

JOHN PRICE DURBIN.

FIRST METHODIST PRESIDENT OF
DICKINSON COLLEGE, CARLISLE.

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Mr. President and Members of the Hamilton
Library Association:—

I desire to say, in the first place, that I esteem it an honor to have been invited to prepare a paper for this occasion. Having listened to some of the papers here presented I fully understood that the preparation of a paper to be read here involved serious labor and that a random talk would not be acceptable.

Dickinson College has had two presidents that stood out with special prominences in its history—one at its beginning, at its *generation*, so to speak, and another at its *regeneration*; that is, when, after having ceased operations for several years, it was reopened under the auspices of the Methodist Episcopal church. When I was invited to write this paper, the suggestion was made that I write on Dr. Nesbit, the first President of the college, but a lady of our town, Mrs. Parkinson, recently published a very brief but interesting sketch of him, so that there seemed no present necessity for saying anything more on that subject. For this reason, chiefly, I have undertaken to write about Dr. Durbin; not primarily because he was one of the greatest pulpit orators this country has ever produced, nor because he successfully reorganized Dickinson College and directed its affairs for about eleven years, but, as the title of my paper as printed

on the program indicates, because he was during these years an influential citizen of Carlisle, and to this part of my subject I propose to pay more attention than would be proper if I were simply writing a sketch of the life of this remarkable man.

John Price Durbin was born near Paris, Ky., October 10, 1800. I may here make a slight digression to remark, in the first place, that Kentucky's first settlers were located near the geographical center of the state. In most of our states the first settlements were on the eastern borders because the trend of population was westward from the Atlantic seaboard, but the whole of eastern Kentucky is rugged and often mountainous, on which account the first immigrants pressed on till they came to what is now known as the blue grass region. It may also be said that while this region is famous for its fine horses and mules, it has also produced many great men. In fact, it would be impossible to find anywhere else in the United States an equal space of territory that had produced as many statesmen as did the central part of Kentucky during the early part of the last century. The region about Boston is famous for its scholars and literary men, but for statesmen we must look to Kentucky. In the first place there was Henry Clay, who, although not born in Kentucky, went there in his youth and during his whole active life was identified with that state. Then came Abraham Lincoln, Jefferson Davis, John C. Breckenridge, John J. Crittenden, Cassius M. Clay, and others of less note, and even now the breed hasn't entirely run out, since James B. McCreary, the senior senator from that

state, who comes from this same region, is one of the ablest and most influential members of the senate. In fact, with our modern means of travel. it would not be impossible in a single day to start at the home of John C. Breckenridge, Lincoln's Chief opponent in the memorable presidential contest of 1860, visit Lincoln's birthplace, then that of Jefferson Davis, Lincoln's opponent during four years of bloody strife, and then by passing across the boundary into Tennessee, visit the home of John Bell, who also contested with Lincoln the election of 1860.

Not only was Doctor Durbin a native of Kentucky, but both his father and mother were natives of that state, being among the first white children born in that region. His father's father had moved in there from Havre-de-Grace, Md., and his mother's father from Georgia. The parents were likewise both Methodists, and were among the first adherents of the faith in that region. When the boy was thirteen years old his father died and at the age of fourteen he was apprenticed to a cabinet-maker and he learned the trade. At the age of eighteen he was licensed to preach, having at that time almost no education except such as almost any bright boy would pick up in spite of all obstacles, as is well illustrated in the case of Abraham Lincoln, who, as I have already remarked, was a product of this same region.

In the spring of 1819 he was sent to a circuit in Northwestern Ohio, and the journal which he kept during that time gives some interesting details concerning the mode of living of the people among whom he labored. Their houses

often had only one room and that not over twenty feet square. Here they were born and here they died, and here were also performed all those intervening acts of their lives that would ordinarily take place indoors. He read a great deal, mostly in borrowed books. The next year he was sent to a circuit in Indiana, and in 1821 his appointments were near the seat of the newly established Miami University, and he began the study of Latin and Greek, as well as of some other subjects, in the university, spending part of each week at the school and the rest on his circuit. Two years later he was stationed in Cincinnati and from the university there he received the degrees of A. B. and A. M. at the same time—an unusual occurrence, but showing the esteem in which he was held by the authorities of the school. Even at this time he was already famous as a preacher.

