

JAMES ROSS, LATINIST.

Two years ago, when the history of old Franklin College was written, we were greatly in want of information concerning the personal history of Prof. James Ross, who was a teacher in that institution one hundred years ago. We had of course, the brief notices contained in the biographical dictionaries, but these were not only incomplete, but often contradictory. As is frequently the case under such circumstances, considerable material came to hand when it was too late to use it to advantage in our memorial volume; and we have, therefore, prepared for this occasion a sketch of a man who was undoubtedly one of the most brilliant scholars that ever lived in Lancaster. For the additional biographical material that has come to hand we are chiefly indebted to the researches of Miss Martha B. Clark and Samuel H. Ranck. The present writer in this instance lays no claim to original research, and can only hope to present the facts which are now accessible in such a way as to give us a more vivid impression of the personality of a celebrated man.

Birthplace and Parentage.

James Ross was born in Oxford (now Upper Oxford) township, Chester county, May 18, 1744. It has, indeed, frequently been asserted that he was a native of Delaware and a member of the celebrated Ross family of New Castle; but, in view of the explicit statements in Futhey & Cope's "History of Chester County," this as-

sertion can no longer be maintained. The subject of our sketch was, however, descended from a Scotch-Irish family that was equally respectable, though probably less distinguished. His grandfather, James Ross, lived at Carrickfergus, near Belfast, in Ireland. He had three sons, who emigrated to America. John was a sea captain, who married in Connecticut, and had a son, Robert, who became a Presbyterian minister. Hugh, the second son, settled in York county, Pa., and had a daughter who married John Purdon, a merchant of Philadelphia. These were the parents of John Purdon, the original compiler of "Purdon's Digest." William, the third son of James Ross, of Carrickfergus, first settled in York county; but afterwards removed to Chester county, and took up and settled on a tract of land about a mile southeast of Russelville. He married Elizabeth Kidd, by whom he had eight children, among whom was the subject of this sketch. William Ross, the father of James, died in 1799, aged ninety-four years.

His Education.

In view of these explicit statements there can be no further question with regard to the ancestry of the celebrated pedagogue. Concerning his early education little is known, but the classical schools of Chester county were celebrated, and after due preparation he entered Princeton College, where he graduated in 1766. In those days, it has been said, "Princeton was all Latin," and though the course of instruction was comparatively narrow, it certainly produced classical scholars of the highest order. President Burr had but recently published a Latin Grammar, and in the same line of work he was ably succeeded by President Davies and a series of bril-

liant classical instructors. In such environment Ross naturally became an accomplished Latinist, and as soon as he graduated he was invited to take charge of a classical school in Philadelphia. It is said that there had been some hesitation about granting the degree on account of his ignorance of mathematics, but his classical attainments were so unusual that he carried the day. At a later date he received the honorary title of Doctor of Laws.

When Dickinson College was organized at Carlisle in 1784, Professor Ross was called to the professorship of Ancient Languages.

Disappointed Professors.

We know from the letters of Dr. Nisbet, the first President of that institution, that the members of the faculty were greatly disappointed. They had expected to occupy positions of dignity and influence, but were made to suffer from poverty and neglect. Men of learning and distinction were compelled to spend their time in teaching rudiments, and were naturally discontented. As there were few advanced students, Professor Ross was compelled to teach in the Grammar School, but on one point he remained inflexible. He absolutely refused to teach English branches. He had been called to be a professor of ancient languages, and in his opinion it would have been derogatory to his dignity to give instruction on any other subject. Indeed, it may, perhaps, be doubted whether he was competent to teach anything else. It is said that he never could comprehend the simplest mathematical problems, and it is even asserted that he knew so little about figures that when he went to market he found it almost impossible to make change.

In Chambersburg and Lancaster.

In 1797 Professor Ross removed to Chambersburg and founded an academy. It was here that, in the following year, he published the first edition of his celebrated Latin Grammar. Removing to Lancaster, in 1802, he became—nominally, at least—a professor in Franklin College. In reality, we suppose, he taught a classical school in the old college building under the general direction of the Board of Trustees. He was, however, evidently disposed to magnify his office. We have seen a letter addressed by Prof. Ross to Judge Yeates, requesting him to attend the examinations of “our little college,” and on the title page of the second edition of his Grammar he is careful to style himself “professor of ancient languages in Franklin College.” We have in our possession a Latin ode composed by him on the death of Dr. Nisbet, which is dated at Franklin College, in March, 1804. In 1809 Professor Ross resigned his position in Lancaster, and returned to Philadelphia, where he taught a select school on Fourth street, near Arch, until about 1826 when the infirmities of old age compelled him to retire. He died in Philadelphia, July 6, 1827, aged eighty-four years, and was buried in the graveyard of the old Ranstead Court Church; but, when the property was sold, his remains were removed to Carlisle for re-interment.

Teachers of His Type Rare.

Tradition represents Professor Ross as a pedagogue of a type which is familiar enough in early records, but which we have probably rarely seen. Personally, he was a handsome man, with light hair and florid complexion—genial on the street, but terrible in the school-room. He carried a “cat-of-nine-tails,” attached by a ring to his

little finger, and was so absent-minded that he sometimes forgot to remove the implement of torture when he took his dinner. In addressing his students he always spoke Latin, and took no notice of their requests unless they addressed him in the same language. There is a tradition that on one occasion he had a disagreement with Dr. C. L. Becker, pastor of the Reformed Church, who was a distinguished scholar. They met on the street, but could not understand each other, as the one spoke English and the other German. Then they branched off into Latin, but here the trouble was that they pronounced the language according to different systems. Finally, they secured space in a newspaper, and carried on the controversy for some time in the language of Cicero. The controversy, however, can not have been long continued, for, when the Lancaster edition of Ross' Latin Grammar appeared, it was prefaced by an earnest recommendation from Dr. Becker, which was republished in subsequent editions.

