

HON. JOHN BOWDISH.

BY F. P. MOULTON.

The traits and genius of men may be more correctly determined when estimated by the circumstances under which they commence the world. The subject of this memoir, John Bowdish, without the aid of friends or early educational advantages, entered life's arena a plain country boy, who in manhood became a successful merchant, a careful, intelligent thinker, and an instructive, tasteful writer. His triumphs in life furnish evidence of the self-made man. His parents were Quakers, of English descent, emigrating from Dutchess County, N. Y., at an early period, securing an humble home in Charleston, where he was born February 18th, 1808. As he grew up he toiled in field and forest with hoe and axe, aiding in clearing the wilds for culture. This when education was thought of little importance; toil the rule, learning the exception. At the age of fifteen, his parents consenting, he left the paternal home for the city of Albany, May 10th, 1824, with fifty cents available capital, bidding adieu to his friends, to become the artificer of his future. On reaching the city, he stopped with a friend of his father, procuring a situation as clerk in a store at a salary of fifty dollars per annum, at the close of his engagement accepting a clerkship in the country. On reaching his majority, he formed a copartnership with Isaac S. Frost, opening a small store June 2nd, 1829, at his present place of business, Rural Grove. Subsequently Job B. Hoag took the place of Mr. Frost, and Charles Hubbs of Mr. Hoag. From 1844 Mr. Bowdish was the sole proprietor until 1870, when his son-in-law, George J. Gove, an estimable and correct business man, was admitted a copartner, and still continues as such. The initial store, under the management of Mr. Bowdish, long since became an extensive establishment, holding commendable rank with the best commercial houses in the country; its success is due to his industry, economy, skill and careful agency.

In 1853 he became interested in banking, and one of the original stockholders of the Spraker Bank, at Canajoharie; also, later, of the Mohawk River Bank, at Fonda; he has been a director of both from their origin, and vice-president of the latter from its commencement. In early life he interested himself in public affairs, when his townsmen conferred on him official positions of honor and trust. In 1843, by the voice of the people, he was elected to a seat in the Legislature of the State, and by their suffrage higher honors were bestowed, electing him a member of the State Convention in 1846, to revise the Constitution, where he introduced a proposition for securing a constitutional system of free schools. The question was referred to the Committee on Education, of which he was a member. When under consideration, the Hon. S. S. Randall, in his History of Common Schools, says: "Mr. Bowdish made a powerful and eloquent appeal to the convention in behalf of free schools, in which he was sustained by Mr. Nichols, of N. Y., and others." The following brief extract from his speech, published in the debates of the convention, furnishes only a faint outline of his remarks. He said: "The welfare of a free government depends on the virtue and intelligence of its subjects, the character and habits of its members; if true we should make no distinction, the banner of education should be proudly unfurled 'like the wild winds free,' allowing all alike to enjoy its advantages. The child of the woodland cottage and princely mansion should, if possible, be educated together, that all may have an equal opportunity of rising to eminence and fame. It is a cardinal principle of republicanism, that there is no royal road to distinction; it is held to be accessible to all. None are born to command or to obey. In the order of nature, God has made no distinction; he has not provided for the poor a coarser earth, a thinner air or a paler sky. The sun pours down its golden flood of light as cheerily on the poor man's home as on the rich man's palace. The cottager's children have as keen a sense of luxuriant nature as the pale sons of the wealthy. Neither has He stamped the imprint of a baser birth on the poor man's child than that of the rich, by which it may know with a certainty that its lot is to crawl, not climb. Mind is immortal, it is imperial, it bears no mark of high or low, of rich or poor; it needs no bounds of time or place, of rank or circumstances; it only needs liberty and learning to glide along in its course with the freedom of the rivulet that forms the mighty ocean. If properly cultivated, it will march on undisturbed until it reaches the summit of intellectual glory and usefulness." At the close of his remarks a vote was taken adopting the proposition, which was subsequently defeated, awaiting a more patriotic body to perfect the system by him proposed, which in 1851 was enacted by the Legislature, and is now a law of the State. In every official position on him conferred, Mr. Bowdish has acquitted



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himself with credit and honor, caring so well for the interest of the people as to deserve and secure their approval without distinction of party. He was appointed postmaster at Root in 1832, and has held the office till the present; on his petition, in 1872, the name was changed to Rural Grove.

In the pursuits of life he has been ever attentive to business; still finding leisure to write much for the press, furnishing evidence of what may be accomplished by application of moments alien from business, and assiduous study by the light of the lamp, without the aid of schools. His contributions in prose and verse have appeared not only in local papers, but some of the best religious, literary and political journals in the State. He delivered an agricultural poem in 1861, and an address in 1873, before the Agricultural Society at Fonda. On invitation he also wrote and read a historic centennial poem, at a celebration on the 4th of July, 1876, at Canajoharie. In business and social life he is kind and obliging, benevolent and generous, ever sympathizing with the poor and unfortunate, and liberal in the support of religious institutions.

His entire life has been one of probity and integrity, in all his dealings from its morning to the night-fall of active business, during half

a century along the busy walks of civil commerce. From the cares and pleasures of business, life's ambition and aims are tending to the solitude of nature's retreat; Mr. Bowdish contemplates soon to retire from the toils and cares of trade, when his contemplative mind will be free to enjoy the beauties and lessons of nature, as illustrated in the following extract from one of his poems, entitled "The Empire of God:"

—The busy world when free from toil, the interlude—
It offers time to contemplate Infinitude;
As seen in classic nature, wrought in grand profile,
The autograph of God, whose thousand charms beguile.
Amid its pleasing splendor, all may sacred muse,
On Him who perfect pencils nature's gorgeous hues.
When Flora's charming beauties spread in grand display,
Rhetoric, silent speak in nature's mystic way;
And when o'er man its magic power assumes control,
It purifies and elevates th' immortal soul.
Thus on the Alps of Alps, in meditative thought,
The mind may trace the mighty arm, whose pow'r hath wrought
The world's grand temple, perfect made of parts allied,
In pleasing grandeur—charmingly diversified;
Earth's endless beauties blending, widely scattered round,
Where seen, the vast, sublime, reflecting Great Profound;
Who rules the spheres where human foot hath never trod,
The world's grand Benefactor, great Creator—God,
Who reigns o'er worlds with sway beyond edict of chance,
Eternal fixed by law of equiponderance.
No pow'r unlike the mighty arm that silent hurled,
Could form creation's atoms or produce a world;
Whose changeless laws, affixed in grandeur, spread abroad
O'er nature's empire, wond'rous work of nature's God.
That Mighty Being—self existing—self sustained,
The world's Incomprehensible, Great, Unexplained.

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The thoughts expressed in the entire poem, furnish evidence of its author's marked admiration for the works of nature, and insuperable faith in Deity, whose agency is seen delineated in the things of earth, the starry heavens, and mystic science of superhuman rule.

In the home circle, as a husband and a father, Mr. Bowdish is ever kind and affectionate, loving and caring for his family with untiring devotion. His estimable wife, daughter of the late Albert Vanderveer, and his three intelligent daughters, love and respect him for his constant efforts to make them happy, and their lives an Eden of pleasure. His home is a delightful one, surrounded with the beauties of nature and art; while his business place has been life-long the attractive centre of the toil that has assured for him a worldly competence. Still, earthly wealth and worldly honors have failed to obliterate from memory his humble beginnings and the incidents of log-cabin life, where he was taught habits that formed the basis of his success, and which his graphic pen has illustrated both in prose and poetry.