

## THE NEILL PAPERS IN THE MANUSCRIPT COLLECTION OF THE MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

In the summer of 1909 Miss Minnesota Neill of Helena, Montana, sent to the Minnesota Historical Society three boxes of manuscript and printed material which had been left by her father Rev. E. D. Neill. About a year ago some scrapbooks and additional papers were received from the same donor,<sup>1</sup> and the whole collection of papers, comprising over three thousand documents and ranging in date from 1836 to 1893, has now been sorted and filed in convenient chronological arrangement. Letters received and drafts of letters written by Dr. Neill make up the bulk of the collection. The letters received form an apparently unbroken series, with the exception of family letters. They cover the entire period of Dr. Neill's career, increasing in volume from first to last in proportion to his growing reputation. Drafts of his own letters, on the other hand, are few and scattered. The remainder of the collection comprises articles by Neill, newspaper clippings, scrapbooks, notes, and miscellany.

Edward Duffield Neill was one of those men of vision, intellect, and energy, whose hearts and brains are inextricably interwoven in the fabric of Minnesota's history—one of a limited number who in marked degree helped to determine the character of that history. He came to Minnesota in 1849, when the foundations of the new territory and state-to-be were being laid. While others were engaged primarily in the political organization and material development of the state, Dr. Neill, through his zeal in the establishment and building-up of religious and educational institutions, was enabled to quicken and direct its spiritual and intellectual life. A maker of his-

<sup>1</sup> See *ante* 229.

tory, he was also an historian and a promoter of historical activities. His services in these several directions continued unbroken, notwithstanding a protracted absence from the state, from his arrival in Minnesota until his death in 1893. He outlived the day of beginnings; other leaders came to the front; but he remained throughout a determining influence in the religious, educational, and intellectual development of the state.

As might be expected, the collection contains an abundance of material bearing upon the history of the various movements with which Dr. Neill was most prominently identified. All three fields of activity—religious, educational, and historical—are represented throughout, though, broadly speaking, each in turn predominates in the order named. This material constitutes the largest part of the papers, though it is not necessarily their most valuable contribution to history.

Dr. Neill came to Illinois in 1847 as a Presbyterian home missionary, and for two years labored among the people of the lead-mining region near Galena. The pioneer spirit brought him in 1849 to St. Paul, at that time little more than a village. There, through his efforts, was erected a building which he claimed was the first Protestant church edifice for the white people in Minnesota.<sup>1</sup> In the same year he organized the First Presbyterian Church of St. Paul, and in the following year aided in forming the presbytery of Minnesota. In true home missionary fashion he often preached at a number of neighboring points, notably St. Anthony and Fort Snelling. In 1855 he organized another church in St. Paul, the House of Hope, and in 1858 assisted in organizing the synod of Minnesota. He continued in the service of the Presbyterian Church as organizer, pastor, and preacher until 1874, when he became identified with the Reformed Episcopal Church, returning, however, to the Presbyterian Church in 1890. All this and much more is to be gleaned from the papers. Of especial interest are the

<sup>1</sup> *Hand Book for the Presbyterian Church in Minnesota*, 8 (Philadelphia, 1856); *Early Days of the Presbyterian Branch of the Holy Catholic Church in the State of Minnesota*, xviii (Minneapolis, 1873).

documents of home missionary days, accumulated when the field was new and the worker young. The various aspects of the life are well represented: the spiritual indifference of a frontier community, the hardships to be endured, the financial difficulties, the denominational rivalries, the friction between brother ministers, and, finally, the compensating satisfactions that attend the unselfish pursuit of a lofty purpose. But accompanying this more commonplace sort of material are to be found also interesting facts and observations peculiar to the time, place, or observer, as the case may be. For example, a member of a neighboring church, writing to Neill in 1848, embodied no little of the religious, social, and political history of the West in a single sentence when he ascribed his pastor's unpopularity to "a worldly spirit of trade & speculation and an over anxiousness to make political abolitionists," continuing with the remark that "the church and the community are right on the subject of slavery they differ only as to the mode of getting rid of the evil &c." The writer, who was considering the possibility of extending a call to Neill, appended the following interesting postscript: "When you write say if . . . your Lady has labored with you in the Female Prayer Meeting and the Sunday School." Occasional letters from other pioneer workers in this field—men, such as Rev. Gideon H. Pond, whose names are prominent in Minnesota history—are of interest. Less intimate and significant in character is the material bearing upon later periods. Religious activities gradually became well-established, recognized factors in the life of the community and more and more matters of course, and Dr. Neill became increasingly occupied with pioneer work in other fields. Attention, however, may be called to a number of papers of the period from 1874 to 1890 which have a bearing upon the history of the movement that found expression in the Reformed Episcopal Church.

