

✓
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.

VOLUME III.

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By ROBERT CARTER & BROTHERS,

In the Clerk's Office of the District Court of the United States for the Southern
District of New York.

succeed here." This was about fifty-five years ago, and I never saw him again,—having soon after left that neighbourhood; but I have not forgotten his manner and words, and the impression they made upon me. Being desirous of hearing his grandson, I have come out with difficulty, and may never hear another sermon. It so happened that he never was out again, and died not long after.

Mr. Beatty seems usually to have made his preparations for the pulpit without writing, as no manuscript sermons have been found among his papers; yet he was one of the most popular preachers of his day, though not probably a profound theologian. The daughter of Dr. Sproat of Philadelphia said that no minister, who assisted her father, was more universally acceptable than Mr. Beatty, both to that congregation and to others, and that her father was always pleased to have his services among them.

Mr. Beatty was particularly desirous that his children should have the best education which the times and the country afforded, and his training of them at home was of the most thorough kind, both intellectual and religious. All felt the impress of his character upon them in their future lives. At his death, he left to his children a considerable estate, which was almost entirely evaporated in the subsequent depreciation of continental money, so that none of them derived much benefit from their patrimony.

Very truly and affectionately yours,

CHARLES C. BEATTY.

JAMES SPROAT, D. D.*

1743—1793.

JAMES SPROAT was born at Scituate, Mass., April 11, 1722. He was graduated at Yale College in 1741, in the same class with Governor William Livingston of New Jersey, Dr. Samuel Hopkins of Newport, and Dr. Buell of Long Island. He entered College, careless of his immortal interests, and continued so during the greater part of his course; but, some little time before he graduated, Gilbert Tennent, on his memorable tour through New England, visited New Haven, and preached in a manner that, by the blessing of God, gave a new direction to his thoughts and feelings, and changed the entire complexion of his life. Tennent was afterwards settled in Philadelphia, and Mr. Sproat became his successor. It was a noticeable providence that Tennent, in preaching a sermon, in a part of the country remote from his residence, and to an audience who were all or nearly all strangers to him, should have been instrumental of the conversion of an individual, who was destined to enter into his labours, after he had himself entered into his rest.

Having gone through the requisite course of preparation for the ministry, he was licensed to preach, and soon received a call to settle in the Fourth Congregational Church in Guilford, Conn. He accepted the call, and was ordained August 23, 1743. Here he laboured with great zeal, popularity, and success, for about twenty-five years. After the death of Mr. Tennent, the church in Philadelphia, of which he had been pastor,—as has been

* Green's Fun. Sermon.—Assemb. Miss. Mag. I.—Allen's Biog. Dict.—Mass. Hist. Coll. X.—Original Letters and Diary of Dr. Sproat.

already intimated,—directed their attention towards Mr Sproat, as a suitable person to be his successor; and, accordingly, in October, 1768, he resigned his charge at Guilford, and, shortly after, was installed over the church to which he had been called. He continued sole pastor till 1787, when he was relieved from a portion of his labours by the settlement of Mr. (afterwards Dr.) Ashbel Green.

In 1780, the degree of Doctor of Divinity was conferred upon him by the College of New Jersey.

The year 1793 was signalized by the prevalence of the yellow fever in Philadelphia, in its most malignant form, and to an appalling extent. The family of Dr. Sproat was almost annihilated by it. Himself, his wife, his eldest son and *his* wife, and his youngest daughter, became its victims. He remained in the city, ministering to the dying and the afflicted, as far as his waning strength would permit, until the disease attacked him in all its virulence. I find among my papers the following letter to his son *John*, who was then absent from home, dated “Friday, October 11th, one o’clock P. M.”—just one week before his own death. From a postscript added by his daughter, it appears that the fever was upon him at that time.

“Dear John: Your poor old trembling father must be the sorrowful messenger of grief upon grief to you. Your brother William is no more—he departed this life about ten o’clock this morning, I trust for a better. I was there when he died. I shall attend his remains to his lonely house, the grave, at six o’clock. Your sister Olive has been with him all the time of his sickness, night and day. Poor creature,—God has hitherto supported her, and I pray He may still. Maria, very sick, knows not of her husband’s death: there are some hopes of her. Your mother, exceedingly feeble, has not been able to see her son. I am so myself, but have seen him twice a day. His child is at our house with a nurse. We are all dying in the city daily. The Lord prepare us. Oh, my son, you have often heard the necessity of repentance towards God, and faith towards the Lord Jesus Christ. Now, now, it is abundantly necessary. Oh, pray for it; turn all your attention to it. What is the world and all the things in it, to an interest in Christ and his great salvation! The Lord have mercy on you all. Pray, pray for yourself, and pray for us. You’ll stay where you are, and may God preserve you.

JAMES SPROAT.”

