BRIGADIER GENERAL JOHN FRASER, A.M.
(1823-1878)

A Jefferson College Professor from Scotland,
in the Union Army

HELEN TURNBULL WAITE COLEMAN

We did very little, in the United States, to prepare our sons for the Second World War; they were largely a pacifist generation, growing up between the First War and the Second. A few months of camping, perhaps—or some seasons with the Boy Scouts, or a newspaper route—with possibly a little knowledge of history—constituted for the most part, their training—except for character—for what they had to face: living or fighting in the open, commando tactics—and the stern necessity of offering (as has always been said of Nathan Hale) "to give their lives, before they had lived them."

At Washington and Jefferson College there was one thing more, before the Army Schools sprang up, in Washington, Pennsylvania, as over all the land: the sober portrait of an early Jefferson College professor, flanking the exit from the chapel in "Old Main Hall." Every student for many years, as he went out from the chapel, consciously or unconsciously, must have seen that worn, high-minded, steadfast, mystical, compassionate face, looking like a prophet—looking in fact, for all the world, like Stonewall Jackson—in Union Army blue.

This was John Fraser, born in Cromarty, Scotland, educated at the University in the old granite city, Aberdeen. A lone figure, he sailed away to his first teaching position, at Hamilton Institute in the Bermuda Islands, carrying with him the books that were the coveted Huttonian prize for mathematics. His health being affected there, he accepted an offer to take charge of a private school in New York, which ended disastrously, whether because the promises made to him were not kept or because exception was taken to the fact that he had become accustomed to the use of "Scotch ale" in

Mrs. Coleman, author of Banners in the Wilderness, a history of Washington and Jefferson College, has written this brief appreciation of John Fraser, a fine type of the classically educated Europeans who did so much for education in America in the early days.—Ed.
Bermuda, instead of the inferior water there, we do not know. At all events he renounced the ale but was reduced to such poverty that he was obliged to sell the treasured library that he had brought from Scotland, including the volumes of the Huttonian prize and the Latin and Greek classics with which he had beguiled the time on the long sailing voyage and in Bermuda.

At this period of discouragement, in 1851, he was invited by Mr. Joseph Paull to come to his home at Connellsville in western Pennsylvania to act as tutor for his two sons; the group, eventually including other boys in the neighborhood, grew into a small private school. At Connellsville also he became an intimate friend of the Reverend James Black (Washington College, 1848), who was afterwards professor of languages at Washington College (from 1859 to the union with nearby Jefferson College), and served as vice-president of Washington and Jefferson under Jonathan Edwards. Through him and through the impression he had made on the boys of the neighboring Dunlap's Creek Academy, he was called to the professorship of mathematics at Jefferson College in Canonsburg, Pennsylvania, in 1855; and there he came into his own.

Not only in mathematics but also in other fields he became an inspiration to the more ardent students. He invited the boys in groups to his rooms and fired them with his own enthusiasm for Latin and Greek; he talked with them about Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* and other great books outside the curriculum. He gave a course of lectures on physical geography, which he made vivid to the students as "the earth and man." He raised the money for the first telescope used in a western Pennsylvania institution and superintended the erection of an observatory.

His younger colleague on the faculty, Matthew Brown Riddle, who knew him well and many years after his death wrote a short, affectionate account of his life, tells us: "His classical training was simply superb . . . Beyond any man the writer ever met he possessed what may be called a 'Greek soul'." He says that never, until he met John Fraser, had he learned the beauty of style in the classic authors.

When the Civil War came, Fraser said that this country had offered him opportunities unrestricted by nationality and that he

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2 Matthew Brown Riddle, "In Memoriam, John Fraser," published in *The Presbyterian Banner*, Pittsburgh, June 23, 1897.
owed it some return. He had at that time no ties except to his students and to Jefferson College and, with the second call for troops in the summer of 1862, he enlisted to fight for Canonsburg and freedom, as a private soldier of the United States. By August he was a captain, by early September a lieutenant colonel. Less than a year later he emerged from the battle of Gettysburg the senior officer in his brigade and was promoted to be a brevet brigadier general, in charge of a brigade in Hancock's second army corps. At Spottsylvania he was wounded and in September, 1864, was captured while reconnoitering and taken to Libby prison; later to other southern prisons. 3

At Rogers Hospital in Charleston, South Carolina, the imprisoned northern officers were often under fire of their own guns from the fleet blockading the city, in the harbor. Under these circumstances, our wayfaring Scot, whose vitality had inspired the students and faculty at Jefferson, undertook to divert the minds of his fellow prisoners from thoughts of starvation, demoralization and death. This he did with real success, as they afterwards testified, using every means at his command; the most popular diversion proved to be the plays of Shakespeare, in which his dramatic force combined with his phenomenal memory, so that, night after night, unassisted by man or book, he gave whole scenes, and, adequately for the purpose, whole plays, that carried his hearers to Rome, Verona, Elsinore or Dunsinane. Matthew Riddle, writing in 1897, says that they still talked of it and none forgot.

Although he remained in the army until the close of the Civil War, his name was continued on the list of Jefferson College professors until the union with Washington College in the same year, 1865. After that he became president of the Pennsylvania State College at Bellefonte, later was president of Kansas State University and State Superintendent of Instruction for the public schools of Kansas; and taught near his adopted home, at the Western University of Pennsylvania, now the University of Pittsburgh. Riddle, a son of the Jefferson College president, of a family whose loyalty to Jefferson was well known and well understood, manages to imply subtly that there may have been few in these other places to appreciate so great a teacher. He adds, sincerely, of his friend: "Learned,

yet modest; brave yet tender; generous and enthusiastic. For such a man, thank God." 4