

ANNALS

OF THE

AMERICAN PULPIT;

OR

COMMEMORATIVE NOTICES

OF

DISTINGUISHED AMERICAN CLERGYMEN

OF

VARIOUS DENOMINATIONS,

FROM THE EARLY SETTLEMENT OF THE COUNTRY TO THE CLOSE OF THE YEAR  
EIGHTEEN HUNDRED AND FIFTY-FIVE.

WITH HISTORICAL INTRODUCTIONS.

BY WILLIAM B. SPRAGUE, D. D.

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## JAMES MUIR, D. D.\*

1788—1820.

JAMES MUIR was a son of the Rev. Dr. George and Tibbie (Wardlaw) Muir, and was born on the 12th of April, 1757, in Cumnock, Scotland,—the place in which his father exercised his ministry. Both his father and his grandfather were highly respectable ministers of the Church of Scotland. Concerning his early years little can now be gathered; but from the manner in which the children of the Scottish clergy in those days were generally educated, it is fair to presume that there was no lack of parental care and vigilance in regard to his early intellectual or moral training.

Early in life, (the precise period is not known,) and under the preaching of his excellent father, his mind became deeply impressed with the importance of eternal things; and to use his own language a few days before his death, he “found no peace till he had fled for refuge to the ark of the everlasting covenant.” His thoughts, which had previously been directed to the profession of the Law, were now fixed upon the Christian ministry.

After the usual course of classical and philosophical studies in the University of Glasgow, at which he graduated in March, 1776, he prosecuted the study of Theology at Edinburgh, but subsequently went to London, and is supposed to have completed his theological studies under the direction of his cousin, the Rev. Dr. Henry Hunter,† author of the “Sacred Biography.” Here he was licensed to preach the Gospel on the 12th of May, 1779, by six clergymen, of whom Dr. Hunter was one, who style themselves “Dissenting Ministers in the City of London and neighbourhood, and conforming to the doctrine and practice of the Church of Scotland.”

After his licensure, he was for some time engaged in teaching a school in London, and preaching as an assistant to Dr. Hunter. On the 10th of August, 1781, the same Presbytery that had licensed him, ordained him as an evangelist at the Scots Church in London, with reference to his acceptance of a call from a company chiefly of Scotch Presbyterians, in the Island of Bermuda, whither he was going for the benefit of his health.

He resided at Bermuda, as the Principal of an Academy, and as the acting Pastor of a Church, for nearly eight years. During this period, he was married (February 29, 1783) to Elizabeth Wellman, who was a native of the Island, and connected with one of its most respectable families. While on a transient visit to his friend and his father's friend, the Rev. Dr. Witherspoon, then President of Princeton College, he connected himself with the Presbytery of New Brunswick, sometime between the meetings of Synod in 1785 and 1786.

He had made his arrangements to return from Bermuda to his native country, and had actually embarked for the purpose; but the vessel in which he had taken passage was driven back in distress, and he was induced to change his direction for the United States. After his arrival in New York in 1788, he preached, for several months, about the same time with the

\* MSS. from his daughters and Rev. Dr. Harrison.

† There is a tradition in the family that he preached for some time in Lady Glenorchie's chapel, but whether this was the chapel which she established in Edinburgh, or another chapel in London, has not been ascertained.

Rev. Jedediah Morse, (afterwards Dr. Morse of Charlestown, Mass.,) as a candidate in the Collegiate Church of which the late Dr. Rodgers was then Pastor. But as division was likely to ensue in consequence of the peculiar attachment of a portion of the congregation to each of the candidates, they both, from a regard to the harmony of the church, withdrew; and Mr. Muir, in the spring of 1789, accepted a call to the Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, where he continued during the residue of his ministry and of his life.

In 1791, the degree of Doctor of Divinity was conferred upon him, at the suggestion of Dr. Witherspoon, by the Corporation of Yale College.

About three years before his death, his health being considerably impaired, he made a visit of a few days to the Island of Bermuda, and, being there on the Sabbath, accepted an invitation to preach in the church where he had formerly ministered. He preached from the text,—“Our fathers, where are they?”—a discourse which excited an unusual interest, and was commented upon in a very laudatory manner by the public papers of the Island. On his return, he remarked to a friend that it was wonderful how he could ever have been contented to remain on such a little patch of earth for seven years, when it seemed to him that there was scarcely room sufficient for ordinary exercise, without coming in contact with the ocean.