Coincident with the beginning of his missionary labors in Minnesota was the commencement of Dr. Neill's life-long activity in behalf of education. As the first territorial super-

intendent of public instruction, as chancellor of the university, 1858-60, and as first state superintendent of instruction, he helped to lay the foundations of the present admirable system of free public schools in Minnesota. He was also a leader in private enterprises for the promotion of the cause of Christian education. With the aid of men of means he established the Baldwin School at St. Paul in 1853. The history of that institution and of those which grew out of it—the changes in organization, name, and location, the long periods of suspended animation during which little beyond organization and name persisted—is a long story. Suffice it to say that, thanks largely to Dr. Neill's efforts, the ultimate result was Macalester College, which opened its doors in September, 1885. With that institution Dr. Neill was connected, first as president, and later as professor, during the remainder of his life. The material relating to educational history contains, unfortunately, comparatively little of value for the student of purely secular education and institutions. It is concerned for the most part with Macalester College and its predecessors, and is distributed with fair uniformity and variety throughout the years of Dr. Neill's connection with those institutions. From the mass of letters, charters, building specifications, accounts, circulars, and miscellany may be distinguished all the various phases of the organization, financing, equipment, and conduct of the typical Christian school and college. But a certain uniqueness attaches to the whole from the fact that in some important respects the history of Macalester differs from that of other institutions of its kind. Dr. Neill's ambition was to establish in the Northwest a nonsectarian Christian college for men, on the model of eastern colleges like Yale, Princeton, and Amherst. A number of adverse circumstances prevented him from fully realizing his ideal, and the final result, in a word, was the taking-over of Macalester College, which was in need of support, by the Presbyterian Synod of Minnesota, which was in need of a college. Letters from M. W. Baldwin, the locomotive manufacturer, and Charles Macalester of Philadelphia, and James J.

Hill, all prominent benefactors of these institutions, form an interesting part of the collection. Occasional letters touch upon the life of other colleges in the Middle West, such as Albert Lea, Beloit, and Grinnell. Letters and papers of the years 1885 to 1893, so far as they relate to educational matters, are largely illustrative of the struggles through which Macalester College passed before it became firmly established, and of Dr. Neill's part in them.

Wherever he happened to be, and in whatever work engaged, Dr. Neill was an untiring delver into the records of the past, and he was the author of numerous books, pamphlets, articles, and addresses on historical subjects. From 1851 to 1861 he was secretary of the Minnesota Historical Society, and edited parts of volumes 1 and 2 of the society's *Collections*. The first history of Minnesota, published in 1858, and three times revised and extended, in 1873, 1878, and 1882,<sup>1</sup> is one of his many contributions to Minnesota and western history. A series of studies on American colonial history, with especial reference to Virginia and Maryland, was the outgrowth of researches carried on by him during the years 1861 to 1868 while serving successively as a chaplain in the Army of the Potomac, as a hospital chaplain at Philadelphia, and as one of the secretaries of the president at Washington. While acting as United States consul at Dublin, 1868-71, he improved the opportunity to study and write about the English colonization of America. Apropos of this opportunity, J. Fletcher Williams wrote Neill: "I envy you 'mousing' in the libraries of Dublin, the old booksellers stands, with an occasional run to England, and dip into the *British Museum*, the State Paper & Record Commission office, &c.!" Dr. Neill's work in historical research and writing furnished the occasion for a large number of letters which will be of interest to the student of history and of historiography. A few of these came from men who were in a

<sup>1</sup> A so-called fifth edition was issued in 1883, which differs from the fourth edition only in the addition of a single page of biographical material.

position to know some of the facts of Minnesota history at first hand. For example, among the letters of 1863 and 1864 are several from Major Taliaferro, the Indian agent, whose name is closely associated with the beginnings of American occupation. A much larger group of letters and papers abounds in material illustrative of the methods, aims, and progress of historical investigation the country over. A long-continued correspondence, for the most part relating to the sources and facts of colonial history, is represented by a series of letters from Alexander Brown of Norwood, Virginia, an authority on the subject. Typical of letters from numerous historical investigators are those written by Lyman C. Draper and Reuben G. Thwaites, secretaries of the Wisconsin Historical Society. Letters from well-known historians, such as Froude, Parkman, Nicolay, Hay, and Winsor, are not lacking. With Nicolay and Hay, Neill was in close association as one of Lincoln's secretaries; with Winsor, he had a part in writing and editing the *Narrative and Critical History of America*.

Scattered throughout the collection are letters written by men of prominence in Minnesota which furnish interesting sidelights upon various aspects of Minnesota history and upon the writers themselves. Of these perhaps the most important were received from Alexander Ramsey. The two men were thrown into close association in the early territorial days, and Ramsey always took a personal interest in Neill and a substantial interest in his enterprises. The most important of these letters fall within the period from 1861 to 1865. The intimate character of some of them is revealed in Ramsey's reply, on January 20, 1862, to a rather desponding letter from Neill: "Do not say you will leave Minnesota, it must not be done. If I only consulted my own convenience I too would leave,—and surely you are as much attached to the state as I am." As governor of Minnesota during the first two years of the Civil War, Ramsey had the appointing of officers for the Minnesota regiments. To Neill, then acting as chaplain of the First Minnesota, he wrote fully of his policy in this connection. Other