In the following year (1825) was started Augusta College in Kentucky, which may, perhaps, be called the first Methodist college. True, about forty-seven years previous to this an institution known as Cokesburg College was founded near Baltimore, but it never really did college work, and its career, besides, was a brief one. To this new Augusta College Mr. Durbin was called as Professor of languages. The faculty at first consisted of three, later of four, Methodist preachers, one of these being Henry B. Bascom, who, with John P. Durbin and Matthew Simpson, formed a trio which is generally regarded as including the most eloquent preachers the Methodist church has ever produced. A considerable portion of Professor Durbin's time, however, was taken up in traveling over the country in the interest of the

new institution. In 1829, while in Washington on this account, he was nominated for Chaplain of the United States Senate. The vote was a tie, and John C. Calhoun, who was Vice President of the United States and therefore presiding officer of the Senate, decided against Mr. Durbin, giving as his only reason for so doing that Mr. Durbin's opponent belonged to the same church as Mr. Calhoun's mother.

In 1881 Professor Durbin resigned his professorship at Augusta because the college didn't seem to have a promising future. In the same year he was elected professor of natural science in the newly established Wesleyan University at Middletown, Conn. He had always been fond of scientific studies and while professor in Augusta College he published an edition of Wood's "Mosaic History of the Creation of the World." The scope of the book was greatly broadened and there are many original notes which show much research on the editor's part. A short time afterwards he also edited Lyall's Geology, which was published by the Harpers. To this work he also added numerous excellent notes, in which Dr. Priestly's theological teachings are specially antagonized. The call to Wesleyan University was not accepted because in the same year he was elected chaplain of the United States Senate, and it is worthy of remark that Vice President Calhoun now admitted that he had made a mistake in voting against Mr. Durbin on the previous occasion. While occupying this position he frequently preached on Sunday in the hall of the House of Representatives. On Sunday, February 22, 1882, by special invitation, his theme was "George Wash-

ington," and he delivered a sermon which, measured by the effect it produced on his hearers, has rarely been equaled. Before him sat the greatest statesmen of the republic, among them orators like Clay and Webster, listening to a discourse that they had invited, on a subject which even at that time had become somewhat commonplace, but which, nevertheless, was not lacking in inspiring possibilities. At the close of the discourse, John C. Calhoun came up, grasped the speaker's hand and said: "Mr. Durbin, I advise you never to preach again, because this can never be equaled." The text of this remarkable sermon was Rev. iv. II: "Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power; for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created." During this period Mr. Durbin spent a great deal of time in systematic reading in the Congressional Library and also attended some scientific lectures in the University of Maryland.

In May, 1832, being then only thirty-one years old, Mr. Durbin was elected by the General Conference editor of the Christian Advocate and Journal, Zion's Herald, Youth's Instructor, Child's Magazine and also of Tracts and Sunday school books. One of his biographers says: "This was a remarkable evidence of the confidence reposed in his literary ability and his adaptation to the place. He was not then, nor had he ever been, a member of the General Conference. He entered upon his labors with a promptness and intellectual vigor that showed his deep conviction of the importance of the duties that his place imposed, and with a manifest purpose

to exert the proper influence of this great denominational office." In his editorial writings he constantly urged the importance of an educated ministry and recommended the establishment of a theological seminary for the training of Methodist preachers, a doctrine that must have almost paralyzed some of his brethren in the ministry since even now they are by no means unanimous in the opinion that theological seminaries are an unadulterated blessing.