In March, 1818, the Rev. (now Dr.) Elias Harrison, after having served as an assistant to Dr. Muir for more than a year, was installed as co-pastor. The Doctor's health, after his return from Bermuda, was generally good until the spring of the year 1820. The last sermon he preached was on the last Sabbath of May in that year, while his colleague was at the General Assembly in Philadelphia. About that time, the disease of which he died, which proved to be an ossification of the muscles of the stomach, began to develop itself. His physician, Dr. Dangerfield, supposing that the country air might be of service to him, had him removed to his own dwelling on the Maryland side of the Potomac, and, for more than six weeks, ministered to him with unceasing care, and all the appliances which medical skill could suggest, but without any favourable effect. As it was manifest that his life was wasting away, he was conveyed back, in a state of great feebleness, to the spacious dwelling of Jonathan Swift, one of his congregation, situated in the suburbs of the town, and there, after lingering some two or three weeks, with many of his beloved flock daily about him, he died in perfect peace on the 8th of August, 1820. Two days after, he was buried in the church, just beneath the pulpit he had occupied for more than thirty-one years. By his own request, he was dressed in his gown and bands, and his grave was thirteen feet deep.

Mrs. Muir survived her husband about ten years. They had had seven children; but, at the time of his death, only four were living,—one son and three daughters. The son, *Samuel*, was, for some years, a post surgeon in the United States army, stationed on the South-western frontier. He had, however, resigned his commission, and, having married a daughter of one of the Chiefs of the Sacs or Fox tribe of Indians, was, for several years, regarded as one of the greatest men of the nation. About three years before his death, he had settled in an extensive medical practice at Galena, Ill.; and, during, the Black Hawk war, when the cholera broke out in our army under General Scott, with such terrible violence, he boldly went out, a volunteer, to endeavour to stay its ravages. But, after saving the lives of

many in the army, he was attacked by the disease himself, and in twenty-four hours was numbered among its victims. He was educated at Edinburgh, was a highly accomplished man, and a skilful physician.

Dr. Muir is the author of several books, all of which are highly creditable to his talents and piety. In 1795, he published a small volume entitled "An Examination of the principles contained in the Age of Reason: In Ten Discourses." In 1812, he published another volume, containing Ten Sermons, several of which were preached on special occasions, and each one having an Appendix, illustrative at once of the subject of the sermon, and of the character of the author. He published yet another, containing seven Sermons, which he preached while he was Pastor at Bermuda—also a Sermon at the ordination of the Rev. T. B. Balch, and it is believed some other Occasional Sermons, not even the titles of which can now be recovered.

In the autumn of 1815, immediately after my graduation at Yale College, I went to reside as a private tutor in the neighbourhood of Alexandria, and had the privilege of an early introduction to Dr. Muir and his family, and of frequent intercourse with them, during a period of about eight months—indeed I first made a public profession of religion in his church, and commenced the study of Theology under his direction. He was a short, thick-set man, rather heavy in his movements, of a grave but most kindly expression of countenance, and as gentle and guileless as any human being I ever met. There was an air of loveliness and simplicity about him that led me at first,—young and inexperienced as I was,—to underrate somewhat his talents and acquirements; but, as I became acquainted with him, I found myself in contact with an exceedingly well balanced, well disciplined, and well furnished mind. His appearance in the pulpit was certainly far from being graceful. He always wore the gown; but that served rather to make the disproportion between his breadth and his height the more noticeable,—though, to my eye at least, it gave additional solemnity and impressiveness to his manner. I can see him at this moment standing in that venerable old pulpit, holding up his little black Bible before him with both hands, and reading sometimes nearly half a chapter at a time by way of illustrating his subject, and in an accent so intensely Scotch that it seemed to my unpractised ear not only strange but ludicrous. But his sermons were always full of vigorous and condensed thought, and in point of style were very much of the Addisonian school. Though he had high ideas of Christian consistency and clerical propriety, he was always cheerful, and never averse to telling or hearing a humorous anecdote. His kindness towards me was scarcely less than paternal; and when I parted with him in June, 1816, to return to the North, he gave me letters to several of his friends in the cities through which I was to pass, that procured for me some of the most valued acquaintances of my life. I corresponded with him till near the time of his death, and I cannot imagine a more perfect representation of his mind and heart than his letters furnished.

FROM THE REV. ELIAS HARRISON, D. D.

ALEXANDRIA, January 10, 1849.

Rev. and dear Sir: You ask for my impressions of the character of our venerable friend, and my former colleague in the ministry, the Rev. Dr. Muir. I can truly say that my recollections of him are such as it gives me sincere pleasure

to record; and I am glad to co-operate with you in an effort to honour and perpetuate his name and memory.

