

HISTORY, BIOGRAPHY, AND TOPOGRAPHY.

Westchester County, New York, during the American Revolution By HENRY B. DAWSON, Corresponding Member of the Massachusetts Historical Society. Morristania, New York. 1886.

The city of New York during the incipency of the war of the Revolution occupied a peculiar position, and its action appears, at this distance of time, the more interesting because of its midway position between the East and the South, Massachusetts and Virginia, and also the uncertainty that seemed at first to attend the question as to what would be its action respecting the dispute of the Colonies with the British Government; and the county of Westchester was simply part and parcel with the city in all these things. There was no lack of the spirit of opposition, nor of headlong violence in that opposition; and yet it is evident that at first there was no wish on the part of the men of character and substance to push things to extremities. There was much real loyalty to the crown, and the

presence of a considerable number of royal officers gave a kind of loyalist flavor to society, and men of social standing and property were not in haste to risk these in a conflict with the Government.

But these were numerically not a very considerable proportion of the whole population, and, among the more numerous and less conservative class, leaders were not wanting who were ready to precipitate a collision with the Government. It is very well known that the men with whose names we are most familiar as leaders, in the actions by which New York became at length fully committed to the revolutionary movement, were not at first the leaders in that movement, and that the provincial assembly which placed the colony in the attitude of rebellion was elected for just the opposite purpose. But the whirlwind of events was too powerful for them to resist.

Mr. Dawson's method of writing history, as is seen here and elsewhere, is to set down the facts as he finds them in original and authentic documents, without "cooking" them to suit any body's palate, either by suppressing a part of the truth or by mingling with them foreign ingredients. By this process it happens that occasionally some popular idol is toppled from his pedestal, and the painted masks are torn from long-admired faces. The deftness with which this work of demolition is done seems to indicate that the writer enjoys his work, and, like other iconoclasts, he is sometimes not less passionate than severely just. That our popular histories, even the best of them, are partial in their statements, and often garbled and purposely one-sided, cannot be disputed, but it is quite possible in attempting to correct these errors to pass over to the opposite extreme. Of our author's use of his facts his readers will form their own judgment; of the correctness of the facts themselves the proof is given by references to original authorities of which even generally well-informed persons have very little knowledge.

The Westchester county (N. Y.) of the revolutionary period was, as to its inhabitants, two nations. Along the Hudson were the descendants of the original Dutch colonists, constituting, except the chief proprietors, a rude and extremely illiterate peasantry, among whom were mingled a later arrived infusion of English and Scotch.

In the eastern towns the Connecticut element prevailed, for these towns, as far down as Eastchester, were largely settled from the New Haven colony, of which they were, for awhile, claimed to be integral parts. These were inclined to sympathize with their eastern kinfolks in their opposition to the British Government, while their more quiet and phlegmatic Dutch neighbors would have preferred less violent methods. But the times were revolutionary, and very soon any possible middle ground became untenable. It is ascertained by satisfactory proofs that till after the Declaration of Independence was made at least three fourths of the people of the river towns were opposed to any violent opposition to the royal colonial government; but the wild blunder of the British at Concord and Lexington so inflamed the revolutionary spirit that moderate counsels became impossible, and even many who had hitherto been

loyalists were swept into its current. The picture of these stirring events, with their entails of sacrifice and sufferings, is given in a good degree of fullness, and with minute exactness, in Mr. Dawson's pages.

The history here given redeems the promise of the title only so far as the beginnings and the inauguration of the revolutionary struggle are concerned, for it ends with the battle of White Plains, in October, 1776. It is well, however, that in such a monograph fullness in respect to the subjects discussed should be preferred to mere comprehensiveness of observations. Such works, while they have a special local interest, are valuable contributions to the general history of the country, and they are beyond all account valuable to the real student of history, who looks beneath the surface of things to discover their secret causes and the philosophy of their action. All such, therefore, owe to Mr. Dawson a hearty vote of thanks.