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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.

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BY WILLIAM B. SPRAGUE, D. D.

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VOLUME IV.
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JOHN BRECKENRIDGE, D. D.*

1822—1841.

JOHN BRECKENRIDGE was born at Cabell's Dale, on North Elkhorn, Ky., July 4, 1797. His father was the Hon. John Breckenridge, Attorney General of the United States under the administration of Jefferson. His mother, whose maiden name was Cabell, was a lady of high intellectual and moral qualities, and belonged to one of the most respectable families in Virginia.

The subject of this sketch lost his father when he was nine years old, and from that time he was reared under the care of his widowed mother, and of an elder brother who was appointed his guardian. Having enjoyed, during his childhood and early youth, the advantages of the best schools in Kentucky, he entered Princeton College at an advanced standing in 1815, and graduated with high honour in the autumn of 1818, at the age of twenty-one. His family had designed him for the profession of the Law; but, during his residence at Princeton, his mind received a decidedly religious direction, and he became a member of the Presbyterian Church; in consequence of which he resolved, contrary to the wishes of his own immediate family,—not one of whom, at that time, was a professor of religion,—to devote himself to the Gospel ministry.

In 1820 and 1821, he was a Tutor in Princeton College, and at the same time was prosecuting the study of Divinity, in the Theological Seminary. He was licensed to preach by the Presbytery of New Brunswick, August 1, 1822. He served as Chaplain of the House of Representatives of the Congress of the United States, during the session of 1822-23. On the 22d of May, 1823, he was received from the Presbytery of New Brunswick, as a member of the Presbytery of West Lexington, Ky., and on the 10th of September following, was ordained by the latter Body to the work of the ministry, and installed pastor of the M'Chord Church in Lexington. Here he made a vigorous stand against the influence of Dr. Holley, then President of the Transylvania University, and of the party by which he was sustained; and with a special view to this controversy, he established the well known periodical called the "Western Luminary." In 1826, he removed to Baltimore, and became associated with the Rev. Dr. Glendy in the pastoral charge of the Second Presbyterian Church in that city. In 1831, he took up his residence in Philadelphia, as Secretary and General Agent of the Board of Education of the Presbyterian Church. In 1836, he was appointed, by the General Assembly, a Professor in the Theological Seminary at Princeton. He accepted the appointment, and held the office until 1838, when, upon the organization of the Board of Foreign Missions, he was elected its Secretary and General Agent. This appointment also he accepted; and continued at the head of the operations of that Board from 1838 to 1840. At the period of his death, he was the Pastor Elect of the Presbyterian Church in New Orleans, and the President Elect of Oglethorpe University in Georgia.

* Spirit of the Nineteenth Century, 1841.—Davidson's Hist. Presb. Ch. Ky.—MS. from Hon. Henry Clay.

He received the degree of Doctor of Divinity from Union College in 1835.

Dr. Breckenridge's health had been gradually declining under the weight of his multiplied cares and labours, for a considerable time previous to his death. At the time his death took place, he was on a visit to his friends in Kentucky; and he died August 4, 1841, on the spot where he was born,—having just completed his forty-fourth year. One of the last sentences that he uttered was—"I am a poor sinner who have worked hard, and had constantly before my mind one great object—the conversion of the world."

He was married in January, 1823, to Margaret, daughter of the Rev. Dr. Miller of Princeton, who died in 1838, leaving three children. In 1840, he was married a second time to a daughter of Colonel Babcock of Stonington, Conn., who, with one child, survived him.

The following are Dr. Breckenridge's publications:—A Sermon preached at Harrisburg before the Synod of Philadelphia, 1827. An Address before the Literary Societies in the New York University, 1836. Controversy with Bishop Hughes, 1836. Memorial of Mrs. Breckenridge, 1839.