There was a peculiarity in Dr. Muir's preaching, in respect to both matter and manner, which it is not easy, by any single phrase or term, to characterize. A member of the United States Senate, after having listened to one of his sermons, remarked that he was "a short man, of short sermons, of short sentences." This was strictly true. His discourses rarely exceeded thirty-five minutes in length, and the sentences of which they were composed were unusually short, as may be seen in the published sermons which he has left behind him. He always spoke with a small Bible open and lying on the large one before him on the desk; and when he had occasion to refer to any part of it, (and his quotations were very frequent and long,) it was his uniform practice to take it up and read, even when his people generally believed, and some of them knew, that there was not the least occasion for it;—for few men probably ever committed more of the Bible to memory than he did. He carried it with him, both in the original and the translation, wherever he went, and rarely, if ever, failed to analyze, with critical accuracy, at least two chapters, each day. Indeed such was his familiarity with the Scriptures in the original languages, that he could quote the Hebrew and the Greek, almost as readily as he could the English. He always preached without notes. Until the last three years of his life, he wrote his discourses with great care, and with equal care committed them to memory. But he never could preach, as he has himself assured me, unless he had his manuscript in his pocket; and, on one occasion, having found, after he had commenced the service, that he had neglected to bring it with him, he was under the necessity of going back to his study to get it. Yet he could speak with as much ease and correctness without as with writing; and few, if any, could ever tell by his manner of delivery whether he was speaking memoriter or extempore. Owing to a pretty strong Scotch accent, and a slight defect in his utterance, he could not be called a popular preacher; and yet his sermons were rich in Divine truth, and were characterized by condensed thought, logical arrangement, and great simplicity and perspicuity of style.

Dr. Muir was a severe student. He could not tolerate the idea of addressing immortal souls on the most momentous of all concerns, without having prepared himself for it by careful study as well as earnest prayer; and few things would put down a ministering brother in his estimation more than to be told that his discourses were either almost or altogether unpremeditated. I rarely ever saw him more out of temper than he was with a young licentiate, who, burning with what he regarded as holy zeal, remarked that it seemed to him a waste of time to study and write sermons. The Doctor could not be called an active man, though he was always regular in visiting his people, and ministering to the sick and afflicted; and when he made an engagement either to preach or perform any other duty, it was never his own fault if it was not fulfilled.

But for nothing was he more distinguished than an exemplary Christian life. I lived in his family, and was in close intimacy with him, for more than three years; and, during the whole of that time, was never able to detect a word, an action, or even a feeling, which I would dare to pronounce decidedly wrong. And yet, during that period, his church was rent with factions, many of his congregation inflamed with bitterness and wrath, and in the issue, about half of the number separated and constituted a new church. Against all these untoward influences, he struggled hard and prayed much; and the result was that he sustained himself throughout with the utmost Christian forbearance and good will. He was often called, in reference to his large share of gentleness and meekness, in connection with his smallness of stature,—“the little Moses.”

Dr. Muir enjoyed, in a high degree, the good opinion and affectionate regards of his brethren in the ministry, and great weight was given to his counsels in the

judicatories of the Church. The whole community in which he lived, revered him for the purity of his life, and the memory of his exalted virtues is still dear to many, though he has long since passed away.

I will close this communication by referring to his death scene, which, for sublimity and impressiveness, has rarely, if ever, had a parallel, within my observation. A few hours before his departure, he called his whole family around him,—his wife and three daughters, (his son was absent,) and laying his hand on the head of each, and in order, according to age, beginning with his wife, he gave to each a most solemn and affecting word of exhortation, corresponding, it seemed to me, to each one's particular disposition; and then, like the Patriarch of old, commending them to his own covenant-keeping God, gave them his parting blessing, amid the tears and sobs of many of his beloved flock. After a few moments' rest, he called me also, and laying his hand upon my head, and invoking the blessing of the great Head of the Church upon my person and ministry, gave me one of the kindest, most affecting, and most impressive charges, to which I ever listened. He had always manifested towards me a strong affection, and the last energies of his life were given to this closing effort. It will never be forgotten; for though I cannot recall the precise language,—the spirit, the look, the impression, are scarcely less vivid at this hour, than they were the hour after the solemn spectacle had passed before me.

Ever fraternally yours,

ELIAS HARRISON.

FROM THE REV. JAMES LAURIE, D. D.

WASHINGTON, May 1, 1850.