We now come to the history of Dr. Durbin's connection with Dickinson College and I shall here make a short digression in order to clear up a matter which seems to need clearing up, because even in Carlisle the impression seems to be quite general that this was once a Presbyterian college. At this time (1883) the college was in the condition known by physicians as suspended animation. it was not entirely dead because there was still in existence a Board of Trustees whose duty it was to look after its interests, but no actual college work had been done for two years or more. On the 12th of March, 1888, this Board held a meeting to consider a letter from the Rev. Edwin Dorsey of the Baltimore Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, stating that his Conference had appointed a committee to consider the propriety of establishing a college within its bounds and inquiring whether Dickinson College could be obtained for that purpose, and if so, on what terms. The subsequent negotiations can best be described by quoting from Dr. Himes's excellent History of Dickinson College:

"A committee of the Trustees, after conferring with this committee, made a

report favorable to the proposed arrangement. Among the reasons assigned was, 'that those colleges in the United States that have been conducted by, or under the patronage of, some prominent Christian sect, have been more flourishing in their operations, and useful in their influence, than others that have not had these advantages.' "

This language is specially interesting. Since the college up to this time had not been under the patronage of any church, it was thought best to transfer it to some church. "True, up to this time the college had generally been regarded as under the control of the Presbyterian Church. Undoubtedly at its origin and in its whole history up to this point, that church was looked to for its main support in money and patronage, but the Board of Trustees was a joint one, of different denominations and different church organizations were asked to co-operate, as such, in its support. In later years, one of the charges before the legislative committee was the election of Trustees in such a way as to secure Presbyterian control." Nor were the members of the Faculty always all Presbyterians. One of its greatest presidents, Doctor John M. Mason, was a member of the Dutch Reformed Church. Another president, Doctor Atwater, was a Congregationalist, while Doctor How, the last president before the transfer, seems also to have belonged to the Reformed Dutch Church at the time of his incumbency, although in early life he had been a Presbyterian. At the time when the college suspended operations, the Professor of Ancient Languages, the Rev. Joseph Spencer, was not only an Episcopalian, but was also

rector of the church in Carlisle and Professor Mayer belonged to the German Reformed Church. "The college, at its transfer, can not then be regarded as a gift or surrender from the Presbyterian or any other denomination, to the Methodist Church. Had it been then as fully recognized as a Presbyterian college, as it now is a Methodist institution, it may be regarded as doubtful whether it would have been so readily abandoned by that denomination. The transfer of this large public interest to the control of the Methodist Church was, in the language of the Trustees, regarded as a proper expedient for the effectual and direct promotion of the original design of the founders of the college, that church formally declaring its willingness and intention to assume it, and obligating itself to properly support it as a college."

On assuming the duties of his new position, Doctor Durbin called to the institution as instructors, several men of marked ability, especially Emory, McClintock and Allen. Of course, those were not the days of specialists and perhaps any man in the faculty could have taught almost any subject that was taught in the college; something that is not true now, although it is by no means to the discredit of the present faculty that it is not true. Professor McClintock, however, will always be regarded as one of the ablest men ever connected with Dickinson College. During the latter part of his residence in Carlisle, he made himself particularly prominent (some persons at the time would have said notorious) by his sympathy with fugitive slaves, which got him into serious difficulty and involved him in a famous

lawsuit. As Doctor Himes further says: "It has always been regarded as fortunate that the reorganized college had the services of these men. It may be said that Doctor Durbin alone brought to the college an established reputation. As a preacher he was widely known. He had been Chaplain of the United States Senate. His inexplicable eloquence had made him a power wherever he was announced to appear. He had declined a professorship in the Wesleyan University. He left the most influential editorial chair of the denomination to assume charge of this high educational trust. As the organizing and directing head of such an enterprise, and as a college administrator, he has, perhaps, never been equaled. According to the policy of American colleges, especially of the smaller ones, a president is so essential as a figure-head and financial agent, as well as administrator and instructor, that they often suffer for want of the combination of these qualities in a high degree in one individual, and so long as the system continues as it is, there will be a demand for men that are seldom met with. As a graduate of a college, and subsequently a professor in Augusta College, Doctor Durbin was not a novice in the peculiarities of college life. His varied acquisitions and tastes put him in sympathy with all branches of learning. Every department and every interest of the college felt the touch of his attention. Revised statutes, new courses of study, new buildings, increased endowments, increase in the number of students, were all subjects of his constant consideration."

