language of Will Carleton—

“And she said, in regards to Heaven, we'd try and learn its worth
By startin' a branch establishment, and runnin' it here on earth.”

It is but just to say, I was not sleepy when bedtime was announced; and when breakfast was heralded by candle-light, I was not hungry. It never did seep through youthful philosophy why children were made to go to bed when not sleepy, and get up when they were. Those people seemed to reverence everything above, yet had no more respect for the sun than to arise before he did. Early rising is not an instinct, but a taste, like that of tobacco—it must be acquired.

It is a mistake to imagine even the most serious portion regard it a sin to laugh. They have a weakness for fun seemingly inconsistent with the austerity of their dispositions, except upon the hypothesis that nature is often delighted to bring extremes and widely differing qualities in close juxtaposition. It would be necessary to wield the limner's pencil to faithfully portray the facial enigma of a solemn, sober-sided Scotch-Irishman, when watching the versatile antics of that parody on mankind, the African monkey. And it is a psychological study to note his open-mouthed anticipation at a circus, when the ring-master and the clown are at their best. There is a relaxation of feature that transforms his face into a broadness equal to its proverbial length. It is only the volcanic eruption of

delighted, pent-up merriment, seeking vent and shaking the outer crust, that keeps it in check and prison.

Carlyle reports that there are two distinct revelations of God and the devil: the pulpit and the gallows. The power of the former has always been so inspiring and elevating in this community that the necessity for the latter has not been called into requisition. Victor Hugo has exquisitely said that "Good actions are the invisible hinges to the doors of heaven."

The Steel Creek people have their share of clayey mould, in common with mankind. They have a resemblance to the rivers Rhone and Arve, which run side by side in the same bed—one bearing in its waters the mud-stains of earth, the other reflecting on its surface the glories of the sky. Stubbornness and hold-back are employed farm words, somewhat expressive of our meaning. In a controversy, when the average Steel Creeker shifts his quid, crosses his legs, protrudes his Adam's apple, and says with deliberation, "'Taint so," the job of changing his opinion might as well be abandoned. He is like the Scotchman who declared that he was open to conviction, but boasted in the same breath that the man did not exist who could convince him. Quoth the honest Sancho Panza, "I am of the lineage of the Panzas, and we are all headstrong, and if we once cry odd, odd it is (though it be even) in spite of all the world."

He is religious, and tries to live according to New Testament rules; but it was foreordained from the beginning in his grim build and unfamiliar disposition, if an enemy taps him on one cheek, he is pretty certain to get knocked down before he has an opportunity to smite the other. Mockery of sacred beliefs or encroachment upon his vested rights, will open a real nest of hornets, whose stings will linger long and painfully. He is conservative about changes and tenacious of customs. For a long time he opposed the introduction of organ music, but has now given

a half-hearted, reluctant assent to the innovation. His conservatism may be a drawback in some particulars; in others it often proves a safeguard. When placed in a position where he has absolutely his own way, he will beam with ineffable good humor and become radiant with joy; for such a state is to him the acme of earthly happiness.

His likes and dislikes spring up, not like the mistletoe, by mere chance, but grow with the growth of childhood. He is charitable to those who act and believe with him, but inclines strongly to the doctrine that "orthodoxy is my doxy, and heterodoxy is your doxy." The simple Uncle Toby, whose sympathy was as broad as immensity is deep, on being informed that Satan was damned already and beyond hope, said sadly he "was sorry for it." The Steel Creeker regards this personage as the arch enemy of humanity, accepts his doom as just and wastes no nonsense or idle sentiment upon the subject.

Shortly after the surrender I was in Steel Creek on a visit, and my attention was attracted by a squad of "blue coats" near the residence of the late Major J. M. Potts. They came to apprehend one of his sons for a difficulty with a freedman, in which the new ward of the nation was worsted. Not receiving the desired information as to his whereabouts, they threateningly pointed their guns at the father. The Major, bearing his breast to the lawless soldiers, said with rising indignation, "Fire, you cowards; it is like you to shoot an unarmed man!" He was arrested, though not a participant in the encounter, and taken to Charlotte. He rode in his buggy alone, while his captors walked. He warned them at their peril not to enter his private property, and no one ventured to take a seat by his side. I was a boy at the time and was amazed that one man could defy the Federal army, but soon found that no superior force could prevent this neighborhood from protesting actively against indignity and wrong.

Taine, the historian, relates when Cromwell's 50,000

veterans were suddenly disbanded and left without resource, they did not bring a single addition to the vagabonds or bandits. History furnishes a parallel to this remarkable incident in the return of the hungry and ragged Confederate soldiers. And neither has Steel Creek furnished any recruits to the great army of tramps who infest every avenue of our national development.

