

ENGLISH EDUCATION OF THOMAS NELSON, JR.,
OF YORKTOWN.

BY G. MACLAREN BRYDON

Letters and other records of the Nelson family still in existence¹ show that Thomas Nelson, Jr., of Yorktown, when a lad of fourteen was sent by his father, Col. William Nelson, to England and placed for his schooling under the care of two friends, Mr. ———— Hunt, of London and the Rev. Beilby Porteus, at that time a Fellow of Christ's College, Cambridge University. He was sent by these gentlemen to the preparatory school of Dr. Newcome, at Hackney, where he stayed for six years; after which he went to the University of Cambridge, and became a student of Christ's College.²

There is also a tradition that Thomas Nelson while at the school in Hackney saved from death by drowning a younger lad, the son of Lord North. This tradition is supported by the fact of the existence today of a gold snuff-box, with a beautifully painted miniature of Lord North in the inside of the lid, which as a highly prized relic has come down in the Nelson family. It is said to have been presented by Lord North to young Nelson as a mark of appreciation and gratitude for saving his son. This snuff-box is now preserved by the Virginia Historical Society.

There was a definite reason why Colonel Nelson sent his son to England under the care of Beilby Porteus,—a double reason in fact, of family relationship by marriage and of friendship between two families living a few miles from each other on opposite sides of the York River. Robert Porteus, the elder, lived in Virginia for a number of years, and in Gloucester County, during which time he had married twice. His first wife was Mildred, daughter of John and Mary (Warner) Smith of Gloucester County. She was a rather distant relative of Col. Nelson, both being descended from Col. George Reade, and his wife Elizabeth Martiau. Robert Porteus, the second, was a son of this marriage. Beilby Porteus was

¹There are a number of letters on this subject in the Letter Book of William Nelson, in the Virginia State Library.

²See R. C. M. Page, *Genealogy of the Page Family in Virginia*, Second edition, pp. 166-67.

the son by a second wife, who was Elizabeth, the daughter of Col. Edmund Jennings. Beilby was born at York in England, after the return of his parents from Virginia. He was educated at Christ's College, Cambridge University, became chaplain first to Archbishop Secker, and later to King George III; was bishop of Chichester from 1776 to 1787, and bishop of London from 1787 until his death in 1808. It is one of the interesting coincidences of history that when the Rev. James Madison, the first bishop of Virginia, went to England in 1790 to be consecrated to that office by bishops of the Church of England, one of those who took part in that service was Beilby Porteus, the one bishop in all England who through his mother and his mother's people, was a son of the Anglican Church of Virginia.

Bishop Madison was one of the three bishops of the Episcopal Church in America who received consecration from bishops of the Church of England, and who, joining with Bishop Seabury of Connecticut, (consecrated by bishops of the Episcopal Church of Scotland) began the long line of bishops of the Episcopal Church in the United States.

With such definite evidence in family records of the fact of Thomas Nelson's having been a student of Christ's College, going even to the extent of fixing the years of his stay at that college, it was strange to find that the published records of the alumni of Cambridge, "Alumni Cantabrigienses," made no mention whatever of his attendance at the University.

For that reason an effort has been made recently through Mr. Gordon Page Williams, of Washington, who is a descendant of General Nelson and a former student of King's College, Cambridge, to find definite evidence in the University records of Thomas Nelson's college course. Through the interest and help of Sir John Clapham, of King's College, Cambridge, and an official of the University, this effort has proven successful and a definite record has now been established.

The two following extracts from letters of Sir John Clapham to Mr. Williams are given because of their interest, and also for the light they throw upon some of the customs of the University:

Cambridge, 1 June, 1943

"Thomas Nelson is a puzzle. The material for the Alumni is

collected and, as the compiler informs me, there is no evidence of a Nelson of Virginia at Christ's, 1758-61. He can only trace a William Nelson, 1772-75, an Englishman, on their card tickets. They have worked the Christ's records completely, I think.

"That is however not quite decisive. In the 18th century College records were defective. Scholars were always entered in the books; but at Kings we have only been able to trace our 'Fellow Commoners,'—and I expect a Virginian gentleman would join that group,—by casual entries in accounts for food supplied, and so on. But I think you may assume that the Alumni people have done their best to date."

Cambridge, 7 June, 1943

"I was wrong about Christ's. I had given the Alumni people a wrong reference.

"Thomas Nelson,—parentage given,—was in fact entered at Christ's, 15 May, 1758, having been born in Virginia on 26 Dec. 1738. Resident till Lady Day, 1761. No record of a degree. (No doubt, too much the gentleman: gentlemen did not bother with examinations much in the 18th century.)

"He was not however a Fellow Commoner, but a 'pensioner' as we say: i.e. an undergraduate who paid for his keep, unlike a 'scholar' who was given it.

"In case some of the other parts are of use I enclose the note sent from the Alumni Office. It is as follows:

NELSON THOMAS, Admitted pensioner (age 19) at Christ's, May 15, 1758. s. of William, Pres. of the Council, and Acting Gov. of Virginia, and Elizabeth Burwell, of Yorktown, Virginia. B. there Dec. 26, 1738.

Resided till Lady Day, 1761³. Merchant. Married, 1762, Lucy, d. of Philip and Mary Grimes (Grymes), and had issue, 11 children. In H. M. Council of Virginia, 1764, and went to the Congress in Philadelphia as representative, being one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence. Ill health forced him to give up service in the Congress, and he returned to Virginia, 1777. Although an ardent Revolutionist, he was in no sense a Radical, and he keenly opposed the Virginia Act of Sequestration of British

³"Lady Day" is March 25th. In the Church Calendar it is the Feast of the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Property in 1777, and is said to have declared that he 'would pay his debts like an honest man.' Was appointed Commander in chief of the Forces of the Virginia Commonwealth, and marched to Philadelphia, 1778; but these troops were disbanded when Congress felt unable to support them.

He returned to Congress but, on account of illness retired to Virginia again, to serve as financier, Governor, and Commander of the Militia. In 1781 was elected Governor, the first Conservative to hold that office. He joined Washington as Major-General of the Virginia forces in the siege of Yorktown, 1781, but had to resign through ill-health late in the same year. This selfless patriotism resulted in his financial ruin. He moved to a small estate, Offley, in Hanover County, where he stayed for the remainder of his life.⁴

(From a Virginia correspondent, and from the *Dictionary of American Biography*, which gives several other references.)

⁴He died January 4, 1789, and was buried in the Churchyard at Yorktown. He never recovered his health, and so was unable to return to public life.