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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.
✓
BY WILLIAM B. SPRAGUE, D. D.

VOLUME III.

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JOHN McKNIGHT, D. D.*

1775—1823.

JOHN McKNIGHT was born near Carlisle, Pa., October 1, 1754. His father, who served as Major in the French and Indian wars of that period, died during the early childhood of this son, and his mother subsequently contracted a second marriage. Little is known of his early life, except that he exhibited great loveliness and buoyancy of temper, which made him a general favourite with his associates. In due time he became a member of the College of New Jersey, where he graduated under the Presidency of Dr. Witherspoon, in 1773.

Shortly after leaving College, he went to Shippensburg, Pa., where he prosecuted his theological studies, under the direction of the Rev. Dr. Robert Cooper. He was licensed to preach by the Presbytery of Donegal between the meetings of Synod in 1774 and 1775, and was ordained by the same Presbytery in the latter part of 1776, or early in 1777.

In 1775, shortly after his licensure, he went to Virginia, and organized a Congregation on Elk Branch, embracing the country between Shepherds-town and Charlestown. Here he remained till 1783, when he resigned his charge, and accepted a call to the Lower Marsh Creek Presbyterian Church, in Adams County, Pa. This connection was eminently favourable to both his comfort and usefulness, and the years which he spent here he ever afterwards regarded as among the happiest of his life. He owned a farm of about one hundred and fifty acres; and such was the generous consideration of his large and respectable congregation towards him, that they actually left him little to do in cultivating it, while the voluntary offerings which they otherwise made him were more than double his stipulated salary.

A somewhat amusing incident occurred during his connection with this church, that was strikingly illustrative of one feature of his character. He had just ordained three ruling elders; and one of them was appointed to attend the meeting of Presbytery to be held the next week. He came to the Pastor on the evening of the day of his ordination, under a good deal of agitation, to inquire what were the duties that would be expected of him. Perceiving the state of his mind, Mr. McKnight assumed a serious air, and replied,—“You are to see that my horse is fed and saddled in time to start; to go before and have breakfast or dinner prepared for us; to pay the bills, and in Presbytery to vote as I do.” This playfulness relieved the anxious elder, whose countenance changed from its solemn gravity to a smile,—when opportunity was given to inform him what his real duties would be as a member of the Body.

After labouring with the Marsh Creek Church for about three years, he was called in July, 1789, to be a colleague Pastor with the Rev. Dr. Rodgers of the united Presbyterian Congregation of the city of New York; and after mature deliberation, and by the advice of the Presbytery of which he was a member, he accepted the call, and was installed on the 2d of December of that year. The church, which had previously been in a somewhat divided state, in consequence of having had several candidates among them, now became harmonious, and Mr. McKnight entered upon his

* MS. from his son.—Miller's Life of Rodgers.

labours with great zeal and alacrity. He was accustomed to preach regularly three times on the Sabbath, and to lecture on the Shorter Catechism on a week-day evening, besides performing a large amount of more private pastoral labour.

In 1791, he was honoured with the degree of Doctor of Divinity from Yale College; and in 1795, was Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church.

Early in 1792, Dr. McKnight's health had become so much impaired by his arduous and incessant labours, that it became evident that he could no longer preach three times on the Sabbath; and, as the congregation were very desirous of keeping up the third service, they resolved on calling a third minister. They accordingly gave a call to Mr. (afterwards the Rev. Dr.) Samuel Miller, which he accepted; and his ordination and installation took place in June of the next year. In 1797 and 1798, a new Presbyterian Church was built in Rutgers street, in connection with the collegiate charge; and a large debt, contracted by the enterprise, was, to a great extent, discharged by the personal efforts of Dr. McKnight, in collecting funds for the purpose.

In 1806, Dr. McKnight was commissioned by the New York Missionary Society to visit the Tuscarora Indians, among whom that Society had previously had a missionary,—to decide upon the expediency of organizing a Christian church among them. He executed the commission, much to the satisfaction of the Society, as appears from their next annual Report. He found some serious difficulties in the way of the organization, partly growing out of the ignorance and dubious Christian character of some at least, who offered themselves as candidates for church membership, and partly from a difference of opinion, on some points, with the missionary who was on the ground; but, notwithstanding these embarrassments, he proceeded to organize the congregation, and the whole was performed in an orderly, peaceable and solemn manner.

Dr. McKnight remained in New York, in the earnest and faithful discharge of his ministerial duties, twenty years. In April, 1809, the collegiate connection was dissolved. Though Dr. McKnight had always been opposed to collegiate charges, from principle, yet he deemed the dissolution of that existing relationship, at that time, inexpedient, as he considered some of the measures employed to effect it, unjustifiable. Anticipating protracted collisions and jealousies as the result, and being considerably advanced in life, as well as reduced in health, he determined to resign, and, with the consent of the Presbytery, did resign, his pastoral charge.

