

ART. VI.—*The Nelsons of Penrith.* By G. WATSON.

*Read at Bowness-on-Windermere, 18th September, 1900.*

PENRITH may claim to be the original home of the Nelsons of the north. From the commencement of the Penrith Parish Registers in 1556 to the middle of the 18th century, the entries in the name of Nelson far exceeded those of any other name. The four surnames of greatest numerical importance were Nelson, Stephenson (with its variants Steinson and Stevenson), Robinson, and Harrison. The entries in the registers from the commencement in 1556 to 1700 are:—Nelson, 720; Stephenson, 440; Robinson, 326; and Harrison, 304. After 1750, however, while the three last names became more numerous that of Nelson decreased, until in the early part of the present century it had almost disappeared from the Penrith registers. Previous to this century, trades or occupations were not mentioned in the registers except to distinguish between men having the same baptismal and surname; hence it is that when Nelsons were most numerous their occupations were generally disclosed, and we find them employed in all departments of handicraft and labour. Then as time went on, and the Nelson entries in the registers decreased, the due proportion of marriages, baptisms, and burials was still maintained, showing that decrease of numbers was not due to increased mortality, but to dispersion to wider fields of enterprise than were to be found in Penrith. It is also noticeable that as the Nelsons increased in numbers a larger proportion of them occupied more responsible social positions.

A typical case of a Penrith Nelson's successful career in another part of England is recorded in the following extract from the *Shrewsbury Chronicle*:—

## THE LIONS AT THE LION HOTEL.

(May 31st, 1895.)

The inscription on a monument, formerly in St. Mary's Church, recorded that John Nelson, of this town, architect and sculptor, died 17th April, 1812, aged 86. He was a native of Penrith, but lived fifty years in this parish. The two lions were his work, and he is mentioned in the *Gentleman's Magazine* as a statuary who will be long remembered in this and the neighbouring counties where specimens of his ingenuity may be seen in many of the churches and in the mansions of nobility. The last efforts of his art are the statue of Sir Rowland Hill on the top of the column in Hawkstone Park, and the two sphinxes on the west entrance to Hawkstone House. The Nag's Head Inn, on the Castle Gates, used to have a sign which was carved by Nelson.

This Nelson, guided by the data given, is readily identified in the Penrith registers in the entry:—

1726 April 9 John son of Richard and Ann Nelson, baptised.

Another Penrith "man of mark" notable for his enterprise and for the widespread results of his career, and that of his son and grandson, was a Nelson whose baptism stands in the parish registers thus:—

1678 March 7 Thomas son of Hugh Nelson and Sarah his wife baptised.

The marriage of Hugh and Sarah stands thus in the registers:—

1674 Feb 5 Hugh Nelson and Sarah Jackson both of Penrith married.

The bride was the youngest child of Mr. Thomas Jackson, styled "schoolmaster" in the registers. He would, of course, be master of the Grammar School—for at that time there could be none other.

Thomas, the son of Hugh and Sarah, after making some voyages of mercantile enterprise to Virginia—then the "El Dorado" of Englishmen—finally settled there. Mr. Thomas Nelson Page, of Washington, U.S., the author of

“In Ole Virginia,” “The Old South,” and other works connected with the early history of the colony of Virginia, is a descendant on his mother’s side from the notable Penrith colonist, and from his books and correspondence I have been enabled to collect these notes on the career of Thomas Nelson and his immediate descendants. In “Old South,” Mr. Nelson Page says:—

The founder of Yorktown was Thomas Nelson, a young settler from Penrith on the border of Scotland, who was for that reason called “Scotch Tom.” His father was a man of substance and position in Cumberland, and was warden of the church in Penrith. The warden’s son, Thomas, looking to the New World to enlarge his fortune, after making one or two trips across, finally settled at the mouth of York River. Here he married Margaret Reid and soon became one of the wealthiest men in the colony. His dwelling known as the Nelson House still stands with its lofty chimneys and solid walls—towering among the surrounding buildings—an enduring pre-eminence which probably gratified the pride which tradition says moved him to have the corner stone passed through the hands of his infant heir. The massive door and small windows with the solid shutters look as if the house had been constructed more with a view to defence than to architectural grace.

