Nine Pennsylvania Lives

Though there may be no royal road to knowledge in general, biography provides a most pleasant approach to a knowledge of history. The University of Pennsylvania Press may have had some such thought in mind in 1940 when it embarked upon the publication of a new series of biographies called Pennsylvania Lives. Reading the nine volumes which have appeared thus far has been a pleasant as well as a profitable experience. Further additions to the series have been postponed until the current paper shortage is eased, and the present lull furnishes a good opportunity to review and evaluate the first installment of this interesting publishing venture.

Pennsylvania Lives was in a real sense a venture, highly laudable historically but dubious from the standpoint of box-office receipts. In this series the publishers deliberately avoided the safe but trite stories of the very great Pennsylvanians, in favor of those of the near- or even not-very-near great—the state’s stars of lesser magnitude, which, though they shine less brilliantly, still serve to outline and illuminate our historical firmament. It is the belief of the University of Pennsylvania Press “that the activities of these less familiar figures . . . deserve a lasting record and that their life histories will be read with pleasure and profit by all who take pride in the achievements of the state.” Historians will agree with this reasoning. It can be just as valuable to an understanding of the past to study the life of a minor figure, in the light of his times, as that of
a great one, whose personal achievements may prevent us from catching a true reflection of his surroundings. Furthermore, as these nine volumes abundantly demonstrate, the personal histories of these lesser lights not only can be highly interesting in themselves, but also, when properly projected against the background of their times, may help to illuminate corners and byways which formal histories leave obscure or untrodden.

Of the nine Lives which have appeared so far,¹ five lie chiefly within the eighteenth century: Beissel, the Bartrams, Peters, Burd, and Smith. Dallas and Rush witness the rise of Jeffersonian and then of Jacksonian democracy. Geary takes us through the Mexican and Civil wars. Brashear is the only subject whose career extends into the twentieth century. This concentration upon the earlier period is not intentional. It merely happened that a number of early lives were offered for publication at the outset. Future volumes will include more in the later period. However, readers of Pennsylvania Lives need not fear five trips through colonial Pennsylvania, for each is conducted by a different guide, who lets us see things through his eyes, shows us sights which interest him, and usually proves to be an interesting fellow himself.

For an overall picture we may begin with the Reverend Richard Peters, an interesting example of those Englishmen of good family who, having got into difficulties at home, found it advisable to leave their troubles behind them and make a fresh start in a new environment. Young Peters’ projected church career in England was

¹ John White Geary, Soldier-Statesman, 1819-1873. By Harry Marlin Tinkcom. 1940, 149 p., $1.75.
James Burd, Frontier Defender, 1726-1793. By Lily Lee Nixon. 1941, 189 p., $2.25.
blasted by his committing bigamy—through carelessness rather than design, his biographer indicates. He came to Philadelphia in 1734. Here he soon gained the confidence of the proprietors, and as secretary of the province and later rector of Christ Church became an outstanding figure in the government and society of Pennsylvania, serving the interests of the Penns faithfully without at any time neglecting his own. Peters' personal life in Philadelphia was exemplary. He was not an exciting personality, and his biographer does not endeavor to make him so, preferring to sit with Peters and watch “the history of Pennsylvania through the Secretary's office window,” and observe the mental processes of Peters himself, who was, as Isaac Norris described him, a “wriggler.” Professor Cummings allows his subject to ramble on rather too much for the patience of the average reader, and the book would be better had it been shorter. However, Peters was a key figure in the history of his time, and the specialist will find his correspondence with the proprietors, from which Professor Cummings quotes liberally, both interesting and illuminating.

Klein's biography of Beissel introduces us to the German pietists, without some attention to which no historical tour of colonial Pennsylvania would be complete. As founder and for many years leader of the religious community at Ephrata, Beissel's story illuminates not only the history of that particular undertaking, but of the whole pietistic movement. The story at once fascinates and repels the reader, as it did Dr. Klein. As he says in the bibliographical note, in preparing this biography he spent “many a somnolent afternoon in the society of some of the weakest minds of the eighteenth century.” The reader is spared this ordeal, and profits by the incisive though hard-bitten analysis which Klein presents of Beissel and his restive but faithful followers.