This mention of new buildings leads me to say, that East College was erected

during the administration of Doctor Durbin. True, it would not now be regarded as a model of architectural beauty but it must be remembered, in the first place, that it was built in the style of that time and, in the second place, that the building as it now appears does not correctly represent it as originally built. It then had porticoes with colonial pillars in front of each of its entrances and these made the building look far better than it does at present. Besides, it is a matter for congratulation that a stone building was erected, instead of a big brick structure that looked like a cotton mill. I have seen most of the old college buildings in this country and few of them are better than our East College and none better than "Old West."

President Durbin was at this time in a difficult position. Higher education was not popular with the Methodists, but he at once showed himself master of the situation. He appealed to the Legislature of the State and received for several years an annual appropriation of \$1000. In the spring of 1842 he made a trip across the ocean in search of much needed rest. He visited most of the countries of western and southern Europe, as well as Egypt and Palestine. Some of his experiences are given in four delightful and instructive volumes; two of them entitled, "Observations in Europe," and two, "Observations in the East." Many parts of these volumes can still be read with pleasure and profit because they are not only written in a charming style, but they are also the "observations" of a careful and philosophical student of men and institutions. The reader will be particularly struck by his broad and unprejudiced views in

seeing what is said about the character of Voltaire and Rousseau, the influence of the French Revolution, the chronic difficulties between England and Ireland, and the established church in England, while his description of a visit to Mt. Blanc and the Mer de Glace has been spoken of as "unsurpassed in all the literature of travel since."

President Durbin's interest in scientific studies was particularly profitable to the college, "and whilst endeavoring to accumulate the endowment fund first proposed, and soliciting funds or even obtaining them by loan for the erection of East College, he could not resist the temptation to acquire what was at that time a fine collection of apparatus, belonging to Professor Walter A. Johnson, of Philadelphia which had been employed by him as secretary of the Franklin Institute." He paid \$2000 for the collection which had originally cost \$5000. Much of this apparatus is still in possession of the college, although it very naturally now is mostly of merely historic interest. "During Doctor Durbin's visit to the East the interests of the college seem to have been continually present to him. At the Giant's Causeway he secured three large sections of columns, of three pieces each, besides a complete wooden model; at Chamounix he procured a model of the valley and of the Mount Blanc chain; in Egypt he secured several mummies of the Sacred Ibis, together with other minor specimens."

Doctor Durbin was for about eleven years a resident of Carlisle; eleven years that he regarded as the best years of his life. Desiring a change of occupation, he resigned in 1845 and became pastor of a church in Philadelphia, serving in that

capacity for four years, when he was appointed Presiding Elder. This position he held for about a year when, in 1850, he was elected Missionary Secretary of the Methodist Episcopal Church, an office which he held until 1872, when bodily infirmities compelled him to resign. If I were writing an exhaustive paper on Doctor Durbin, it would be necessary- to devote a large amount of space to this part of his life, for, while not actually the father of the Methodist Missionary Society, he brought his powers as an organiser to bear on it in such a way as to give it its present form and he greatly increased its efficiency. When he assumed the office, the Methodists were annually contributing about sixteen cents per member to the cause of missions, which amount was increased nearly five fold during his administration.

Since the title of my paper indicates that I expect to pay special attention to the life of Doctor Durbin, while a resident of Carlisle, I shall return to that part of my subject. I have not been able to find anyone in Carlisle who remembers him well enough to give much information on this point, but have obtained much interesting information from other sources. Some of his former pupils have left on record some of their recollections of him. If I had been seeking for this information a few years ago, Judge Henderson could have helped me very much, because he was not only a citizen of Carlisle during the entire presidency of Doctor Durbin, but his entire college course was comprehended in these years. Bishop Bowman, a member of the first class that graduated under Doctor Durbin, wrote

a few years ago: "In personal appearance he was not specially attractive. He was a little below the average height and his limbs were not well proportioned, but as a teacher I have never known his superior. He had a wonderful ability to communicate his ideas in plain, simple language and in a most interesting and attractive manner. But it was in the pulpit and on the platform that Doctor Durbin reigned supreme." You will recollect that in a previous quotation, Doctor Himes spoke of his "inexplicable eloquence." On this point, Bishop Bowman says: "It is always difficult to analyze the elements of an eloquent speaker's power. In Doctor Durbin's case, there seemed to be a wonderful combination of elements, no one of which could positively be said to be the source of his marvelous power over an audience. In the beginning he was somewhat heavy and drawling and his delivery a little repulsive but after a little time all that disappeared."