How in time to come this was realised to the full will be seen hereafter. Reading this graphic description of “Scotch Tom’s”—or, let us say, “Penrith Tom’s”—mansion, one naturally wonders which of the 16th and 17th century manorial halls of Cumberland and Westmorland was the builder’s model. One also wonders when this enterprising merchant from Penrith made his trips to Virginia before settling there, what commodities he took with him on his six weeks’ voyage across the Atlantic. The most ready surmise is that they were principally of Penrith’s then staple trade—the products of the tanner and the currier, and the handicraft of the numerous glovers, shoemakers, belters, sadlers, &c., these being the most likely goods to be wanted in the far south, and, it may be added, the productions of the numerous Nelsons of Penrith, who were extensively engaged in these

industries ; and, no doubt, on his return voyage he would bring England an ever-welcome supply of Virginia's staple produce—tobacco. That Thomas Nelson should have been thought a Scotchman is likely enough, his Cumbrian dialect being sufficiently uncouth to the southern ear to be deemed Scotch.

To return to Mr. Thomas Nelson Page's interesting reminiscences of his maternal ancestor's house at Yorktown, he goes on to say :—

Here in this home of the Nelsons have been held receptions at which have gathered Grymeses, Digges, Custises, Carys, Blands, Lees, Carters, Pages, and others of the gay gentry of the old dominion.

The Blands here mentioned were the descendants of Roger Bland, of Orton, in Westmorland, of the time of Henry VIII., whose son Adam, with what might be thought an unpromising trade in his hands (that of a skinner), went to London and founded a wide-world posterity. A pedigree of the descendants of Roger Bland was published by the Harleian Society in 1895, from which I compiled a pedigree in narrative form suitable for the columns of the *Penrith Observer*, in which it appeared. Adam Bland, the London skinner, was Serjeant Pelletier to Queen Elizabeth (1563). The ninth person in the third descent was Theodorick Bland, a merchant at St. Lucar in Spain, and afterwards in Virginia, where he lived at Westover, on James River ; he died 1671, and was buried in Westover Church, which he had built. In the fourth descent is Giles Bland, son of Bertlet Bland, on James River, Virginia, who suffered death for his share in Bacon's rebellion in 1677, aged 29 years. The Harleian pedigree, which goes to the seventh descent, extending to 1827, includes numerous Blands, who were among the leading gentry of Virginia.

Thomas Nelson, the Penrith colonist, died in 1745 ; his tomb still remains, but has suffered much from war and

weather. A description of it, kindly sent to me by Mr. John Radcliffe, of Furlane Saddleworth, is from a MS. book belonging to the late Joseph R. Nelson, copied by Dr. Russell in the graveyard of Yorktown, Virginia, U.S. It stands thus:—"Generosi filius Hugonis et Sariae Nelson de Penrith in Comitatu Cumbriae, natus 20<sup>mo</sup> die Feb. A.D. 1677. He died in 1745. His tombstone is headed by his arms, bearing a bar and three lilies." Mr. Thomas Nelson Page describes the arms as "fleur-de-lis." In this there is no material conflict. The fleur-de-lis is defined in Boutell and Aveling's *Heraldry* as a "conventional lily," and a lily in heraldry is often depicted conventionally with a general resemblance to a fleur-de-lis, and by persons with only an elementary acquaintance with heraldry the two are often confounded with each other.

The parents of Thomas Nelson, whose memory was so piously commemorated on their son's tombstone in Virginia, had predeceased him—his mother by 12 and his father by 11 years—they being buried, the mother on September 30th, 1733, and the father the same month and day of the month of the year following, she being 80 and he 83 years of age.