It is a relief to turn from the frustrations of Beissel to the well-ordered but fruitful lives of the gentle Bartrams. And it is a delight

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2 Professor Cummings is a native of Harrisburg, of Scots-Irish ancestry. He recently became emeritus professor of English at the University of Cincinnati after twenty-nine years of service. He now lives at Harrisburg, where he is working on another volume dealing with colonial central Pennsylvania.

3 The Reverend Mr. Klein, Th.D. (General Theological Seminary), Ph.D. (Columbia), is an Episcopal minister and a former member of the faculty of the Philadelphia Divinity School. He is now a chaplain in the United States Navy.
to read about them, as it obviously was to Dr. Earnest to write about them. Beginning as a simple Quaker farmer with a meager educational background, John Bartram raised himself by his own intellectual bootstraps to a position of comradeship with the intelligentsia of Europe and America. His son William inherited and added worthily to the achievements of the father. But they were more than botanists, their present biographer insists. "They were interesting persons in their own right," and "had a breadth of knowledge on many subjects and a fearless originality of ideas that would be remarkable in any age." It is from this broader viewpoint that Professor Earnest writes about them, and his liberal quotations from their letters and journals are sufficient evidence to establish his claim for the Bartrams.

From the Bartrams, who are of first importance in the cultural life of eighteenth-century America, we turn to James Burd, who can scarcely claim to be of more than third magnitude in the colonial constellation. Yet his story is none the less interesting and instructive. Professor Cummings lived with his subject so long and intimately that he could evolve a faithful reproduction of Peters' mind in relation to his times. Miss Nixon has pursued James Burd with equal assiduity through an adventurous and colorful career which is more representative of life in colonial Pennsylvania as a whole than any of the biographies mentioned above.

Burd came to Philadelphia in 1747 to make his fortune in the new world, like thousands of others from the British Isles before and since. He set up as a merchant and married into the Shippen family, but (contrary to our normal expectation of Scotsmen) did not prosper. He moved to the frontier and there found his greatest usefulness, not in mercantile pursuits, but as "roadbuilder for Braddock" and as an officer in the campaigns against the French and the Indians. It is these activities into which his biographer has delved most

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4 Dr. Earnest is associate professor of English at Temple University. He is at work on a biography of S. Weir Mitchell for the Pennsylvania Lives series, and desires the help of readers of the Pennsylvania Magazine in locating Mitchell material.

5 Even to his birthplace in Scotland, for details of his early life. She has published documented articles on Burd in the Braddock campaign, and in those of 1759 and 1760, in the Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine (December, 1934, June, 1935, and March, 1940), and on the Forbes campaign in the Pennsylvania Magazine of History (April, 1935). Miss Nixon teaches history in the Peabody High School, Pittsburgh.
thoroughly. After the return of peace Burd resumed the life of a country gentleman on the banks of the Susquehanna, still without notable economic success. Nor were his efforts for the patriot cause in the Revolution properly appreciated by his contemporaries. In fact, Burd's whole career seems to have been one of striving but always falling a little short of his goal.

William Smith is a much more prominent figure in Pennsylvania's history than James Burd, but, like Burd, Provost Smith, struggle as he might and did, never quite achieved the full fruition of his ambitions. The Provost's acknowledged brilliance and ability were marred by defects of character which caused even his colleagues to withhold complete confidence from him—as when they refused to elect him Bishop of Maryland after the Revolution. William Smith was a contentious person, and his contemporaries tended to paint him in strong colors, whether black or white. Dr. Gegenheimer in his appraisal is fair and judicious, though, in regard to the College of Philadelphia, we should like to hear also the Presbyterian side of the story—as we undoubtedly should have, had the late Thomas C. Pears, Jr., lived to complete his biography of Francis Alison for the Pennsylvania Lives series.

