

Miss Indie's Faith: What Hath it Profited?

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On Founders' Day "The Legend of Giant Guion," a ballad of which she is heroine, amused Dr. Connie.

IN 1930 I drove to Proctorsville, Vermont, to see a patient, Mrs. Allen Fletcher. She lived in a lovely stone house on Chuckle Hill with her two daughters and one granddaughter. Everywhere was evidenced culture, good taste and a full life. It was certain that these were no ordinary folk, but quite the contrary, proud and wealthy descendants of Vermont's most honored settlers. Not far from the road stood a typical New England house and barn where the ancestors of this family had fought the elements, won, and built their home in 1783. The setting in the Green Mountains reminded me of Sweet Briar and the foothills of the Blue Ridge. At the time I had no inkling that I was in a house built by the grandson of Jesse Fletcher and that the old farmhouse nearby was the birthplace of Elijah Fletcher, the sixth child of Jesse and Lucy Keyes Fletcher, and Sweet Briar's own ancestor.

Elijah Fletcher from his early youth determined to obtain the best possible education even though his father was poor and life was narrowed to hard work and a constantly enlarging family. The farm yielded barely enough to meet the family needs. Nevertheless, Elijah's ambition was greater than his poverty, and by dint of his persistence, intelligence and foresight he succeeded in graduating from the University of Vermont in 1810, just one hundred years before the first class graduated from this college.

During his last year in college he decided that he wanted to teach in the South and he received an offer to teach in the Raleigh, North Carolina, Academy and promptly accepted it. After graduation he borrowed twenty dollars and a Morgan mare from his father, and with no other assets he started on the long and uncertain trek. It is unknown why he chose to go so far afield but certain it is that he had yearnings for new experiences to broaden his knowledge. He was prepared to teach French, German, Italian, Greek, history, mathematics, and English – he was not limited by our present-day fever for specialization.

In his letters on his journey he showed many facets of his character. Always he expressed devotion to his family, his sadness at parting and his longing to retain his father's affection and approval. He showed his love of nature, his keen powers of observation of the country, its vegetables, the people, their manners, farms and animals. He thought poorly of upper New York State with its run-down houses, unkempt barns and animals. He described Pennsylvania and its citizens with scorn saying they were so stingy they even faced the back of their houses to the main roads. His letters show he was a keen judge of men, full of Vermont wisdom, shrewdness and independence. He lost no opportunity to advance his plans but he never sacrificed the ultimate objective for mere speed. Upon his arrival in Alexandria he took a position at the Academy there and another young man went on to the Raleigh Academy.

Finally in May, 1811, he reached New Glasgow, Amherst County, Virginia, to become head of the Academy for boys and girls. His letters to his father tell of this little town, of his house and of his pride in planting trees, shrubs and flowers. He stressed the friendly reception he met from the students and their parents, his earnest interest in his work, and his love of teaching.

HE REMARKED especially about the proficiency of the girls. He had been concerned about the education of women even in his own college days. After he arrived in Virginia he constantly advised his father to send his sisters to school, and he provided out of his small earnings the monies necessary to defray their

expenses. He wrote his father, "A girl will be more respected with an education than with wealth. I think female education is too much neglected – they are the ones who have the first education of children and they ought to be qualified to instruct them correctly." Over and over again in his letters he emphasized that educated men and women were needed to guide society.

His influence in New Glasgow extended far beyond the school house. He was interested in every phase of life about him. He studied constantly, especially farming, and compared it with methods and results back in Vermont. He shared his knowledge with his neighbors, and bought a small farm so that he could experiment with his theories. The results were so successful that his friends adopted them.

Among his neighbors was the Crawford family of Tusculum. Mr. Crawford was a Princeton graduate, a lawyer and a farmer. He was one of the most respected and richest men in the county. Elijah was a great favorite of both Mr. and Mrs. Crawford and he was often invited to their home. For him the chief attraction was their daughter, Maria Antoinette. He described her to his father as "a lady distinguished for her sense, her accomplishments, and her education: a lady who dressed in daily silks but who had too much sense to be proud – sincere, candid, intelligent, superior in her management of domestic affairs."