Near the grave of Thomas Nelson is that of his son William, marked by a tombstone, on which is an epitaph in the wordy style peculiar to the period. It commemorates:—

The Hon. William Nelson Esq., late president of His Majestie's Council in this Dominion, in whom the love of God so restrained . . . and invigorated the mental power in general as not only to defend him from the vices and follies of his age and country but also to render it a matter of difficult decision in what part of laudable conduct he most excelled, whether in the tender and endearing accomplishments of domestic life, or in the more arduous duties of a wider circuit, whether as a neighbour, a gentleman, or a magistrate, whether in the graces of hospitality or piety . . . . . (remainder illegible).

He died 17th Nov An Dom 1772 aged 61 years.

The inscription on Thomas Nelson's tomb (as transcribed by Dr. Russell) "Generosi filius" is a vague term understood to mean gentleman born, and involves a claim to belong to an armorial family and the right to bear arms. That Thomas Nelson came of a citizen family engaged in trade in Penrith for five generations does not necessarily disprove such a claim, for in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries it was no uncommon thing for men of an armorial family to be so impoverished as to be under the necessity of engaging in trade. The extreme brevity of the Penrith registers and the very numerous Nelson entries makes it impossible to trace in them alone any particular family.

In the case of the Penrith colonist in Virginia, however, his ancestors for five generations are made clearly traceable by a monument formerly in Penrith Churchyard. This monument, with its genealogical inscription, is described by Bishop Nicolson in his visitation to Penrith Church in 1704, sixteen years before the original fabric and many of its ancient monuments (including the one so carefully described by the Bishop) were ruthlessly demolished, or, if brasses, stolen for sale as old metal during the rebuilding of the body of the church under the direction of the then Vicar, Dr. Todd, who, it might have been expected, would have taken special care to preserve them. It is however most fortunate that the painstaking Bishop Nicolson placed so many of the old monuments on record in his account of his visitation to Penrith Church in 1704.\* The Bishop thus describes the Nelson monument :--

Over against St. Andrew's Quire-Door on a high built Tombstone :  
 Mors Sanctorum Domini in ejus conspectu est pretiosa,  
 Here lyes the body of *Hugh Nelson of Penrith*,  
 Grocer, who dyed upon the 13th of Nov<sup>r</sup>. 1674.  
 Aged 83 years. Here lyeth also *Marian* his beloved wife, who died

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\* *Miscellany Accounts of the Diocese of Carlisle*, by Bishop Nicolson, published by this Society 1877, pp. 153, 154.

upon the 17th of Nov<sup>r</sup>.  
 1657, aged 58 years. They had first Seven  
 Sons, and after four Daughters. Here lyeth also the body of  
*William Nelson*, third Son  
 who died upon the 28th of October 1670  
 aged 49 years: And also *Bridget* his wife  
 who died upon the 18th of Dec<sup>r</sup>. 1670,  
 aged 50 years. They had onely two Sons. Here  
 lyeth also the body of *Hugh Nelson*, their Fourth Son, who dyed  
 upon the 30th of  
 Dec<sup>r</sup> 1648 aged 21 years.

The data here given, in conjunction with the Parish Registers, in which can be found all the entries of Hugh's descendants, make it clear that the subject of the monument was the Virginia colonist's great-grandfather. The ancient grocer's birth goes back to 1591, but although the registers are so complete and continuous that they record the baptism of two, three, or four Nelsons every year from 1556 for 150 years, they never record the name of a Hugh Nelson until 1619, when the ancient grocer of the monument himself was married; and no Hugh Nelson was ever baptised until 1627, when Hugh, son of Hugh of the monument, was brought to the font. It is therefore certain that the great-grandfather of the Virginia colonist was not a native of Penrith. Now if Hugh Nelson, grocer, was entitled to bear three fleurs-de-lis as his arms, it is probable he came from York, such being the heraldic insignia of the Nelsons of York, which may possibly have been derived from the Nelson who was one of the glass painters of York Minster in the 15th century, as stated in Dean Purey Cust's great work on the Heraldry of York Minster. In a book of *Yorkshire Visitation Pedigrees*, I find Christopher Nelson of Grimston having for his arms "a chevron between three fleurs-de-lis," and a work on Crests giving 4000 illustrations, has "a cubit arm, in the hand a fleur-de-lis," as a crest for Nelson of York.