From the colonial America of the eighteenth century we pass to the era of the early republic, through the lives of Alexander James Dallas and Richard Rush. Rush was twenty years younger than Dallas and lived to be twenty years older. Both belonged to that group of social aristocrats who espoused the cause of the people and furnished the necessary political leadership for the rule of Jeffersonian democracy. Both men were lawyers. Neither aspired to elective office, serving their state and nation in appointive positions and at considerable financial sacrifice to themselves. Dallas and Rush are excellent subjects for this series, and their biographers have done them full justice. Walters' Dallas and Powell's Rush, modestly conceived and competently executed, are models of historical biography.

6 The author taught English at the universities of Arizona and Connecticut before going into the Army. This biography is an outgrowth of his doctoral dissertation at the University of Pennsylvania. He has in progress a biography of one of Provost Smith's students, Jacob Duché.

7 See Dr. Pears' article on Francis Alison in Delaware Notes for 1944.

8 Dr. Walters, now technical sergeant in the Historical Division of the Army Air Forces, is a native Pennsylvanian, and first wrote this account of Dallas as a Ph.D. dissertation in
The importance of Dallas, first, as a mastermind in the formation and guidance of the Jeffersonian party in Pennsylvania, and, second, in the financial history of Madison's administration, is generally recognized but imperfectly understood. The author goes into these matters fully, without neglecting the other aspects of his subject's life and times. Dallas was one of a number of Philadelphians of foreign birth who were prominent in the early history and politics of the republic. A native of Jamaica, of Scottish ancestry and English education, Dallas came to Philadelphia in 1783, almost by accident. But he quickly threw his lot with the new nation and achieved recognition as "an outstanding representative of the men who were making the phrase 'a Philadelphia lawyer' synonymous with great legal talents." Identified personally with the social aristocracy of the city, he fitted in well with the conservative political democrats who ran the country during the Jeffersonian period.

Richard Rush was perhaps a less vigorous personality than Dallas, whose career was cut short by death at the comparatively early age of fifty-eight. But Rush lived much longer, and unlike his friend Dallas, he was American born, a son of the famous Doctor Benjamin. Beginning in 1811, Richard Rush was successively Attorney General of Pennsylvania, Controller of the United States Treasury, Attorney General of the United States, Minister to England, Secretary of the Treasury, and John Quincy Adams' running mate in the presidential campaign of 1828. Failure in this, his only bid for elective office, retired him to private life, from which he was recalled from time to time during the next twenty years to render various public services. Rush was not—at least his biographer does not claim him to be—one of the great men, even of his day. But his life, as a friend observed, "must be nearly the history of his country for half a century." And

history at Columbia, 1942. His interest in Dallas was aroused by his reexamination of the career of Gallatin, a new biography of whom he has in preparation. Dr. Walters has also written two articles on David Parish, an associate of Dallas and Gallatin, for the Journal of Economic History (November, 1944) and New York History (April, 1945), one on the beginnings of the Jeffersonian party in Pennsylvania for the Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography (October, 1942), and one on the movement for chartering the second Bank of the United States, to be published in the Journal of Political Economy.

Dr. Powell, a frequent contributor to this magazine, is an Iowan, and taught history at Ames and at the University of Delaware until his recent appointment to the staff of the Free Library of Philadelphia. He has in progress a full-length biography of John Dickinson.
so Dr. Powell has made his book about Rush. Rush observed much and wrote much, and his biographer has combined Rush's comments with his own historical knowledge into a skilful running narrative of our history in the days when the nation was young.

Next in point of time but the first volume to be published in the series is Tinkcom's biography of John White Geary, an excellent choice to start with. Geary was a truly fabulous character in a stirring era of national expansion and conflict, yet he is known only vaguely as having been governor of "bleeding Kansas" for a short while, and of Pennsylvania during the Reconstruction period. He was a product of frontier Pennsylvania, born in Westmoreland County of pioneer Ulster stock. To an impressive physique (he was six feet five inches tall and weighed two hundred and sixty pounds) he added the best educational attainments his community afforded, graduating from Jefferson College, then, after a turn at school teaching, studying civil engineering, law, and finally military history and tactics. After serving as a colonel in the war with Mexico he got himself appointed the first United States postmaster of San Francisco in 1849, and in the following year was elected the first mayor of that booming city. He soon returned to Pennsylvania with a fortune made not in the gold fields but in business, and was called from his farm by President Pierce in July, 1856, to take over in Kansas. Because of lack of support from the national administration he resigned this task upon the accession of Buchanan to the presidency in the following March. Upon the outbreak of the Civil War he organized a regiment of Pennsylvania troops, served in the field throughout the four years, and came out a major general. After the war he was elected governor of Pennsylvania in 1866 and again in 1869, and died a few days after the expiration of his second term in 1873.