letters from Ramsey, notably several relating to his contest with Aldrich in 1862-63 for a seat in the United States Senate, are of significance for political history. There are also a number of letters scattered over a series of years from Henry M. Rice, at one time territorial delegate to Congress and later United States senator from Minnesota. These relate for the most part to Neill's personal affairs and to his religious and educational enterprises, in all of which Rice took a marked interest. Apart from their value in these connections, the letters contain suggestive indications of the personality of the writer. In the matter of building a church Rice advises Neill to "go the entire swine now" instead of going at it piecemeal. Elsewhere he expresses his aversion to the use of a motto in a foreign language on a state seal. Again, referring to men who could easily furnish much-needed aid to Neill's college, he remarks, "Rich men may go to heaven—the very selfish ought not to." Among other prominent men who had occasion to address Neill more or less frequently were William R. Marshall, Thomas Foster, George L. Becker, Stephen Miller, John S. Pillsbury, Cushman K. Davis, and S. J. R. McMillan.

In addition to this more or less unified body of material there is another group of letters and papers which may be distinguished as having been accumulated under special circumstances and as not being wholly in line with Neill's enduring interests. These fall within the period of his absence from Minnesota, 1861-72. As a chaplain in the army Neill wrote a series of letters describing the movements of the First Minnesota and of the Army of the Potomac in 1861 and 1862. Not less significant are the glimpses of less dramatic and often neglected features of army life afforded by papers bearing upon the management of the post fund of the First Minnesota, of which Neill was treasurer. Methods by which dependents at home were cared for also are touched upon in papers relating to the assignment by the soldiers of a portion of their wages for the support of their families. A number of letters from officials of M. W. Baldwin and Company's Locomotive Works,

Philadelphia, have a bearing upon the government's operation of military railroads.

While acting as one of Lincoln's private secretaries in 1864 and 1865, Neill shared in the work of handling the president's mail, and he preserved a number of interesting communications addressed to Lincoln. Among these are all sorts of requests and appeals. A colored soldier, disappointed in his efforts to secure a commission promised him by the war department, lays his case before the president. Clemency is asked for the "editor of a one horse concern of a Democratic Paper" in Ohio who has been convicted of discouraging enlistments, because, in the writer's opinion, the culprit is "more fool than knave." Several earnest appeals bring out mitigating circumstances in the case of a rebel spy condemned to be hanged. A Catholic bishop, about to make his decennial pilgrimage to Rome, asks for a safe conduct through the North from Richmond rather than undertake to run the blockade. Another correspondent suggests that the war be ended by the simple expedient of purchasing all the slaves. Lincoln probably never had the benefit of much of the shrewd observation and wise counsel as to the causes and conduct of the war which came to the executive mansion. It is doubtful if he ever perused the sixty-eight-page "Letter on the Rebellion of the Southern States of North America" by one Philippe Gutbub, a teacher of languages at Philadelphia, or the communication from "Veritas" of Edinburgh, Scotland. Another type of letter which Neill preserved was of the sort that came from the humble admirer of the great Lincoln, with its crude spelling, worshipful tone, and naïve assumption of the president's interest in the writer's personal affairs. One such letter concludes as follows: "I am a right loyal frend of yours and hails from old kaintuck your humbl wel wisher Isral putnam Winchester." The hand of the "crank" is seen in the following extract from a note from "Walter of Greenburg": "My dear friend Abraham Lincoln and Lady, peace be upon you, and do not be offended with me if I appear this day before the Executive Mansion, with my cart



which I draw through the country, and lodge in it, a faithful high way preacher and peace maker, without money scrip rations or pay, and always on duty." Neill evidently made it a point to collect and preserve autograph letters and notes of prominent men. Four of these were written by Lincoln, a number by Andrew Johnson, and others by Colfax, Welles, Stanton, and Seward.

Neill's term of service as United States consul at Dublin, Ireland, 1868-71, has resulted in a few papers illustrative of the duties of that office, of the consul's relation to other diplomatic officers and to the state department, and, to a slight degree, of the life of the time in Ireland. Two incidents alone appear worthy of special note: the generous contribution of the city of Dublin toward the relief of Chicago after the great fire, and Dr. Neill's defence of the University of Pennsylvania from the charge of selling its diplomas in London.

A quantity of miscellaneous printed material which accompanied the papers has been placed with similar material in other departments of the library. It consists mostly of pamphlets, circulars, broadsides, maps, photographs, and annotated copies of some of Dr. Neill's works. Of these, two rare leaflets attributed to Ramsey Crooks deserve special mention. They are entitled *A Letter Addressed to Thomas L. M'Kenney, Esq., Superintendent of Indian Trade, March, 1820, in Reply to His Report of January, 1820, and On the Indian Trade, by a Backwoodsman* (Washington, February, 1821). These, together with articles from the same pen in the form of clippings from the *Washington Gazette*, are a severe criticism of the superintendent, of his factors, and of the whole factory system.

FRANKLIN F. HOLBROOK



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