My dear Sir: Your request for my recollections of our excellent and lamented friend, Dr. Muir, I have been prevented from complying with till now, partly by domestic affliction, partly by ill health, and partly by other causes which it is not necessary to mention. But I assure you that no part of the reason has been that I have been indifferent to the subject of your request,—for I can truly say that I have been associated with few men in the course of my life, whose memory I cherish with more reverence and affection than that of Dr. Muir. I became acquainted with him first, forty-seven years ago, on my arrival in this country from Scotland,—a number of years after his settlement in Alexandria; and, as I became almost immediately after a permanent resident of this city, distant from Alexandria but a few miles, my opportunities of intercourse with him were frequent during the remainder of his life. Our intimacy was probably greater from the fact that we were natives of the same country, and had, on that account, many common interests and associations.

Dr. Muir was one of those men in respect to whose characters there is likely to be very little difference of opinion. He was constituted with such perfect simplicity and ingenuousness of temper, that it would have been impossible for him, by any effort, to practise the least dissimulation. Every one who was brought in contact with him, felt that he was exactly what he appeared to be; his statements were all taken without any abatement on the score of designed exaggeration; though his unsuspecting disposition might sometimes perhaps have rendered him liable to the charge of credulity. It is not unlikely that Mrs. Hunter, the wife of the celebrated Dr. Henry Hunter of London, a relative of his, had this trait of his character in view, when she told him, as he was coming to this country, not to believe a word that he heard, and not more than half of what he saw. I do not mean to impute to him any extraordinary weakness in this particular, and yet it must be acknowledged that, in what commonly passes for worldly shrewdness and sagacity, he was not much distinguished. He was so conscious of the purity of his own motives, was so entirely "an Israelite

indeed in whom there was no guile," that he would never impute evil motives when charity could possibly find out those of a different character. So uniformly gentle and benignant was his spirit, that I remember but a single instance in which he was betrayed into what would be considered as savouring in any degree of severity, and that was a remark addressed immediately to an individual, who, he had reason to believe, had, under the guise of friendship, acted a disingenuous and treacherous part towards him.

Dr. Muir retained too much of the Scottish accent to have any great popularity in this country as a preacher; and yet his sermons were always rich in evangelical truth, and written in a chaste, easy, perspicuous style. There was one peculiarity in his mode of preparing his discourses, which deserves to be mentioned. He used, at the commencement, to scatter all along over his paper key words, or words which were to begin paragraphs; and so thoroughly had he studied his subject, that he had never any difficulty in filling up his paper, making these several words subserve his original design.

In his theological and ecclesiastical predilections he was thoroughly a Presbyterian, both from education and conviction, and yet he was as far as possible from an intolerant spirit, and mingled freely and cordially with Christians of different communions. So amiable and generous a spirit as he possessed, sanctified withal by deep and consistent piety, could not but render him an object of attraction in every circle. In his family, he was a model of all the domestic virtues; among the people of his charge, he was the warm hearted and devoted Pastor; and in society at large, he was not only a well wisher to, but a diligent promoter of, all the great interests of human life. When I say that he had no enemies, I have stated only half the truth; no one could be brought in contact with him, especially in the sense of enjoying familiar intercourse, without regarding him with respect and veneration; and the deep and general lamentation which was witnessed at his death, was a sufficient testimony that the whole community in which he lived regarded him as among the excellent of the earth.

He had long been familiar with death before he was called to encounter it. It was a subject on which his thoughts were greatly prone to dwell, and though, in his latter years, the grave yard was a mile or more from his dwelling, he was accustomed frequently to resort thither, and yield himself to devout "meditations among the tombs." When his own turn to die came, his spirit was so disciplined to meet the event, that he could rejoice in the prospect of his departure, knowing in whom he had believed; but the physical agony attending the approach of death was well nigh overwhelming. A day or two previous to his departure, he sent for me to come and see him; but so extreme was his weakness, and so severe his bodily sufferings, that I found him incapable of holding much conversation. I remember he exclaimed—"Is this death?"—and then added, with reference to the torturing pains which he was enduring—"it is terrible;" but there was nothing to indicate that his spirit was not reposing with perfect confidence in the merits and promises of his Redeemer. Those who stood by his bedside, when the pulsations of life finally ceased, could not feel a doubt that Heaven was, at that moment, opening to receive a glorified spirit.

In calling up these reminiscences of my friend long since departed, I am glad if I have contributed to your object, as I am sure it has led me into a field in which it has been most grateful to me to linger. If my recollections are less extensive than you had expected, you will perhaps find a satisfactory reason for it in the fact that they are the recollections of a man whom age has brought near to the borders of the grave.

Yours truly and affectionately,

JAMES LAURIE.