Dr. Breckenridge's collegiate course at Princeton was contemporaneous with my own theological course there; and it was then and there that my acquaintance with him commenced. I think the first time I ever spoke with him was while he was bowed like a bulrush under a sense of his own sinfulness, and before the first ray of hope had dawned upon his troubled spirit. It was deeply interesting to mark the struggles of a mind of so much capacity and power,—naturally lofty in its impulses and ambitious in its aspirations,—while it was groping its way in thick darkness in search of the Cross. And it was still more interesting, at a subsequent period, to observe the vigorous and strongly marked exercises of the spiritual man,—modified as they were by a natural nobility of mind and heart, as rare as it was attractive. For a few years after I left the Seminary, my intercourse with him was interrupted; but after I became connected, as a minister, with the Presbyterian Church, it was renewed, and led, I think I may say, to a strong mutual friendship. He preached several times in my pulpit, presenting different objects of benevolence, and while his efforts, when I heard him, were always remarkable, I think, in one instance, it was uniformly conceded that he attained to the highest effect of pulpit eloquence. His presence in the family was always a bright sunshine, that cheered every one that came within its influence. Even the little children anticipated his visit as a jubilee; and it was hard for any of us to say whether we loved or admired him the more. Once and but once I saw him when his spirit was greatly ruffled; and he spoke sharp and scathing words, when a milder tone would have suited me better; but it was in defence of what he believed to be truth and right, and he, unconsciously to himself, passed the boundary, which his own sober judgment would have fixed. He was a fine specimen of a devout and earnest Christian, engrafted upon a splendid man, and a noble-spirited Kentuckian.

FROM THE HON. HENRY CLAY.

SECRETARY OF STATE, &C., &C.

ASHLAND, July 14, 1848.

Dear Sir: I received your favour of recent date requesting from me some expression in regard to the character of the late Rev. Dr. John Breckenridge, with reference to a work which you are engaged in preparing for the press.

Although I was acquainted with Dr. Breckenridge from an early period of his life, and with his family before him, our spheres of action were so different and often so distant, that I had not the happiness of much personal intercourse with him, or of often hearing him in the pulpit. He has, however, left on my mind impressions of his piety, his zeal, his great powers of persuasive eloquence, and of his blandness and sweetness of disposition, that will never be effaced. I deeply regret that my knowledge of him does not allow me to bear a more ample and extended testimony to his great worth and high merits.

I am, with great respect,

Your obedient servant,

H. CLAY.

FROM THE REV. JOHN M. KREBS, D. D.

NEW YORK, March 18, 1852.

Rev. and dear Sir: I fear that you have overrated my opportunities of intercourse with the late Rev. Dr. John Breckenridge. The few remarks I made to you orally in regard to his character as a man and a preacher, and which, at your request, I shall now put to paper for you, were the recollections of occasional interviews, some of which were official, and others simply social, but occurring during a space of fifteen years or more, although always characterized by a good degree of friendly intimacy.

My acquaintance with Dr. Breckenridge began at his own house in Baltimore, while I was yet a student in College. Being on a visit to that city, I called upon him, with the friend who introduced me, to pay our respects. I could not fail to be impressed with his engaging aspect,—I might say, indeed, the manly beauty of his countenance; an impression never lost, and still justified by the accurate engraved portrait in my possession. There was a combination of dignity and gentleness, of purity and candour, intellect and firmness, mingled with all a woman's tenderness and sympathy, that played upon his speaking face, which, added to his gracious condescension—utterly remote from the slightest air of patronizing—to two mere lads, instantly won upon my heart, as it did on many others that cherish his memory with fond affection. There was nothing austere and ungenial about him, and certainly nothing merely put on. You were attracted as to a man, but to a holy and a good man. I always felt myself, when with him, in the presence of a man of God, and one whom I could love as a father or an elder brother.

In person, he was of medium height, lithe and active, but apparently not of robust frame. there was nevertheless that vital energy about him, which prompted and sustained abundant labours, until it prematurely exhausted and wore out his strength and life.

His temper was ardent, generous and frank; his manners refined and polished, partaking and expressing the noble courteousness of his nature, the suavity and delicate considerateness of a Christian gentleman. If you have ever seen that fine commentary on the thirteenth chapter of the first Epistle to the Corinthians, which reveals it as the portraiture of a true gentleman, I am sure that you will appreciate the estimate which leads me spontaneously to associate it with Dr.