There are many testimonies to this peculiar drawl with which Doctor Durbin began his sermons and, while I never heard him, I have often heard him imitated by those who had heard him. On many occasions persons came to hear him on account of his reputation but were so disgusted that they soon went away or were with difficulty persuaded to stay. It is certain, however, that all those who had the patience to sit through the first ten or fifteen minutes of one of his sermons were willing to remain an hour or two longer, if necessary, to hear the end.

Bishop Bowman also relates the following rather amusing anecdote, one which forcibly illustrates Doctor Durbin's

power over an audience. The occasion was a camp meeting in the Cumberland Valley, probably at Oakville. He says:

"On this occasion the doctor preached a sermon of marvelous power. It differed from most of his, as it was intensely interesting and attractive from the very beginning. Although it was about two hours' long, there was not the slightest sign of weariness or uneasiness in the great congregation. About the middle of the sermon, the mass of the people rose unconsciously to their feet, pressed around the pulpit and stood spell-bound to the end. At one time, while he was describing the condition of the lost, an intelligent, well educated Carlisle lawyer standing near me grasped a tree near which he was standing and began to climb it. Three times I had to pull him down and after the close of the service he couldn't be made to realize the condition through which he had passed."

I have myself heard Dr. Charles F. Deems speak of Doctor Durbin's peculiar style. He writes as follows:

"Wonderful were the advantages of the boys who lived in that college town at that period. Apart from the scholastic advantages there were immense church privileges. Doctor George Duffield was at the Presbyterian Church, a man of rare learning and great skill in preaching. Doctor McGill, since of Princeton, was preaching to a small congregation (known as the "Seceders"). Young as I was, I was struck with the contrast between the smallness of his audiences and the massiveness of his discourses. Two years of this time, the Methodist pastor was the Rev. George O. Cookman, one of the most thrillingly

eloquent preachers of his denomination. In the college were Doctors McClintock and Emory, two young, gifted and accomplished professors, who had the stimulus of alternating with such men as Durbin and Cookman. No mortal man in any age of Christianity, I am persuaded, ever enjoyed superior church privileges, so far as preaching was concerned, to those at the command of the students in Carlisle from 1834 to 1839. The chief of these pulpit princes by all odds was Doctor Durbin. I have never studied any man so closely to find out his methods as I have Doctor Durbin and yet, putting together everything I have thought through the nearly half century since I first knew him, I find it difficult to give a satisfactory analysis. He would begin his sermons in an elocution which was a cross between a Quaker intonation and a hard-shell Baptist whine, and succeeded in almost immediately arresting the attention of his hearers by making the appearance of a cat like approach upon his intellect. The hearer would watch to see what was coming next and felt very much like the mouse that knew the distance between the cat and himself had diminished but was afraid to run lest any motion might provoke the dreaded spring. Then there came a period when the attacking party moved from side to side, apparently, and did not make much additional approach. Then there was a moment of stillness, and then there was a bound, not as of a cat on a mouse, but as of a tiger on some nobler game, producing a thrill that made all the vegetation of the jungle tremble.

I can think of no other figure to describe the style of this remarkable man.

So sudden and prodigious would be these shocks that I have seen whole congregations swayed by them. Twice in my junior years I sat and watched the approach and just as it came, sprung to meet it. The word magnetic is sometimes used about men, generally very loosely, I think. I have met only two men who were to me magnetic: Henry Clay and John P. Durbin. In my boyhood, I could never see Mr. Clay rise to speak without having a nervous chill, although I heard him only in his declining years."

I have heard Dr. Deems speak of Dr. Durbin's sermons and he said "he fairly jerked you" with the magic of his eloquence. Once as he came out of the church after hearing Doctor Durbin preach. two soldiers from the garrison were walking just ahead of him and he heard one of them say: "Wasn't that a hell of a sermon:" lie didn't mean to be profane but he probably used the strongest language at his command.

