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Letter from John McDonald to James B. Finley

John McDonald

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Lattas 29th March 29th 12 1/2
 Col. M. J. J. J.
 Rev. James B. Henley
 German Town
 Montgomery county
 Ohio
 Single

1159

Poplar Ridge, near Lattas, Ross county, Ohio, March 2, 1842

Dear Sir

I have not written to you since you were at conference, and would now were it convenient prefer having a social chat, then write; but providence has prepared for us a place on which to spread our blankets far distant from each other, writing is the next ^{best} mode of communicating our thoughts to each other.

You have doubtless seen in the papers, that our mutual friend Judge Cook has paid the debt of nature, and his body now quietly sleeps in the bosom of his mother earth. So far as a moral and virtuous life constitutes a good man, he has not left a better man behind him. He joined himself to the Methodist church a few weeks previous to his exit, but whether any new light had broke in upon his mind, is to me matter of doubt. In the month of last November he paid me a visit, and remained with us two days, during which time we had much conversation on the subject of Religion. So far as morality and virtue constituted a Christian he was eminently such; but ^{at} the same time he expressed strong doubts of the divinity of Jesus, and all other marvelous affairs recorded in the Bible. I regret extremely that I did not see him after he had joined the church, and before his sickness commenced. He was a man of so much candor, that I have no doubt that he would have freely and honestly opened his mind to me without reserve. Doctor Trimble attended him during his illness, and he expressed to the Doctor a strong desire to see me. The Doctor sent ^{me} word, I went immediately to his residence, but his disease had made such rapid progress that it was with the utmost difficulty that he could make himself understood, and but little was said. I waited with him from Thursday till Friday evening. On Saturday morning before day he breathed his last. You are aware that Judge Cook was one of the earliest persevering and most successful temperance lecturers in our country. Being in easy circumstances he devoted much of his time and talents in that cause: this ^{course} of life through him constantly among preachers and other religious citizens. His strong discriminating mind, his courteous manners, his easy and pleasant address, made him a welcome visitor to all kind of people. His presence being thus courted by the moral and religious community, I am inclined to believe, that no new light broke in upon his mind when he joined the church, but that gratitude for the partialities shown him by the religious community was the moving cause which led him to join the church. The Methodist church is liberal about creeds. All the question they ask the applicant is, "Does he desire to flee from the wrath to come, and to be saved from their sins?" Every man who believes in a future state of rewards and punishments will honestly answer this question in the affirmative.

You and I have lived in ^{an} age of revolutions in many respects. The steam engines have been introduced in our day, and have ^{almost} annihilated space. When rail roads shall have checkered Asia, Africa, Europe, and America, a tour over the four quarters of the world, can be performed in fewer months than it formerly took years.

The temperance revolution will effect a change in the morals of man, as great as steam has in the mechanic arts. Nine tenths of the crimes committed are justly attributable directly or indirectly to the use of intoxicating drinks. From present appearances the temperance reform is doomed to over spread the earth. It is now the cause of the people, and they are moving forward with irresistible force. They people have no leaders in this cause - No distinguished orators - No illustrious moral philosophers to give tone and spirit to the movement. In this part of the country, Every meeting house, school house, and many private dwellings are the theaters of declamation. The tailor - the cobbler - the blacksmith - the day laborer - the mechanic of all grades - as well as the farmer - the minister, the Doctor, and the Lawyer, all are heard and seen holding forth - and many of them in sublime strains of eloquence, and that from sources never dreamed of before. I heard a poor illiterate reformed drunkard, deliver an address in old Town not long since, it was ^{the most} touching sympathy speech I ever heard. The large Methodist meeting ^{house} was full to a Jam, and when the miserable man finished his tale of woes, there were scarcely a dry eye in the house. At old Town 500 have taken the pledge - at our meeting upwards of 300 have signed the pledge - our old friends, the McNeals - Givens - and cutrights are hostile.

In the temperance cause we see all the various denominations of the religious community unite as one man. The reason of this union of sentiment in this good cause is obvious to my mind. There are no mysteries in this school - all understand the subject.

A great change has taken place in the manners of the ministers of religion ^{two} in the last half century. 40 or 50 years ago the preacher wore a gloomy ~~solemn~~ face, when he saw people cheerful and merry, it ^{would} cause him to groan as if his heart strings would burst. The evidence of having religion was to see a solemn gloomy melancholy face - We now see a happy change in the ministers; they are generally the most social cheerful; communicative men with whom we meet. In former days to contradict or animadvert on what the preacher said in the pulpit, was considered a sin, an insult, that scarcely be atoned for. Not so in the present days, more liberal views has taken the place of bigotry. The preacher ^{can} now endure animadversion, with composure and good humor, without thinking the man who contradicts him either a fool or a knave. There is ^{one} particular in which I think the present age has deteriorated; from that candor and sincerity practiced by the old pioneers - our people are too suspicious, too cautious to be honest - Many of our people when they meet a man whom they hate or despise, ~~with~~ will take him by the hand with all ^{the} apparent cordiality of friendship, when at the same time in their hearts they wish him at the devil.

The last ^{year} has carried off several of our old friends to that bourne from whence no traveler returns. Those frequent departures of my early associates causes a sense of loneliness to steal over my mind; but ^{such} is the inexorable decree of the great spirit, when the angel of death calls all must submit, for "such is the hard condition of our birth

no flight can then resist, no force can save all sink alike the fearful and the brave.

The Logan historical society of which so much was promised is defunct - is dead. A Mr Williams is publishing a monthly periodical called "the American pioneer," which he is palming off as being under the auspices of the Logan historical society: this is ^{not} true, he goes on his own hook. The undertaking is one of herculean labor, should ^{he} be able to carry it out to a finish - He purposes to record the early history (not only of Ohio but) of all America. He is an industrious, persevering, enthusiastic, vain man. If he succeeds it must be by the labor of others, for he is but a poor writer, and not well acquainted with his subject: but still his unwearied industry may enable him to be a good compiler. I wish him success.

My daughter Henrietta has ^{been} sick the last six months - since the warm weather set in she is recruiting her strength. My wife, and children are all well, and be assured the all wish ^{you} and yours well.

David Reed and Hannah are in Greenfield, I have not seen them since winter set in, but I hear from them every week or two, they are well, and David stands fair as a preacher.

I wish to hear from you occasionally.

Give my respects to your wife, and to all the Brook family, and rest assured that I am in sincerity and truth your friend.

John McDonald

Rev. J B Hinley