Breckenridge. Indeed, this trait was so well known, at least in its outward expressions, that even where partisan prejudices transferred their hostility to the persons whose principles they opposed, they nevertheless implied an acknowledgment of it. A person who was strongly prejudiced against that party in the Church with which Dr. B. was identified, speaking with some disapprobation of his position and deportment in the controversy, and comparing him with another minister, equally distinguished and no less agreeable in private life, yet thrown more prominently into the front of the conflict, and more obnoxious on account of a certain pointed invective in debate, said, too energetically for her sex, that for her part she had as lief be beheaded with the broad axe of the one, as have her throat gently cut by the smooth, keen razor of the other.

As might be inferred from what I have said of him above, he was a very hospitable man; and his hospitality was, like himself, frank and unostentatious. It was not from any thing he said, but from all the cordiality and kindness of his reception, the evident enjoyment he took in the society he welcomed to his roof and table, that you felt yourself at once at home and at ease. In this respect, it was like that fine and unaffected welcome you meet in the best homes of the South and West, in which the guest is made to feel himself more an obliger than obliged.

In the controversies within the Presbyterian Church, he took a decided and earnest stand with the Old School. All his sympathies led him that way. In the darkest periods of the great conflict, he shrunk not, neither was he disheartened. Sink or swim, he periled reputation and position in the issue, and ever stood firm to his convictions. This is not the place to discuss or to assume the merits of that controversy; but it is due to the truth and history of the case to state the estimate of his position in it, which was formed by those who were associated with him in the conferences and consultations of that momentous time.

Notwithstanding the vehemence with which the debates of that period were conducted, and,—making all due allowance for the imperfections of the best men, and for the infirmities that appear in the arena of fervent controversy,—I cannot recall an instance in which he ever forgot the amenities of the occasion, or lost his self-possession. I remember one occasion, indeed, which, at the time, and to one unacquainted with him and with the circumstances of the case, might have appeared like a display of unduly excited feeling; though it really was not so. Without attempting to describe the scene, I will only say that it reminded me of one, in which, some years before, another minister from the same State figured. After an ardent debate, on an ecclesiastical trial, in which he had taken part, he overheard, but mistook the purport of, some angry threats of certain friends of the party arraigned. Supposing, however, that these persons were, as if in sympathy with himself, meditating injury to one, who, in the debate, had dealt him some unkind reproaches, he interposed, saying,—“Gentlemen, I beg you to forbear; I feel no ill-will to those persons, and have no wrongs to be avenged; I am a Kentuckian, indeed, but I am a Christian too.” But he was speedily undeceived, and found himself to be the object of their purpose;—when he rejoined,—“Gentlemen, I beg you to beware; it is true, I trust I am a Christian, but you must remember, that I am also a Kentuckian!”

His intrepidity of character needs no special illustration. It was a part of himself, and he would not have been himself without it. He never feared the face of man, and as a bold and uncompromising advocate of what he believed to be truth, he exhibited not only the *suaviter in modo*, but the *fortiter in re*. Once, when he was making a speech at an Anniversary of the Colonization Society, of which he was one of the stanchest friends, at a time when the public meetings in this city were often the scene of great excitement, some of his remarks on the subject, in its relation to slavery, were received with peculiar

expressions of disapprobation, by the opponents of that scheme who were present. The speaker was assailed with hisses; angry looks and gestures menaced him; and he was interrupted for a moment by the outcries and the confusion that reigned in the audience. Drawing himself up to his full height, he cast around him a look of undaunted firmness, while a slight flush suffused his countenance, and even a smile played around his mouth, and said,—“I am not to be put down by hisses or by threats. I was cradled where the Indian war-whoop yet mingled with the infant’s lullaby, and trained by a mother whose earliest lessons taught me, next to the fear of God, not to be afraid of any body.” The effect of this speech, uttered with such serene composure and heroic dignity, was electric. The audience subsided into perfect calm, and he finished his address without further interruption, than that of enthusiastic applause. On another occasion, in making the annual Address before the literary societies of the University, speaking from short notes,—a usual practice with him,—he advanced some sentiments which were not well suited to the popular sympathies of the time. A slight buzzing in the audience attracted his attention, and recognising in it a dissent from his opinions, he paused, then uttered with majestic calmness these words—“I was born a freeman, and by the grace of God, I mean to live and die one.” The assembly was hushed in a moment to audible silence, but then there arose such a thunder of applause as overwhelmingly indicated its sympathy with the manly sentiment and avowal of a freeman’s right to speak all his thoughts. It was as when a Roman theatre received that utterance which spoke to the heart of humanity,—“I am a man, and nothing that concerns man is alien to me.”