When President Durbin returned from his trip across the ocean there was a great desire on the part of the students as well as of the Citizens of the town to give him a proper reception. The whole town turned out to do honor to one who might well be regarded as their most distinguished citizen. The students had planned a grand illumination for the evening, one of the features of which was that a lighted candle was to be placed in every window of every college building. When President Durbin heard of this, he absolutely forbade it on account of the danger of fire. Finally, however, he consented to let the program be carried out but only on the condition that a student with a bucket

of water should be stationed in every room and remain there until the lights were extinguished. Thus the students had their illumination, although many of them were prevented from being present at other important functions, especially the formal reception to the President.

In 1844 Doctor Durbin and the Rev. William Herbert Norris, rector of Saint John's Church, Carlisle, became involved in a controversy which evidently produced no small commotion in the community at the time and for the details of which I am indebted to Mr. J. Webster Henderson.

At this time the Church of England was distracted by the so-called Tractarian or Oxford movement, otherwise known as Puseyism. Doctor Durbin alluded to the matter in one of his sermons and stated that on the three great questions of the rule of faith, the means of justification and of the nature of the Eucharist, the Episcopal and Methodist Churches were in substantial agreement. This statement was brought to the attention of Mr. Norris, who seemed to think that his church had been misrepresented and even insulted, and he published a letter to Doctor Durbin in the form of a pamphlet of 46 pages, entitled: "Methodism and the Church, opposed in Fundamentals." It begins as follows: "Reverend Sir:

Inasmuch as you have hazarded a public discourse on matters that intimately concern the church which I serve, you can not be surprised if some of your reported statements should meet with severe criticism and others with pointed denial, and since you have given currency' to several very erroneous opinions

for which you are referred to as authority, it becomes my painful duty to correct those opinions by publicly addressing you."

To this Dr. Durbin replied in a letter "On the Identity of the Fundamental Doctrines of the Church of England, the Protestant Episcopal Church and the Methodist Episcopal Church." It is of very nearly equal length with Rev. Norris's deliverance. He begins by saying that the religious controversy that had arisen in England was not one that affected simply the Church of England or the Protestant Episcopal Church, and that this extended view of the controversy justified every public teacher in explaining it to the people and giving his opinion on it, but he complains that Mr. Norris should have given the controversy a personal bearing by addressing a pamphlet to him personally. He then goes on to say that his remark that the Church of England and the Methodist Episcopal Church exactly agree on the three questions discussed, was merely incidental to the subject of his discourse which was to show the views of the Church of England, the Oxford Tractarians, and the Church of Rome on these questions. He further expresses surprise that Mr. Norris should be offended at his assertion that the two churches were in agreement on these questions, which ought rather to have gratified his pride, but Mr. Norris' pamphlet plainly shows that he greatly preferred that his church should agree with the Church of Rome than that the Methodist Church should agree with the Episcopal Church.

Mr. Norris now returned to the charge with a pamphlet of 70 octavo pages, entitled:

"The Fundamental Doctrines of the Church Vindicated from all Affinity with Methodism, in a Review of a Letter of the Rev. J. P. Durbin, Asserting Their Identity," in which towards the end he departs from the real subject of the controversy and attacks the validity of Methodist ordination.

So far as I could discover the matter was now allowed to drop, the only result apparently being that each controversialist was only the more firmly convinced of the strength of his own position.

I have very little more to add except that during the eleven years that President Durbin resided in Carlisle, he was interested in everything that concerned the welfare of the community and, although necessarily often absent, he could always be counted on to lend a hand in every good work. It was during this period that the free public school system was established in Pennsylvania and this would naturally be a subject that would greatly interest him and since, as we have seen, he had sufficient influence with the legislature to secure an annual appropriation of money for several years, it is only reasonable to suppose that his opinions as an expert in educational matters would also have weight with that body. I have also heard it said that he sent out students from the college to visit the country schools, such as they were, and report on their condition, so that he might have accurate data on which to base his arguments, but this report I have not been able to verify.

Doctor Durbin died Oct. 18, 1876, at his home in New York and was buried in Philadelphia, of which city his wife was a native.