the great petroleum and steel industries of western Pennsylvania and Ohio; the beginnings of coke manufacture, at Connellsville, in 1841 and of the bromine industry, at Freeport, in 1845 or 1846; the refinement of petroleum on a small scale, at Pittsburgh, in 1855; and the first electrolytical production of aluminum on a commercial scale, at New Kensington, in 1888.

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Old residents of New Alexandria and of other like towns in western Pennsylvania will recognize many of the features of New Salem, the fictitious locale for this saga of the McDowell family between 1852 and 1910: the flour mill and tannery on Loyalhanna Creek, the general store, the turnpike to Greensburg and Pittsburgh, the sleeping cows that made walking in the village dangerous after dark, and the mines that began to pollute the streams in the latter half of the last century. The more well-to-do residents of New Salem read the _Pittsburgh Gazette_ and the _New York Tribune_; their children learned the A B C's from the _New England Primer_ and then toiled over the Presbyterian catechism. The young people went to Elders Ridge Academy, Blairsville Seminary, and sometimes to the Western Theological Seminary at Pittsburgh. Pleasant interludes to which they looked forward included maple sugaring, quilting bees, funerals, and weddings. At the turn of the century square dances, sleigh rides, and “Teachers’ Institute” provided excitement. Some, of course, moved to near-by Pittsburgh, where they so far forgot their Presbyterian training as to attend plays at the Nixon Theater and take part in objective after-dinner discussions on the authenticity of the Bible and the nature of death.

“The Presbyterian Church in Action” might be a suitable subtitle for this chronicle of struggling descendants of Scotch-Irish pioneers. The story really begins on a bright Sunday morning in the summer of 1870. The wheat, after days of rain, stands ready to be cut; another day of rain and it will be ruined. Tense and subdued, the McDowell family nevertheless prepares to spend the day as good Presbyterians always spent the Sabbath—at church, in religious reading and singing, in the quiet performance of necessary chores. The despair of the son of the house as he realizes that the grain will be lost unless Monday is fair, the indignant wrath of the father when he sees his neighbor reaping, the
steady ruinous rain Sunday night, and the subsequent trial and punishment of the impious farmer—all impress the reader at the very beginning of the novel with the power and influence of the church in the lives of the people. The reader’s sense of justice is aroused again when, many years later in the story, the same church refuses to accept as members two heartbroken little girls, one of whom dies soon afterwards, because they will not swear “never to dance.” That the stern and restraining hand of organized religion was often needed, however, is vividly illustrated by young David McDowell’s unhappy experiences at the rowdy revival meetings held by an itinerant evangelist. The church also sponsored schools and colleges: David’s father’s conscience permitted his son to study law at Elders Ridge Academy, when a better but less religious school would most certainly have been vetoed. The author skillfully maintains a balance between the good that the upright church elders achieved and the evil effects of many of their stern edicts. As the years went on, and the necessity for strict supervision lessened, the church perforce relaxed its hold on the people of New Salem and became more liberal and sympathetic.

Agnes Sligh Turnbull grew up in New Alexandria, in the hills of Westmoreland County, and her portrayals of people and events are drawn from historical facts, family and church records, neighborhood legends and personal reminiscences, and her own experience. Partly because of her background and partly because of the candor with which she writes, her novel succeeds in being interesting and accurate, a delight alike to the social and economic student and to the blase reader.

*Western Pennsylvania Historical Survey*  
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