On leaving New York, he removed to a small but beautiful farm, with modern improvements, in the neighbourhood of Chambersburg, Pa., which he had purchased for a residence. Shortly after this, the Presbyterian Church of Rocky Spring, one of the oldest congregations in that region,—then recently rendered vacant, and whose house of worship was about three miles from his dwelling, unanimously invited him to become their pastor. He dissuaded them from presenting him a regular call; but consented to serve them as a stated supply, as his health would permit; and as such he performed towards them all the duties of a pastor, with as much fidelity and punctuality as if the pastoral relation had actually been constituted. About this time, he received several pressing invitations from different churches in the State of New York, to take the pastoral charge of them;

but in each case he returned a negative answer. His removal from New York he always regarded as a happy event in his life. It not only loosened him from the cares and responsibilities of a heavy city charge, which had become exhausting by reason of advancing age, but brought him into a peaceful retirement, among a large circle of relatives and friends, and gave him leisure for those special devotional exercises so congenial with his feelings, and so fitting to his circumstances and prospects.

In 1815, he was invited to the Presidency of Dickinson College. Contrary to his own inclination, he yielded to the importunities of his friends, and accepted the invitation. But he soon found that the fiscal concerns of the institution were so much embarrassed, as to render the hope of its success, and even permanency, in his estimation, at best doubtful; and he accordingly resigned the office, after having held it for little more than a year. He now returned to his farm, and resumed his ministerial labours, and continued in the discharge of them, as opportunity offered or occasion required, until the commencement of the year 1822, when he had an attack of a bilious epidemic disease, which entirely prostrated his physical energies, already greatly reduced by age, and a long course of active ministerial labour. From the effects of this attack he never recovered; and on the 21st of October, 1823, in the seventieth year of his age, in the full exercise of his mental powers, and in the lively assurance of a future glorious life, he departed calmly and triumphantly to mingle in other scenes.

Dr. McKnight published six Sermons on Faith,* [recommended by Doctors Rodgers and Witherspoon,] 1790; a Thanksgiving Sermon, 1795; a Sermon before the New York Missionary Society, 1799; a Sermon on the present state of the political and religious world, 1802; a Sermon on the death of the Rev. Dr. John King, 1811.

On the 17th of October, 1776, he was married to Susan, daughter of George Brown, of Franklin County, Pa., who survived her husband about nine years. They had ten children. Two of them entered the ministry, one of whom is deceased, the other is still (1857) living. Another entered the medical profession, became a Surgeon in the navy of the United States, and died on the 14th of May, 1857, in the sixty-fifth year of his age.

WASHINGTON McKNIGHT, the eldest son of the Rev. Dr. McKnight, was born near Millerstown, Adams County, Pa., January 29, 1779. He was graduated at Columbia College, New York, in 1798. Having prosecuted his theological studies under the direction of his father, he was licensed to preach by the Presbytery of New York, October 3, 1800. After his licensure, he spent considerable time in travelling through the State of New York, and some of the adjacent States, visiting vacant churches, forming an acquaintance with many Presbyterian ministers, and exercising his talents in preaching. Having declined invitations to settle in several places, he was at length invited to become the Pastor of the Presbyterian Church in Augusta, Ga., and President of the Academy in that place. This invitation he thought it his duty to accept; and, accordingly, he was ordained

* Dr. Archibald Alexander states that, in one of his preaching excursions in the early part of his ministry, he met with a Mr. Robert Campbell, who had formerly been a member of Dr. McKnight's congregation in Virginia, and whose memory was so prodigious that he could repeat many of his Sermons verbatim; that after the Doctor's removal to New York, when he resolved to publish his Sermons on Faith, he found the manuscript of one of them was missing, and on applying to Mr. Campbell, recovered the discourse, not only in substance, but nearly or quite to the very letter.

by the Presbytery of New York, April 26, 1804, and proceeded immediately to undertake the duties of the double charge devolved upon him. These duties he discharged in a manner that gave promise of extensive usefulness. But his career of activity was destined to be short. Within less than a year after his arrival at Augusta, he was attacked with a disease, known as "the strangers' fever," which, after a few days, terminated fatally. He died on the 5th of September, 1808, in the twenty-ninth year of his age. He retained the full use of his intellectual faculties to the last, and passed away under the sustaining influence of a hope full of immortality. He was uncommonly amiable in his dispositions, and bland in his manners; was a fine classical scholar, and an animated, earnest and popular preacher.

FROM THE REV. GEORGE DUFFIELD, D. D.

DETROIT, March 11, 1850.