Quick in repartee, he was often very happy,—still so bland and courteous that he did not give offence. One day on the street, he was met by a lady and gentleman, the latter of whom dissented strongly from Dr. B.’s Calvinistic sentiments, while he yet greatly admired his character and talents. He introduced the lady as his wife, adding sportively,—“Dr. B., my wife is just one of your sort of folks. She believes that what is to be, will be.” “Ah,” said he, “and I suppose I am to understand that you are one of the sort which believe that what is to be, won’t be.” It was a poser.

Devoted to the doctrines of the Presbyterian Church, he was their uncompromising expounder and advocate. His influence was visible in the greatly improved tone of piety attained by his Congregation in Baltimore, and in the happy results of his ministry, cotemporary and affiliated with the excellent Nevins in that city. His memory is cherished there to this day. His people were trained, and instructed, and of one mind with him. I once heard a distinguished person, whose ecclesiastical politics were opposed to Dr. B.’s, say that he had so thoroughly imbued his people with his views, that, even some years after he had left them, (at a time when it was desired and hoped that they might be enlisted in an opposite interest,) not the least impression could be made upon them.

As a debater in the Ecclesiastical Courts, or on the platform, he always spoke without any notes, and apparently without studied preparation. On these occasions, he was sometimes discursive, yet he never abandoned his point. And there were times when lofty bursts of eloquence told with fine effect on the delighted hearers. I think I may apply to him what has been lately written of Thomas Lord Lyttleton as a *Senator*, though alas! of him *only* as a parliamentary orator.* “His tone in the Senate had been pure, moral and high-principled. Even his opponents acknowledged the harmony of his periods, the force of his declamations, and the ingenuity of his arguments.” He was often in request for public occasions. And there are those who still remember his masterly dissection, at an Anniversary of the American Tract Society, of Gibbon’s

* London Quarterly Review, January, 1852.

insidious but sophistical explanation of the causes of the remarkable spread of Christianity in its primitive period; and the splendid peroration, wherein, describing the magnificent enterprise which he commended to the Society, even at the risk of failure, he concluded in words like these:—"Let the spot be marked with enduring stone, bearing this suggestive and memorable inscription—'*Here fell the American Tract Society, in attempting to achieve the conversion of the world!*'"

In the pulpit, he was distinguished equally for copiousness and felicity. He never read his sermons, and I believe he very seldom wrote them. I have known him to be called upon to preach without any opportunity for preparation. Sometimes his mind rapidly chose his theme, and arranged his thoughts around it, and he then spoke with great point, clearness, and force. At other times I have heard him, when it seemed as if he had started with some inkling of a point which eluded him, so that he could not yet seize it, and for a while he exemplified what, upon such an occasion, was very pertinently said of him by a loving relative, that "Mr. B. appeared to be hunting something." But when he caught the theme, his form dilated, his eye kindled, and his eloquent features all aglow, he would pour out a strain of admirable argument and burning illustration. Sometimes he wrote, and then curiously enough. Even for a special occasion I once knew him, after being much engaged otherwise up to his departure for the place where he was to speak, attend to the completion of his preparations for it while on the way, occupying the intervals of his journey when the coach stopped for meals or for the night, by retiring to his room and writing out his discourse. There are few men, however well-furnished, who could or ought to venture on experiments like these. But commonly he preached from a "brief," carefully arranged, and the construction and management of this was something of a curiosity. His habit may be learned from my first observation of him in this respect, when I regarded his proceedings, as I sat with him in my own pulpit, not without some wonder. Drawing forth a small packet of what I supposed to be "skeletons," he selected some three slips of paper, not written precisely like the prophet's roll, "within and without." These were quarters of sheets, of letter-size apparently, folded lengthwise so as to make four pages. The inside pages were blank, while one or both, as he might need, of the outside pages were covered with his bold and careless manuscript. Next he produced a thin, round, pocket pin-cushion, well filled. Then, selecting one of the slips, he pinned it so as to lap the leaf on which his text was, so that when the first page should be exhausted, he might turn the leaf of the Bible, and proceed with the second. Carefully selecting quite another place in the Bible, he there pinned another paper in like manner; and so on with the third. Each of these slips, I afterwards learned, as it was not difficult to guess, contained a distinct head of remark, with brief hints to be filled up in speaking, and concluded with a reference to a topic that required the use of a text elsewhere; and following the reference, he turned over to the page thus indicated, where he found his further hints and proceeded as before. My old pulpit Bible bears many a mark of these perforations. This peculiar method was suggested solely by regard for his own convenience, and was by no means intended to "blind the eyes of galling critics;" for the aggregate of all that was thus written might easily have been read off in less than five minutes.

