

In Old Bellaire

By D. W. THOMPSON

Nearly 60 years ago a beginning novelist brought out a creaky and pokey little novel called "In Old Bellaire" which immediately became the most frequently read book about Carlisle in the Civil War. The book has long been out of print and is getting scarce, and is less and less read. Yet its impact may be seen in the school, park, restaurant, apartments, and other enterprises which proudly bear a name invented by an authoress who was writing about the town and people she remembered as a girl, and who thought that she ought to change all the names from real to fictitious, if often similar, ones. Bellaire was her happy substitute for Carlisle.

Mary Dillon, author of "In Old Bellaire," was born Mary Johnson, the daughter of Herman Merrills Johnson who was president of Dickinson College during the Civil War period. There are indications of personal recollections of the war in her novel, so we may suppose her to have been about 10 years old at the time of the invasion.

In 1877 she married Patrick Dillon, whom she lost by death two years later. She resided in St. Louis, and must have been a middle-aged widow, verging on the elderly, when she decided to try her hand at novel-writing. "The Rose of Old St. Louis" (1904) was an immediate success, and encouraged thereby, she proceeded to write half a dozen other novels. There followed "In Old Bellaire" (1906); "The Leader" (1906); "The Patience of John Morland" (1909); "Miss Livingston's Companion" (1911); "Comrades" (1917); "The American" (1918); and "The Farmer of Roaring Run" (1920). Mrs. Dillon died about 1924-25.

To Carlislens. "In Old Bellaire" will always be the novel about old Carlisle in Civil War days, with allusions to actual local scenes

and characters on every page. It is therefore a difficult book to appraise, from the point of view of the general reader. Having made allowance for local color and local history as the chief source of interest, one is inclined to dismiss the novel as a rather amateurish and unsuccessful effort. But this will hardly do, for the evident success of the book with the general public is astonishing. It not only exhausted its original edition of 1906, but required later printing in 1911, 1916, 1919, and perhaps one or two others.

To explain such popularity is difficult. What we think to be the charm of the purely local may in fact appeal to a wide public as a description of an old town not unlike many another throughout the country. Bellaire may be an American "Cranford" or Miss Mitford's "Village." Or the Civil War background may have interested many readers, for the book does recreate the atmosphere of a town involved in the exciting events of the Gettysburg campaign.

It appealed in some measure to the interest that welcomed "Gone with the Wind" 25 years later.

Some of the liberties taken by the author with history are great enough to invite comment. She boldly introduced Robert E. Lee, for example, as having been stationed at the barracks at some time, as returning in the fall of 1860 on a tour of inspection, and again as visiting the town on the eve of Gettysburg. The fact is that Robert E. Lee was never in Carlisle. That is a difference between Bellaire and Carlisle.

Another famous person referred to is George Washington. Mrs. Dillon believed that he had his headquarters in the Denny house during the Indian wars. The time of his visit was, of course, the Whiskey Insurrection, and his headquarters were in the Blaine house on the Square. Years ago Dickinson College and the State of

Pennsylvania, both placed markers in front of Denny Hall stating that Washington reviewed his army on that spot.

We have seen no evidence for the statement and think it mistaken, but it is interesting to see that already in Mrs. Dillon's time there was some association in people's minds between Washington's visit and the Denny house.

The Denny home (of Major Ebenezer Denny's parents) was not, however, on the site of Denny Hall, which property did not then belong to the Dennys. Of course the origin, whatever it was, of the belief that Washington reviewed his troops at that spot may not have been connected with the Dennys at all.

Many readers will be surprised to learn that "In Old Bellaire" is a roman a clef, having not only its scenes and events, but its very characters taken from life. Mrs. Dillon used the vivid memories of her girlhood, merely altering a name or location to disguise her originals.

The topographical features of the setting are readily identified: Bellaire is Carlisle, Northumberland is Cumberland, Henrysburg, is Harrisburg, and Marystown is Hagerstown, Md. Langdon, Main, Portland, and Harcourt streets are Louthier, High, Pomfret and Hanover respectively. Hetzger is Metzger, and Sulphur Springs, Carlisle Springs. Old Tomlinson of course is Dickinson College.