Rev. and dear Sir: You ask me to communicate to you whatever recollections I may have of the Rev. Dr. John McKnight, which may serve to illustrate his character. It is but little that I knew personally in relation to him. He was far my superior in years and attainments. Although a resident of the same place with him for the greater part of a year, and associated in the same Presbytery for several years, in the latter period of his life, my opportunities for intercourse with him were perhaps scarcely sufficient to justify me in undertaking what you request. I will, however, do the best to meet your wishes that I can.

Dr. McKnight was a man of slender person, and rather above the medium height. His countenance indicated a considerate turn of mind, and at least a capacity for deep thought. His manners were graceful and dignified, without any attempt at the polish and courtier-like demeanor, sometimes assumed by popular and fashionable clergymen. He was at home in all society, and could adapt himself, in his native simplicity of character, to every variety of age, temper, and education. A shade had been cast upon his natural naivete and cheerfulness by advancing years, and possibly deepened somewhat by unexpected changes in his ministerial relations. In the circle of his friends and acquaintances, and among the people to whom he ministered, his manner was free and affable, and his conversation pleasant and instructive. As a preacher, he was calm and dispassionate. Although there was little variety in either his tones or gesture, yet his delivery was far from being dull or monotonous: it was well adapted to his matter, which was generally a lucid, logical exhibition of some important scriptural truth. He was a zealous assertor and advocate of the Calvinistic faith, which, however, he chose to present in connection with a "thus saith the Lord," rather than the subtleties of metaphysics. The bearing of Christian doctrine on Christian experience and practice, he carefully set forth; and a small volume which he published, on the subject of "saving faith," unfolds both his own influential belief, and his opposition to Antinomian peculiarities. He maintained the views which had been held and defended by Dr. Robert Smith of Pequea, Pa., in his controversy with Dr. Annan. This work was well received and extensively circulated, and was acknowledged, even by those who dissented from the views which it maintains, to evince a very thorough acquaintance with didactic theology, and no inconsiderable skill in conducting an argument.

The first time I recollect to have seen Dr. McKnight, was during the sessions of the General Assembly in Philadelphia, in May, 1812, if I mistake not, when the subject of the location of the Theological Seminary was under consideration. Princeton and Chambersburg were the places between which the competition was greatest. Dr. McKnight earnestly advocated the latter, deprecating various influences which he stated, and predicting (for he spoke thus confidently) that,

in process of time, should it be placed in Princeton, it would become the great ruling head and motive power in the General Assembly. On this subject he displayed great zeal; but he was overruled by the judgment of his brethren. I think he seldom appeared afterwards in the General Assembly, but diligently confined his attentions and labours within the immediate region in which he lived.

Dr. McKnight finished his earthly career, surrounded by his family and friends, and among a people who still greatly reverence his memory. Having commenced his ministerial labours in the region where he died, at a very early period after its first settlement, his name was associated with the earliest and most important events connected with the Church and cause of Christ, within the bounds of the Presbytery of Carlisle. There are still living a considerable number, who cherish a grateful appreciation of his services, as an able and faithful minister of Christ.

Very respectfully yours,

GEORGE DUFFIELD.

JOHN LINN.

1776—1820.

FROM THE REV. ROBERT BAIRD, D. D.

NEW YORK, January 15, 1850.

My dear Sir: My personal recollections of the Rev. John Linn are not very extensive or minute; and yet, in my earlier days, I had some opportunities of knowing him, and I can truly say that he left an impression upon my mind which time has done little to impair. I regarded him as an uncommonly fine specimen of a man; and so, I am confident, he was generally regarded by those who were privileged to know him. The materials for the following brief notice of him, are derived from the most authentic source; though his life was of so even a tenor, that it could hardly form the subject of a protracted narrative.

JOHN LINN was born in Adams County, Pa., in the year 1749. His parents were Presbyterians, and were connected with the Congregation of Lower Marsh Creek, in the Presbytery of Carlisle. He made a profession of religion while he was yet quite a youth. He was fitted for College by the Rev. Dr. Robert Smith of Pequea, Lancaster County, Pa., and was graduated at Nassau Hall, during the Presidency of Dr. Witherspoon, in the year 1773. He was a classmate of Henry Lee, Morgan Lewis, Aaron Ogden, John Blair Smith, William Graham, John McKnight, and several others, distinguished in their respective professions. After leaving College, he returned to Pennsylvania, and studied Theology under the direction of the Rev. Dr. Robert Cooper, minister of the Congregation of Middle Spring, within the limits of what was then Donegal (now Carlisle) Presbytery. He was licensed to preach by the Presbytery of Donegal in December, 1776. Not far from a year after his licensure, the Congregations of Sherman's Valley, in Cumberland (now Perry) County, invited him to become their pastor. He accepted the invitation, and was accordingly ordained and installed shortly after. Here he remained labouring faithfully