His style and delivery were sometimes very grand, flashing with intellect and power; and then again he changed to the tender and melting mood. Though not unmethodical, nor talking against time, or for talk's sake, he was often excursive and episodical,—more so perhaps than in extempore debate—for whereas there, he rose to speak under the impulse of some thought that struggled for utterance, and revolved around some single point,—in the pulpit there was more of previous leisurely intention, and the calmness that is not stimulated by

controversy, nor pressed by want of time. And it sometimes happened that, tempted by his very fulness, he poured out rich stores of thought and imagination, till the exhausted hour required him to stop,—not without disappointment to the hearers, both for the balking of their willingness for more, and for the brief treatment of the latter points announced in his plan,—leaving in some cases the impression of incompleteness. But his manner was chaste, and his fine imagination was not undisciplined. You saw no rant, nor start theatric; you heard no thunder let off to make people stare; no trickery to please gaping sides and benches. You would not say of him exactly

“ Though deep, yet clear, though gentle, yet not dull,
“ Strong without rage, without o’erflowing, full:”

For he was not always “ calm,” but on the contrary impassioned and sublime. And he did sometimes “ overflow:” but it is no disparagement of the Mississippi to say it is not in all respects like the Thames.

You may think I have written herein with too strong partialities of friendship on me. But I stand not alone in my estimate. And I could not write otherwise and write truly. Would it were worthier of a man whom living, I was happy in numbering among my friends, and dying, I lamented with no affected grief.

I cannot forget that when I was almost overwhelmed with sudden and sore trial, he wrote and he came to me, with counsels most judicious, comforting and salutary. It was not long afterwards that I was called upon to requite, by reminding him of timely consolations he had ministered to me. I remember how he bore sorrow like a man of grace and faith. Yet afflictions and labours wore him out, and too soon for the Church he loved and served so well, he entered peacefully into rest. I was his friend, and I am

Affectionately yours,

JOHN M. KREBS.

ALEXANDER AUGUSTUS CAMPBELL.*

1822—1846.

ALEXANDER AUGUSTUS CAMPBELL, a son of Captain Francis and Nancy (Barnet) Campbell, was born in Amberst County, Va., December 30, 1789. He spent his early years at home, and had only the advantages for education furnished by the common schools of that day, until, at the age of about eighteen or nineteen, he commenced the study of medicine. Having studied for some time under the direction of Dr. Patton of Danville, Va., he went to Philadelphia, and completed his studies at the Medical School in that city, where he graduated in the year 1811.

In his boyhood he was, at one time, much concerned in regard to his eternal interests; but, while he was studying with a view to his profession, he became sceptical, and tried hard to divest himself of a belief of the Divine existence. While attending the Lectures at Philadelphia, he was attacked with the yellow fever, and his case, even in the judgment of his physicians, became hopeless. Of his experience at that time, he has left in manuscript the following remarkable record:—

* MS. from Rev. E. S. Campbell.