On the 23d of August preceding the date of this letter, he completed half a century as an ordained minister; and, from that period, he had seemed to be living in constant expectation of death, and a large portion of his waking hours were spent in private devotional exercises. His domestic afflictions, severe as they were, he endured without the least repining. At the funeral of his son, whose death is referred to in the above letter, he evinced the very sublimity of Christian mourning. Trembling with age, with disease already fastened upon him, he followed the corpse of his beloved son to the grave, and, after it was deposited, leaning on his staff, he pronounced only these words,—“The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away, blessed be the name of the Lord, Amen.” His own death took place on the 18th of October, 1793, in the seventy-second year of his age. He continued in possession of his mental faculties to the last. After he had lost the power of speech, he was asked if he still experienced the sustaining influences of the Gospel, and he answered affirmatively, by lifting up his hand and his eyes to Heaven.

There were the most substantial demonstrations of grief in connection with his funeral. The more common mode of conveying a corpse to the grave, during the ravages of the pestilence, was on a cart,—sometimes on a hearse; and the attendants consisted only of the person who drove the carriage, the grave digger, and, in a few instances, two or three mourning friends. But, in the case of Dr. Sproat, the people who had met at the church for prayer, formed a procession of about fifty persons, and some pious negroes voluntarily offered to carry the bier.

Dr. Sproat's colleague, Dr. Green, was absent from the city at the time of his death; but, immediately on his return, he preached a Funeral Sermon, from Psalm cxvi. 15, which was published.

Dr. Green, in the sermon above referred to, thus describes the character of his venerable colleague:—

“In his natural temper, he used often to tell me that he was easily susceptible of passion. If it was so, it is certain that, like the sage of antiquity,* *he was remarkable for his victory over it*, and for those virtues which are its opposites. Patience, moderation, indulgence, and forbearance, were leading features in his general character. Meekness and affection distinguished him highly. Not only in the near relations of husband, father, and master, did they render him most dear and exemplary, but in all his intercourse with the world they shone out in the mildest and most amiable light. His candour, charity, and tenderness appeared on all occasions, and gained him, in a peculiar degree, the respect and affection of almost all descriptions of persons. He was free from all disguise. He was ‘an Israelite indeed, in whom there was no guile.’ You saw, at once, the man you would always see. Such a man was peculiarly formed for lasting friendship and unreserved confidence. They could scarcely be avoided by one who was often with him. Between him and myself, therefore, they subsisted in a manner which fills me with a mournful pleasure to recollect, and the loss of which I most sensibly realize and deplore. In a collegiate charge of nearly seven years, not one cold, or distant, or formal word ever passed between us; not the slightest alienation interrupted our harmony. On all occasions, he treated me like a father, and like a father, I can truly say, I loved and honoured him. His usual appellation in addressing me was, ‘my son:’—and had I been his son by the ties of nature, as well as in the bonds of the Gospel, he could scarcely have treated me with more affection, or more sincerely regarded my interest as his own.

“In scholastic attainments he was a good proficient. Of those which are denominated the learned languages, he was a considerable master. He loved all the pursuits and interests of science; and I have heard him lament that his urgent calls to active service in early life left him so little time to become accurate in some of the departments of literature.

“In the study of Divinity he had made a progress that was truly great and enviable. It was his delight, and he pursued it incessantly. A man has seldom been seen, who had a more complete knowledge or a more familiar acquaintance with the Holy Scriptures. His great readiness in quoting and applying them in a pertinent manner, in his public addresses, you have all observed, and many of you, I trust, will remember as the means of your spiritual edification. He had made deep researches into systematic, casuistic and polemic Divinity. On these subjects he read much in some of the last years of his life. ‘My own sentiments,’ said he, ‘in regard to the essentials of religion, I believe, are fixed. But I find much entertainment, and I think some advantage, in reading books of this description.’

“In his discourses from the pulpit, he loved to dwell on the fundamental and peculiar doctrines of the Gospel, which he regarded as a system of pure grace and mercy, abasing the sinner to the dust, and exalting God in the highest. When the train of his address led him to speak on the experimental part of religion, he was excellent and edifying in a singular degree. * * * His public prayers were remarkable for a vein of piety and fervour seldom equalled. He had a certain copiousness of expression and engagedness of manner in this Divine service, which could arise from no other source than the familiar intercourse of his own soul with Heaven.

“In his personal religion he was truly eminent. His life and example exhibited a most amiable view of the influence and efficacy of the Gospel principles on the human heart and character. Unfeigned humility,—that ornament of every other grace, had become a habit of his soul, and appeared in all his deportment. Having studied long and made great proficiency in the School of Christ, he had learned the hard lesson of

thinking in a very lowly manner of himself. His charity for others was uncommonly extensive. It led him to hope the best, where there was any probability on which hope could be founded. His faith was built on the sure foundations of the Gospel, and it supported him in the most trying hour. In some of his last moments he said, 'All my expectations for eternity rest on the infinite grace of God, abounding through the finished righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ.'

FROM THOMAS BRADFORD, Esq.

PHILADELPHIA, December 31, 1850.

Rev. and dear Sir: My reminiscences of the Rev. Dr. Sproat, concerning whom you inquire, have respect to a period when I was quite young, and of course are not very extended; but the little that I do remember concerning him, I am happy to communicate, in compliance with your request. My parents were both members of his congregation, and my mother a member of his church; and one of my early recollections of him is his coming to my father's house in the autumn of 1785, to officiate at the baptism of my youngest sister. At that day, it was common to administer the ordinance in private.