Such, in brief, was the busy life of John W. Geary, full of action and, on the whole, of success and satisfaction to its subject. It typifies the versatility of men of his time, who could turn easily from one trade to another with a proficiency and success which was common in his day, if not in ours. The highlights of Geary's career (the Kansas episode in particular) are ably set forth in Mr. Tink-

9 The author, now overseas with the Historical Division of the Army Air Forces, like the subject of his biography is a native of western Pennsylvania. He was teaching at the University of Pennsylvania and studying for his doctor's degree before entering the Army. This biography of Geary grew out of M. A. thesis at Lehigh University.
com’s account, but the interludes of peaceful activity on his Pennsylvania farm are only sketchily indicated, as is his post-war political life.

John Alfred Brashear is a name unfamiliar to historians, unless they chance to hail from Pittsburgh, where “Uncle John” was known and loved by thousands of people in every walk of life. His biographers, also Pittsburghers,¹⁰ are frankly eulogistic in the present work, and seemingly with proper justification. If “Uncle John” ever did or said a mean thing in his eighty years of life, it has apparently escaped the attention of his fellow townsmen.

Like Geary, Brashear was from western Pennsylvania, but he was a humble millwright of little formal education. Astronomy was his hobby, and since he could not afford to buy a good telescope, he proceeded to make one for himself. He developed new methods in the grinding of lenses and prisms, and became world-famous as a maker of scientific instruments, not as a means of accumulating wealth, which he never did, but in the furtherance of astronomical science, to which he devoted the rest of his life. His work was supported by Thaw, Carnegie, and other rich Pittsburghers, and the confidence they, as well as the public in general, placed in him inevitably led to his involvement in various philanthropic movements. If he backed an enterprise, that was sufficient recommendation of its worth. In emergencies “Uncle John,” as capable as he was modest, could always be called upon. Thus he was for a time director of his beloved Allegheny Observatory; later he served as chancellor of the Western University of Pennsylvania.

These nine biographies provide excursions into various areas of the state’s and the nation’s history during the past two hundred years. Despite the present suspension of publication, the series is really just beginning. Volumes on numerous other Pennsylvanians are in progress—Charles Brockden Brown, Joseph Priestley, Mathew Carey, and Philander C. Knox, to mention only a few. There are many other subjects for whom the Press would like to find

¹⁰ Mrs. Gaul, wife of a Pittsburgh organist and composer, confesses to being an enthusiastic but fitful writer of fiction, drama, and poetry. Miss Eiseman is a newspaperwomen who as a small girl adored “Uncle John Brashear,” and has for years been collecting material for this biography of a man “who loved people and the stars and brought those same stars out of the observatory to those people he so loved.”
biographers. Andrew G. Curtin, Prince Gallitzin, Franklin Gowan, Elisha Kent Kane, and many more are on Director Phelps Soule's list of interesting possibilities. In fact anyone who is writing a serious biography of a prominent Pennsylvanian would do well to communicate with the University of Pennsylvania Press, with a view to including it in the present series.

The publishers' requirement that these Lives be short (75,000 to 90,000 and at the most 100,000 words) is a good one. None of the nine volumes published would benefit by being any longer than it is, with the possible exception of the work on Geary. Every volume is readable as well as scholarly, even though documentation is lacking. The rule against footnotes might well be reconsidered in future volumes. These biographies are contributions to knowledge, not mere popularizations or interpretations of material already familiar or easily available. They need not be cluttered with footnotes like a doctoral dissertation, but they do need a few here and there. It is said that a reasonable number of fleas are good for any dog. By the same token, a reasonable number of footnotes in a book will not poison even the casual reader, and they are necessary for serious students of history, who are probably the chief readers of Pennsylvania Lives, after all.

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