I now make mention of a few deceased representatives of Steel Creek, known personally by the writer, who, putting their hands to the plow, drove a straight furrow through the field of life. For nearly three-quarters of a century Gen. Wm. H. Neel was a prominent figure in the Church, in society and in positions of trust. He wore his dignity like a mantle. His expression was kindly, his disposition genial, his bearing stately, and being above the ordinary size, he arrested attention and commanded respect in any gathering of men. There were few wrinkles upon his brow, none on his heart, for he never grew old in feeling. He passed through the temptations of more than 80 eventful years without even the smell of fire upon his clothing. I will adopt the expression of Gaillard, the historian, about another, "Putting everything together, he was a man."

I now speak of one, a native of this section, and who spent only his young manhood there. He kept the laws of God religiously and respected the rights of man conscientiously. Being almost devoid of prejudice, he was as nearly just as it is possible to be. One of the most striking traits of his character was modesty, and this quality, whether found in man or woman, is a crowning moral grace. He concealed nothing, save gifts of charity to the deserving, which he gave with open hand. Endowed with a strong mind and tireless energy, he mingled largely in the world, but like the diver in his bell, he emerged from the sea unstained by its waters. That person was Robert Irwin McDowell, the father of the writer. I offer no apology for this brief and incomplete sketch of his upright life and great worth.

It is no slight praise to say that the mental force and personal magnetism of Rev. John Douglass, held the large congregation of Steel Creek church together for years without any serious dissensions in its ranks. He had the manner of a courtier without its affectation. He was cultured without pedantry, and approachable without reserve. To those whose spiritual wants he ministered unto, there was a mutual understanding and a sympathetic affection, both rare and touching. He filled the full measure required of preacher and pastor; he did his duty, and that is the completest life of man.

Robert W. McDowell never sought or desired public honors. He was strictly a private citizen—for that mode of living was thoroughly congenial to his taste. In him the elements were smoothly and beautifully blended. His foot never slipped and nothing ever swerved him from truth as he saw it. His only ambition was the approval of a clear conscience, and the guiding thought of his artless life was of family, country and God. It could be written of him, as appeared on the epitaph of Roland of France, "A man who consecrated all his life to being useful, and who died as he lived, virtuous and honest."

As I write of another, the pen falters. He was so young, so generous, so gifted. His life, too, was so pathetic, and his existence seemed to end almost before it fairly began. If the war called some from the portals of the grave, it took others almost from the cradle. A mere stripling boy went forth as a volunteer. Intrepid as a Hampden, as daring as a Ney, he was twice shot through the body upon the enemy's breastworks, within touch of his guns. He brought back from the field painful wounds and a wrecked constitution; but with all his suffering he was an admirable companion and a natural leader and adviser of men; and no young man in this section and of this generation left a deeper impress of admiration and sympathy upon those who knew him best, than Calvin E. Grier.

The congregation of Big Steel Creek compose the largest country church within the bounds of the Southern Assembly. To visit this house of worship and listen to the full-voiced music of male and female, elder and youth; to note the intelligent, well-bred audience and watch their devotional earnestness, is an inspiring and memorable sight. One patriarch is especially mentioned on account of his activity and prominence. His long, valued life, like the Cararra marble, has never borne a stain. Capt. A. G. Neel, besides being well equipped with general and religious knowledge, has shown himself on many important occasions to be a logical reasoner and an effective debater upon Church polity and ecclesiastical law.

The following is a partial list of the influential families, extinct and existing, of this community: Irwin, Neel, Grier, Barnett, Hart, Knox, Neely, McDowell, Dinkins, Reid, Herron, McLeary, Brown, Alexander, Simrill, Collins, Potts, Price, Watts, Watt, Porter, Robinson, Stowe, Pegram, Strong, Query, Swann, Gallant, Ross, Freeman, Spratt, Erwin, Pressly, Harris, Hoover, McAllister, Sadler, Wilson, Peoples, McKnight.

Such an array of spotless names cannot be surpassed; it is doubtful if its counterpart can be found in any rural population of equal area in the United States.

This brings us to the present time. The closing years of the century are going out in a whirl of riot, demoralization and strikes. In the forceful language of a great writer, there seems to "be a brewing towards preternatural weather." But through all these changes and shocks the yeomen of Steel Creek are acting as of old, as best they can, with the lights before them; pursuing the even tenor of their way and trusting to a higher power to solve the problem and dissipate the doubt. They are not sycophants to those in power; they are not ducking to the opinions of an agitated public, nor running wild over new theories and undeveloped movements. They have too firm a bottom of

good sense. Methinks if the silent, heroic old pioneers could awaken from the dead, they would have no cause for shame in the living; for they are still "guarding the faith" and carrying out the other virtuous precepts of their noble and patriotic ancestors. From time immemorial the lower classes have never been steeped in ignorance, nor the upper immersed in frivolty ; and, taking this population in its entirety, from the first settlement to the present date, no better all-around American citizen, no sounder exponent of true manhood, has been constructed in the Nineteenth Century of time.

