BOOK REVIEWS

Remarks of Stanton Belfour,
President, The Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania,
to members of the press, radio and television media,
at the Pittsburgh Press Club, February 28, 1968, regarding

WILLIAM G. JOHNSTON

Life and Reminiscences from Birth to Manhood,
Pittsburgh, 1901

on the occasion of the re-publication of the book
by the William G. Johnston Company, Pittsburgh
1968

Eyewitness accounts are invaluable. "I was there" for the passing
scene is important to all historical writing. This "self-veracity" is all
the more valuable when the person is someone important, literate,
and understanding.

Such is the role of William G. Johnston who wrote a great deal
about his life at a time when Pittsburgh ceased to be a frontier village
and was growing up.

As the author says, his is a Pittsburgh book. It tells much about
the Pittsburgh of the early nineteenth century. One only wishes there
was a second volume. The autobiography is the story of Johnston's
youth and not his middle or old age. It is more than 300 pages long.
While there are many digressions and some observations of politics
and society beyond his youth, it is still fascinating reading for all who
love the old town.

It is their "reminiscences from birth to manhood" of William G.
Johnston. He tells the story of his Scottish ancestry through several
generations until his grandfather came to Pittsburgh in 1787. Print-
ing was the family concern and the Johnston business flourished with
the growth of Pittsburgh.

The Johnstons were prominent and seemed to know everyone
of importance. Young Johnston had a fascination for politics and
American History. He was born in 1828 in a house built by Major
Ebenezer Denny of brick taken from the demolition of Fort Pitt. He
recalls the flood of 1832 and the centennial of Washington's birth on
22 February of the same year (all this at four years!). There are delightful accounts of the chute at the end of Ferry Street, Stephen Foster's Negro minstrels, famous visitors (Jefferson Davis, Governor Curtin, Abraham Lincoln, Henry Marie Brackenridge, Cassius M. Clay, General Harrison), the vanishing Revolutionary War veterans, Pittsburgh buildings, transportation, dress of gentlemen, school boy days, sports of boyhood, brief experiences at The Western University, and strong Sabbath School and church connections.

Perhaps the most valuable description in the book is the witness of the author to the Great Fire of 1845. This is vivid and important in the annals of Pittsburgh. Also the story of the evolution of the printing business is important: from quills to steel pens; from writing sand to black and red inks; copying and envelopes, commercial note paper and foolscap. He talks about the parades, the literary societies, the Mexican War, lessons in politics, and Whig campaigns. His evaluation of American Presidential candidates is remarkably good before, during, and after his youth. He writes about most of them from Washington to McKinley. Johnston's favorite was Henry Clay. As a Whig and later a Republican, he was regular in national elections but confesses being a "mugwump" on occasion. The story ends with "Farewell to Youth."

The William G. Johnston Company is to be congratulated on re-issuing the autobiography of the man whose name graces this important Pittsburgh industry. This book is the story of Pittsburgh and its people, its taverns, its social life, its politics, its schools. It reads well in spite of what is now considered archaic and stylized writing. We can all thank "William G." for taking the time to say so much about his life in one town. The author had civic and professional responsibilities which all should emulate a century later.


Coincident with the emergence of industrial civilization in America, a new professional appeared, the "mechanical engineer." This individual — originally an entrepreneur, not a mechanic — guided the machine shops that supplied the parts, tools and dies for American industry. Often of upper-class background, he and his professional cohorts were truly men "of parts." They dignified the culture of the