As usual Elijah was astute in his judgement and promptly decided to ask this very desirable lady to become his wife. They were married in April, 1813, only twenty-three months after his arrival in New Glasgow, a penniless teacher from far away Vermont, who had just finished paying off his last debt. This marriage was the beginning of his phenomenal success in the life of Amherst County and Lynchburg. He enlarged his holdings to include what they later named the Sweet Briar plantation. He entered the printing business in Lynchburg and published *The Virginian*, its first newspaper. He prospered and accumulated a goodly fortune.

In those early days he and Maria planted around their home rare trees and shrubs, the boxwood and flowers that we all love today. He himself chose as his last resting place the round top of the present Monument Hill. He directed the planting of trees and shrubs and flowers and he specified the details of the present obelisk. He stated that all his children should meet him there once a year to prune, trim and cultivate the trees and shrubs. We of the college community are in truth his children and once a year we respect his request and repair to his last resting place to pay homage to this wise man and to offer our admiration

and gratitude to Elijah Fletcher through whose belief in women's education this college was called into being.

ELIJAH and Maria gave equal education to their sons and daughters. The sons went to Yale and the girls to Washington to the best schools of the day. In 1844 their father sent Sidney and his two sisters abroad. They travelled in France, Italy, Switzerland, Germany, Denmark, Greece, Egypt and Spain. They were given insight into what to see and to do. Indiana studied the harp in Paris and brought home the one now standing in Sweet Briar parlor. She became a proficient linguist as well as a gifted musician. She laid the foundation to teach her child of the future as her father had planned.

IN 1865 at thirty-seven years of age, Indiana married James Henry Williams, born in Ireland, educated at Trinity College in Connecticut, where he received both his Bachelor and Master of Arts degrees. He then graduated from the General Theological Seminary in New York and spent six years as the Episcopal minister in Dobbs Ferry. I mention these facts that you may know that Indiana, like her father, chose an educated and intelligent spouse.

IN 1867 Daisy was born to this couple, their first and only child. From henceforward Daisy was their chief interest in life. Just as Elijah had taken a long look into the future of his youth, so did Indiana and James Henry Williams plan for their child's life. At Sweet Briar she had few playmates and no available school, so it was that her mother became her tutor with the rich background provided in her own youth. Her parents were her constant companions together with the little colored girl, Signora. They realized that such a life was narrow and dwarfing for their child and soon made plans for expanding her experiences and education in New York. For her formal education they sent her to the best schools available. To broaden her culture they took her to museums, opera, theater, churches and even Barnum's Circus. They took her to shop in Tiffany's that she might see the best styles and learn relative values and costs of ordinary commodities. Her father took her to Brentano's to browse among good books. These wise parents were already preparing their little girl to be a worthy leader in their community and to be equal to the demands of her generation. Indiana was imbued with the faith and training she received from her own father, and as a result her child was mature beyond her years and profited well from her experiences in New York. In 1882 she kept a diary; it shows her to be observant, witty, kindly, critical, and thoughtful. She liked New York but loved Sweet Briar and all its beauty and associations. When it was time for the trip to New York

each winter, she was already looking forward to the springtime and the hour of her return.

Daisy's portrait hangs in the West Parlor of Sweet Briar House. This picture reveals the same little girl that you will come to know if you read her diary and letters. On a cursory glance she looks serious, but pray, who does not when sitting before the professional eye of a portrait painter! If you study that little face you will come to see the smile, the humor under the sober mask put on for the painter! When this child died in 1884 at sixteen years of age, her parents were so bereft that they withdrew from life about them. We know little of their activities in the ensuing years, but we do know from their separate wills that they must have spent many hours together trying to formulate a way in which they could consummate their cherished plan for Daisy's life and insure a perpetual memorial to her.