His Famous Grammar.

It was, of course, on this celebrated Grammar that the reputation of Dr. Ross was chiefly founded. At present, when text-books are almost as numerous as the leaves of autumn, it may appear to have been a small matter to have prepared a book of this kind; but it was actually an important publication, and marked an epoch in our educational history. It had defects, especially in prosody, but these were subsequently in great measure removed, especially in the revised edition, issued about sixty years ago, by Dr. N. C. Brooks, of Baltimore. There is a fashion in text-books, as in everything else, and the old Grammar, which was for many years almost the only

one of its kind employed in this country, has now become obsolete; but, for all that, it is a question whether it has ever been surpassed as a practical introduction to a knowledge of the Latin language.

Prepared Other Text-Books.

Besides this book, Dr. Ross published a whole series of classical text-books. His Greek Grammar was less popular than the Latin, but was regarded as an able performance. He also issued editions of *Æsop's Fables*, *Cicero's Letters* and the *Colloquies of Erasmus* and those of *Corderius*. He also translated the *Westminster Catechism* into Latin and required his students to commit it to memory—a task which they may not have regarded with special favor. His Latin poems were numerous, but we cannot venture to assert that they were extensively read.

That Dr. Ross was in some respects pedantic may reasonably be inferred; and even in his days there were men who smiled at his extravagant laudations of the classics. Once, when he was in Court during a trial, one of the counsel made the common remark that there is no rule with an exception. —“No! No!” exclaimed Dr. Ross, in an audible voice. “That is a mistake. Nouns of the second Latin declension, ending in *um*, are always of the neuter gender.”

Some of His Pupils.

Many eminent men of a succeeding generation acknowledged that Dr. Ross had “beaten the Latin language into their heads.” Among his pupils in this locality may be mentioned Dr. Samuel Humes, who continued his Latin studies to the end of his life; the Rev. Dr. J. C. Becker, and the Hon. H. A. Muhlenberg, afterwards of Reading. Other

eminent pupils who attended his school in Philadelphia were Nathaniel R. Snowden, James Patriot Wilson and James W. Alexander. The last named clergyman he had nick-named "Alexander Magnus" (Alexander the Great), possibly in humorous allusion to his diminutive size, but more probably because he observed in his boyhood the elements of future greatness.

It might be supposed that a man so unworldly, and in some respects so utterly helpless as Dr. Ross, would have to suffer the usual fate of scholars; but the fact is that he was never troubled with the cares of subsistence. Curiously enough, he refused to sell his copyrights and when his books sold by tens of thousands they brought him an income that abundantly met his modest wants. In his old age teaching was a labor of love and not of necessity.

His Eccentricities Grew.

Prof. Ross was always peculiar, but as he grew older his eccentricities became more evident. He was an enthusiastic patriot, and insisted on wearing domestic clothing, for the purpose of encouraging home industries, even when goods of English manufacture could be purchased at a much lower price. He sought to dignify important national events—such as the victory at New Orleans and the visit of Lafayette—by the production of Latin odes, which he was ready to recite whenever he could find an audience. He was a devout member of the Presbyterian Church, and on Sunday was rarely absent from his place. Dr. Joseph Smith says in his History of Jefferson College: "We remember to have seen him when he was probably eighty years of age, at the First Church, in Philadelphia, of which Dr. Wilson was then pastor. His seat was

in the gallery; and before him he had fixed, on a little shelf, attached to the parapet or breastwork of the gallery, nearly a dozen of books—a Greek Testament, a Hebrew Bible, Concordance, Lexicons, etc. When the Doctor announced his text, Mr. Ross at once took his Greek Testament, turned to the passage and seemed to be earnestly studying it.” In everything that concerned the interpretation of the text he took the keenest delight, and his pleasure was evidently increased by the fact that the preacher had been one of his favorite pupils.

Dr. Ross was twice married. His first wife was Rosanna Sharp; the second was Catharine Irvine, of Carlisle, who survived him and died in 1846, at an advanced age. He left no descendants.

That Dr. Ross was a good man has never been doubted. An early biographer says: “He was nervous and excitable, and seemingly could not remain long in one position, but he was an upright man, of spotless moral character, and as artless as a child.” In this community, where he labored long and well, his name and fame has been almost forgotten; but for his personal excellence, no less than for his literary distinction, he deserves an honored place in our series of local celebrities.

Author: Dubbs, J. H. (Joseph Henry), 1838-1910.

Title: James Ross, Latinist : an early Lancaster pedagogue / by
Rev. Joseph H. Dubbs, D.D., LL.D.

Primary Material: Book

Subject(s): Ross, James, 1744-1827.
Franklin and Marshall College.
Latin language--Study and teaching.
Lancaster (Pa.)--Biography.

Publisher: Lancaster, Pa. : Lancaster County Historical Society,
1904/1905

Description: [29]-36 p. ; 23 cm.

Series: Journal of the Lancaster County Historical Society ; v. 9,
no. 2

Call Number: 974.9 L245 v.9

Location: LCHSJL -- Journal Article (reading room)

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