Dr. Sproat, as I remember him, was a venerable looking man. He always wore the wig and the cocked hat, according to the usage of aged ministers at that period. He possessed a benevolent countenance; his manners were gentle and courteous; his speech conciliating and kind, especially towards the youthful part of his flock, who were attracted to him by his paternal and affectionate treatment of them. He was accustomed to hear them say their Catechism; and if any one was not perfect in his lesson, instead of severely reproving him, he would gently lay his hand upon his head and say,—“Take care, my dear child, and get your lesson better next time.” As the venerable man declined in strength and vigour, his preaching, of course, lost, in some degree, its interest, and the junior pastor, Mr. (afterwards Dr.) Ashbel Green, who was then in his early prime, became, especially to the younger part of the congregation, the chief object of attraction; and sometimes they even absented themselves from church in the afternoon, when it was known that Dr. Sproat was to occupy the pulpit. Some of the Doctor's friends indiscreetly alluded to this circumstance in conversation with him, by way of finding fault; but he mildly, and with the kindest spirit, replied,—“This is natural, and therefore not to be complained of: he must increase, but I must decrease.”

I never knew of Dr. Sproat's publishing more than a single sermon, and that was one preached on the death of Whitefield, in October, 1770. It is highly evangelical in its character, and contains a lively and graphic delineation of Whitefield's prominent qualities. I will give you a brief extract from it:—

“Being a good man, full of the Holy Ghost and of faith, fired with a flaming zeal for his Lord and Master, filled with bowels of tenderness and compassion to immortal souls, and favoured with more than Ciceronian eloquence, he soon became the wonder of the world, as a preacher.

“As a speaker, he was furnished with such admirable talents, with such an easy method of address, and was such a perfect master of the art of persuasion, that he triumphed over the passions of the most crowded auditory with all the charms of sacred eloquence.

“Such were the impressions of the Eternal Majesty upon his mind, that he habitually lived as seeing Him who is invisible. He lived with a wise reference to futurity, and maintained a close walk with God. Prayer was his soul's delight. * * * Praise was an employment in which his soul was exceedingly delighted. In this exercise, he often appeared to anticipate the sacred pleasures of the upper world. His work was done, and we have good reason to believe it was well done. He lived long enough to perform an excellent part on this stage of action; to exemplify a life of virtue and piety; to sound the Gospel trumpet through almost the whole of the British empire; and to gather in a

plentiful harvest of precious souls to the Redeemer, that shall be as so many sparkling diamonds in that untarnished crown of glory, which adorns his victorious brow. He lived God's time, which is the best time."

Regretting my inability to comply more fully with your request,
I remain your friend and brother in Christ,

THOMAS BRADFORD.

JOHN ROAN.*

1744—1775.

JOHN ROAN was born in Ireland, about the year 1716, and was brought up a weaver. He came to this country in his youth, and studied for some time at the Log College. He was licensed to preach by the "New Side" Presbytery of Newcastle. As early as 1741, he was engaged in teaching a grammar school on the Neshaminy; for Dr. Rodgers of New York (according to Dr. Miller) entered his school there that year, and continued in it several years afterwards.

In the winter of 1744, the Presbytery of Newcastle with which Mr. Roan was connected, sent him on a missionary tour to Virginia. He preached with great effect in Hanover, and the neighbouring counties; and many in different places were awakened and hopefully converted through his instrumentality. He was bold, energetic, earnest, but had less of caution and prudence than the peculiar circumstances in which he was placed, required. He inveighed against the clergy of the Established Church with great freedom, charging them not only with neglect of their official duties, but with gross moral delinquencies. His offensive statements and seathing satire quickly attracted the attention of the parish clergy and their friends; and they resolved that he should no longer be tolerated. Affidavits were laid before Governor Gooch, representing that this man was not only earnestly engaged in efforts at proselytism, but had actually been guilty of blasphemy. The matter came before the Grand Jury; and, after the Governor had delivered a vehement charge, they agreed to "present John Roan for reflecting upon and vilifying the Established Religion, in divers sermons, preached at the house of Joshua Morris in James City Parish, on the 7th, 8th, and 9th of January, before a numerous audience unlawfully assembled." Mr. Roan returned to Pennsylvania, before the meeting of the Court at which this charge was given. The charge was published, and an order forbidding any meetings of "Moravians, Muggletonians, and New Lights," was issued. The people of Hanover laid the case before the Synod of New York in May, 1745; and the Synod sent, by the hands of Messrs. Gilbert Tennent and Samuel Finley, an address to the Governor. These gentlemen were very graciously received by His Excellency, who readily granted them liberty to preach at Hanover. Before their arrival, the individual who had been chiefly instrumental in inflaming the government against Mr. Roan, and who was believed to have done it at the expense of perjuring himself, had fled never to return. The trial came on, on the

* Hodge's Hist. Presb. Ch.—Webster's MSS.