Indiana's will is a masterpiece of brevity and wisdom. It states in part... "I direct the said Trustees ...to procure the incorporation in the State of Virginia of a Corporation to be called the Sweet Briar Institute... The said Corporation...shall establish and maintain...upon the said plantation a school or seminary..." "It shall be the general scope of the school to impart to its students such education in sound learning and such physical, moral and religious training as shall in the judgement of the directors, best fit them to be useful members of society... This bequest is the fulfillment of my own desire... and of my late husband... for the establishment of a perpetual memorial of our deceased daughter, Daisy Williams."

THIS will expressed beautifully, Mr. and Mrs. Williams' ideal for Daisy's life and their plans to educate her to build a better world. Since Daisy was denied this opportunity, her parents were determined that other girls be prepared to carry Daisy's work in perpetual memory of her.

Elijah Fletcher and his daughter Indians laid the foundations of Sweet Briar College, but their ideals were crystalized and implemented by the executors of Mrs. Williams' will, her appointed trustees of the school and thereafter by their chosen representative, President Mary K. Benedict, and her faculty.

Mary Benedict arrived at Sweet Briar in June, 1906. As the train pulled away she looked around to find the college of which she was to be President. There was not a building in sight but she was quite reassured when her eyes rested on a signboard out in the field on which was painted "Sweet Briar." She then saw a

horse-drawn buggy standing nearby and a man approaching her inquiring if she was Miss Benedict. He said he had been sent to drive her up the hill. They slowly wound their way through the oak grove and finally she saw the rolling hills and distant mountains. The beauty of the landscape lifted her spirits. Then she saw the four stark, new, red buildings and she knew this was a new venture – how new she was soon to learn! She found that there were but two engaged as members of the faculty and one student, Lillian Lloyd, registered for admission; there were no plans formulated for any academic life, no catalogue, no equipment; the academic building was not completed; the utilities were not in operation. Problems raced through her brilliant, practical mind demanding an immediate solution. The college was scheduled to open in less than three months. She first decided that she could run a school without almost everything, but not without students. Students there must be! One was not sufficient. She then decided that the college must be publicized promptly to secure a student body. When the Board of Directors met that day she presented her dilemma to them with the request for \$5,000 to launch a campaign. This was granted and by September 27th, 1906, there were registered 36 boarders and 15 day students from Amherst County.

With the same dispatch she had gathered together a faculty of ten men and women, all strangers to her and to each other and to this new institution. She had no actual measure of what practical assistance any of them could give her in the administration and she had no time in which to experiment. She knew that she must publish a catalogue that would outline a master plan for the new school. She had already obtained the cooperation of the Board to establish a curriculum for graduation equivalent to that of the best liberal arts colleges.

As she had studied the applications of the 51 prospective students, she knew that there were only a few who could matriculate as college freshmen. She concluded that special courses must be provided for the rest in accordance with the special preparation each would present. She considered these problems her responsibility and she studied the application of every student to learn about her home, her interests, capabilities, experience and needs. The night before the session opened she sat up all night completing the schedules and other details involved in the day ahead. She finished her task as the sun rose, went for a walk to get the kinks out of her muscles and to get a fresh start for the new day.

How simply Mary Benedict could have answered all the problems that confronted her, both financial and academic, had she decided to build here a

stylish boarding school where girls could be prepared to cook, to sew, to paint, to become musicians, linguists – to be accomplished young ladies and desirable wives. This she would not do because she believed that Indiana had higher ideals for the education of women. She could have simplified the beginning of her ideal four-year college course had she been willing to request the Trustees to establish a copy of the organization at Vassar College. She knew every detail of its academic and student life and all of their ramifications. But Mary Benedict was not interested in imitating any college in existence. She felt this new college offered a fresh opportunity to develop the character of every individual who was concerned in its building. She selected the teachers with infinite care from the faculties of well-established colleges so that this new college would become of interest to the older ones, and she succeeded in making it a center of curiosity.

IN those early days life was uncertain and there were no precedents to guide either faculty or students in their academic or extra-curricular activities. Miss Benedict encouraged the faculty and student body to work out their own salvation, giving them suggestions, with freedom of action.