We must now return to the Nelsons of Virginia and be made acquainted with the story of William Nelson the

President's son, Thomas, who when a lad of fourteen, was sent to England to be educated, first at Eton, where he and another young Virginian Nelson had for a school-fellow Charles James Fox. Young Thomas afterwards went to Cambridge, where he graduated with honours.

After leaving Cambridge at the close of the year 1760, he sailed for Virginia, and it is either a curious coincidence or the result of an arrangement, that in the month of October of that year, Mr. Joseph Tickell, curate at Penrith Church, disappeared, taking with him the day-book of baptisms and burials, thereby creating the only gap to be found in the Penrith Registers. The occurrence is thus noted in the register book:—"There are no entries of baptisms or burials from January 17th to October 5th 1760, occasioned by Mr. Joseph Tickell leaving the curacy and going into Virginia." Had Thomas Nelson visited the home of his ancestors, made the acquaintance of Mr. Joseph Tickell and tempted him away to Virginia? This is not unlikely, for clergymen were then in request in the colony. It appears from Mr. Nelson Page that the Nelsons, and their kinsmen the Pages, were Episcopalians, and the pillars of the establishment in the colony; and that when a bishop was wanted there, Mr. John Page, a great churchman, was urged to take orders and be the bishop, but this he positively declined, and on being further pressed, he reiterated his refusal in very forcible terms; I may not record his words on the occasion. Suffice it to say, they were superabundantly emphatic and not at all polite, so much so, that his friends at once and for ever dropped the subject. Perhaps the runaway curate from Penrith might fill the gap; who knows?

Young Thomas Nelson reached his Virginia home early in 1761, and a year later married Lucy, daughter of Col. Philip Grymes of Brandon in Middlesex.

In later years, when the great struggle for American independence came, he, as General Thomas Nelson, not only co-operated with George Washington and other

military leaders, but spent his immense fortune in the cause ; and when the great end was gained and independence secured for the state, he was left in comparative poverty.

“Penrith Tom’s” House at Yorktown, known as Nelson House, became famous in history at the close of the war of independence. Cornwallis the commander of the British forces had seized it, and entrenching himself within its massive walls stood a—to him—disastrous siege ; for in it he surrendered to the Colonials, when all that was left of his army laid down their arms, thus ending the great war which made the American States a free nation, and causing King George’s Prime Minister, Lord North, when he heard of it, to throw up his arms exclaiming, “my God, it is all over.” Mr. Nelson Page says :—

The Nelson House still remains in the family, but to the Nelsons, peace came with poverty. Nelson’s vast estate went for his public debts. He gave the whole of it. When a question arose in the Virginia Convention as to the confiscation of British claims, he stopped the agitation by rising in his seat and declaiming :—Others may do as they please, but as for me, I am an honest man, and so help me God I will pay my debts.

Nelson had the honour of being elected Governor of Virginia after the death of Jefferson, and Mr. Nelson Page adds :—

Years afterwards Virginia did tardy and partial justice to the memory of his great services by placing his statue among the group of her great ones in her beautiful Capital Square, and in company with Washington, Jefferson, Marshall, Henry, Mason, and Lewis, he stands in bronze tendering the bonds with his outstretched hands ; but no recompense was ever made to his family for the vast sums he had expended.

When young Thomas Nelson and Charles Fox were fraternising at Eton, they little thought that in the future, the one was to devote himself and fortune in actual warfare on his native soil to resist the tyrannical

policy of King George, while at the same time Charles Fox in the House of Commons would be denouncing the royal obstinacy and emphasising his devotion to the cause of the American States by clothing his servants in liveries of blue and buff in imitation of the uniforms of his quondam schoolfellow, General Thomas Nelson, and his fellow soldiers serving under George Washington; and as some historians say, earning the reputation of having originated in the House of Commons that—at times—formidable organization known as Her Majesty's Opposition.

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