The modern reader may be confused in locating the president's house, for in Civil War days the president's family lived in the east end of East College, then furnished with its own porches and fenced garden. Lovers Lane ran from its garden gate to the Iron Gate at the corner of West and High streets. The novel opens on the steps of the Burton mansion, easily recognized as the John Brown Parker home, now the Elks' club. The St. John's Presbyterian Church on Portland Street, where Eunice Harlowe taught and sang, was the Emory

Methodist Chapel, later the Law School, on the site of the present United Brethren Church, West and Pomfret streets.

Identifying the original characters of the novel must have been the tea-table sensation of Carlisle in 1906. Several keys to the dramatic personnel have been preserved in town, and a chapter of reminiscences contributed by Mrs. Dillon to *The Dickinsonian* of 1908 identifies some of the faculty circle. Many of the characters and their friends were then alive, and no one was so indelicate as to print a list. But there can be no objection now, for time the destroyer has left only a few scattered remnants of the families who once maintained the elegant social life described.

The Charlton family was that of President Johnson of the college, Lucy and Millicent being his daughters Lottie and Mary, the writer. With them lived Annis Donkersley, of Connecticut, who taught the family children in Emory Chapel. She was the original Eunice Harlowe (with one trait, her defiance of the fashion in hoop-skirts, borrowed from another teacher, Hattie Gere). Rex McAllister was Thomas Jefferson McCants, Dickinson 1861, of South Carolina. The southern patronage of the college, incidentally, is exaggerated. Of the class of 1861, 28 were Northerners, 25 Southerners; a typical division.

Sallie Burton and her younger sister Mazie were the daughters of J. B. Parker, later Mrs. Staley and Mrs. Fraley, of Philadelphia. "Their cousin, the beautiful Miss Marcie Morris," was Marcia, or Mimi Moore, daughter of Johnston Moore of Mooreland, and in truth their cousin. Lydia McNair, "the dashing belle of the army set," was Lydia Biddle, daughter of Gen. Edward M. Biddle, and sister of Judge Edward W. Biddle. In the faculty, Prof. Tiffin, the epicure, was Dr. Otis H. Tiffany; Prof. Haywood, the bachelor pianist, was John K. Stayman; and Prof. Feldman, the chess master, was Prof. Samuel D. Hillman. The Misses Caroline and Phoebe

Perkins were the "brilliant spinners" Misses Sarah and Phoebe Payne, who conducted their school for girls at 116 South West Street.

The original models should not be completely identified with the fictional characters. The feverish flirtations which provided a mild suspense were perhaps entirely imaginary. Annis Donkersley, according to one key, married a man from Illinois, not Rex. Thomas McCants had no military record, while Rex McAllister was a prodigious hero. Lydia Biddle never married.

"The best-portrayal extant of the Carlisle life about the time of the Civil War," said Dr. Morgan of the novel, and this is true if we qualify the Carlisle life to mean the pleasant society of the college circle as seen by a school girl. The book even gains in concentration by its limited outlook. The real life of the town, common and bitter, like the real war and real human nature, lay outside the author's scope. Reality only penetrates the happy valley of old Bellaire like a mutter of thunder from the direction of Gettysburg.

Yet we need not accuse Mrs. Dillon of falsifying the picture. She remembered Carlisle in the light of her own experience. Of all her writing, that which most endears her to Carlisle readers

is her reminiscences, reprinted in part in "Two Hundred Years in Cumberland County," entitled "In Old Carlisle," which she published in *The Dickinsonian* in 1908, after receiving the first honorary degree the college ever gave to a woman, in recognition of her novel. She recalls a heaven upon earth, and what astonishes us is that the period she describes, the 1860's, was also the worst, socially, and the most lawless, in our history.

She lived here in the midst of our three decades of continuous arson, beginning with the burning of the Court House and Town Hall, and ending in the 1870's with the sentencing of a number of men to the penitentiary. In 1867 came the worst armed riot, that left two men shot dead, a woman who looked out of her door to see what was going on shot through the foot, and many injured. Illicit grog shops, dance halls, and faro games flourished; soldiers were murdered in the streets and citizens in saloon brawls. And to Mary Johnson life here was a rapture of innocent delight.

But idealist and cynic do not see the same world. It is a reminder in this age of emphasis on objective science, that reality is also subjective, and that after all the universe is a private concept to every person.