They did not realize the quiet guidance that was forming this college into an amazing spiritual and educational mold, even in the first few months. The place was pervaded by an atmosphere of zeal, earnestness, ownership and a sense of responsibility in the building of this young college. This same spirit was transfused into the Board of Directors. Mr. Manson and Mr. Heald of Lynchburg couldn't stay away. When Mr. Manson's happy laughter did not ring out in the refectory and around the campus, it was a bleak day indeed. He knew every person on the campus by name. He was universally beloved because of his own great capacity for friendship. When we needed money he signed personal loans to supply it. Those on the edge of the academic group who made its life possible, caught the spirit of enthusiasm. Mr. Dew was always alert and helpful with his quiet wit and wisdom. Our carpenter, Mr. Watts, was tireless in his good works. He had a language all his own; he built us "platforms" for the May Queen's throne and desks in the "epidemic" building. Mr. Martindale, Miss Dix, Miss Carroll, Miss Mattie, old Bias, Signora – each worked tirelessly to make our lives more effective.

So it was in those early days that a conglomerate group of young girls, many with not even a full high school education, a handful of college students, a faculty from many colleges with diverse interests, a lay Board of Trustees, executives, workers – were all impelled to build this college with one common ideal through

the influence of Mary Benedict and her determination to keep faith with Miss Indie and Elijah Fletcher.

In the fall of 1909 the faculty knew that the college had succeeded in taking its place among colleges of first rank. Several students had been accepted as transfers to Vassar. The class of 1910 had proven its academic worth. The time had come to call our success to the attention of the academic world. The faculty announced that we would celebrate our first Founders' Day in October, 1909. On this occasion our first Senior class of 1910, in cap and gown, lead our first academic procession, followed by the Faculty, Mr. Manson, and Mr. Craighead, President of Tulane University, into Room 1, then our chapel. This was a great day in our history! Miss Benedict announced that the University of Vermont had given her permission for Sweet Briar to use as her diploma a replica of the diploma that they had awarded to Elijah Fletcher in 1810. Mr. Manson then told the story I have given you of the Fletcher family. I wish you all could have sat there in that simple room and seen the face of Mr. Manson. He was so inspired by the story of this college which he loved so well that we all sat spellbound. Elijah, Miss Indie, Daisy, old Logan, little Signora – all of them stood there beside him, united again in their life of service to Miss Indie and their beloved Sweet Briar of yesteryear.

Now, fifty years later, we ask what hath it profited that Elijah Fletcher in 1810 believed in the education of women?

What hath it profited that he was willing to live for 15 days on his long journey from Vermont to Alexandria on only bread and cheese? He wrote his father, "From this trial I have learned that we can accomplish almost anything if we have courage and persistence."

I assure you that in the first ten years Miss Benedict often felt akin to Elijah, and like him she learned that she could succeed through courage and persistence to maintain the standards of this college to meet the demands of Miss Indie's will. She saw a succession of girls leave this college better fitted to meet the demands of their lives and to contribute more richly to the life of their community.

What hath it profited that Indiana Fletcher had the philosophy of her father and believed in the education of women? What hath it profited that Indiana Fletcher translated her faith into a living, perpetual memorial for the education of young women?

The answer is simple – Sweet Briar College! The visible and outward evidence is the buildings, the equipment, the Faculty, students, alumnae, the Board of Overseers. But more important than all these physical endowments is the spiritual foundation underlying our creation by Indians Fletcher and James Henry Williams. They willed that their fortune be used to prepare women to make a better world.

Mary Benedict and each of her successors devoted their lives to establishing and maintaining a college that has fulfilled the will of the founders. Our faculty, students, alumnae and Board of Overseers have all dedicated their loyalties to the college ideals.

What does the future hold? We have a future which lures us on with confidence because we believe in our heritage; we believe in the firm foundation of today and we know that our future stems from the glory of this present. Out of our present student body our future alumnae will rise, from our present faculty an even greater one will develop, to our present Board will be added greater talents. The present college standard will never fail and it will attract more and better students. In our future we shall continue to have the courage and persistence of Elijah and Miss Indie.