
This book is made up of seventeen lectures given by various persons in a series sponsored by the Pittsburgh Bicentennial Commission and the Pittsburgh History and Landmarks Foundation, honoring the national bicentennial in 1976-1977.

The famous Pittsburghers included cover a wide spectrum of the city’s life: manufacturing, literature, science, music, art, medicine, labor, invention, and education. Those chosen were Benjamin Bakewell, Hugh Henry Brackenridge, Jane Grey Swisshelm, John Brashear, H. J. Heinz, Stephen Collins Foster, Mary Cassatt, Dr. Chevalier Jackson, Philip Murray and John Golden (together), Robinson Jeffers, Rachel Carson, Samuel Pierpont Langley, Charles Martin Hall, Willa Cather, Dr. T. Lyle Hazlett, John Kane, and John Gabbert Bowman.

The biographies, varying from eight to twenty pages, are generally well written and accurate, but often — even for their brief compass — incomplete. Among the best are those on Heinz, Brackenridge, Foster, Langley, and Hazlett.

Some might feel the arrangement is puzzling, the order being neither alphabetical, chronological, categorical, nor that in which the lectures were given. Also puzzling is the choice of subjects for the lectures, omitting, as it does, such towering figures as Andrew Carnegie, John Arbuckle, George Westinghouse, William Thaw, Ethelbert Nevin, Gladys Schmitt, Mary Roberts Rinehart, Russell Smith, Andrew Mellon, Henry O. Tanner, John White Alexander, Henry Clay Frick, and others. Another puzzle is the inclusion of Hall, who apparently never lived in Pittsburgh, nor stayed here long.

However, not to criticize the book for its choices or omissions, it is attractively presented, informative, and interesting. Unfortunately, there are several errors in the table of contents: Brackenridge is given the title of “General,” which he never held (although many of his enemies would have voted him “general nuisance”); Swisshelm’s middle name is misspelled, and worse, she is described as “America’s first newspaperwoman,” which she was not. And Hall is listed as “inventor of aluminum.” No one “invents” an element; what he invented was the commercially successful method of refining that metal.

Pittsburgh

George Swetnam