

COLLECTIONS

OF THE

MAINE HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

VOL. VI.

PORTLAND:
PUBLISHED FOR THE SOCIETY.

1859.

ARTICLE VII.

MEMOIR

OF THE

REV. JOHN MURRAY,

FIRST MINISTER OF THE CHURCH IN BOOTHBAY.

BY

REV. A. G. VERMILYE,

OF NEWBURYPORT, MASS.

REV. JOHN MURRAY.

FROM its first settlement, about 1630, till 1766, the township of Boothbay appears to have had neither church nor minister; although in 1674, when the county of Devonshire was established, this was one of the principal plantations. The land, however, was not bought of the Indian sagamore till 1666; and in 1686, during the second Indian war, the place was overrun by the savages, and lay waste for forty years. In 1737, the then proprietor made a grant of lands to sundry people dwelling there, and at the same time a generous provision for the support of the ministry. Ten acres were reserved for a meeting house, training field, and burying-ground. And he ordered that the first settled minister should have an equal share in the meadows with the first settlers, and that one hundred acres should be laid out as a free gift to the first minister, and another hundred acres for the use of the ministry forever. He also allowed the inhabitants to deduct, out of the sales of the land, one hundred pounds towards building a meeting house, and thirty pounds per annum towards paying the first settled minister. Still, for some reason, nearly thirty years elapsed before a meeting house was built or a minister obtained, although Rev. Robert Dunlap resided there awhile, previous to his settlement at Brunswick. The people of Boothbay,

—then Townshend,¹—many of whom were Scotch-Irish Presbyterians, seem not themselves to have been entirely responsible for it. Applications were at various times made by them to the Presbytery of Boston for supplies; but all were treated (say the session records) “with utter neglect,” probably because the Presbytery had no supplies to send. So many and so urgent, indeed, were the “supplications” of feeble and destitute congregations for preachers, and so desirous the Presbytery of meeting the want, that they sometimes erred in receiving too hastily men of doubtful repute, who proved in the end “troublers,” and whose censurable conduct in some places seriously damaged the interests and credit of Presbyterianism. Such a man was the Rev. Alexander Boyd of Newcastle in Maine; who was sentenced by them to be “sharply rebuked,” but was at length ordained; the reason assigned being “the urgent necessity of the destitute places.”

Dispirited by long and fruitless attempts, and seeing now “no hope of any settlement of the gospel at Boothbay, the people sat down in inaction and despondency,” — we again quote the session records of the church, — but in the midst of this gloomy prospect, their minds were relieved by the arrival, in 1763, of Mr. John Murray, a probationer from Ireland; who had been drawn thither by repeated invitations from one of the principal settlers of the place. This was Andrew Reed, Esq., formerly of Mr. Murray’s native town, and his uncle by marriage.

¹ There being another Townsend in the State, the inhabitants petitioned General Court for a change of name, and their agent was asked, “What name will you have, — what is there peculiar in your location or harbor?” “Why,” said he, “it is as snug as a *booth*.” “Well, has it any bay?” “Yes, a fine bay.” So they called it Boothbay.

REV. JOHN MURRAY.

We shall now sketch the history of this eloquent divine, subsequently the subject of so much public discussion and bitterness, and endeavor to do what we think justice to his memory. Mr. Murray was born in the county of Antrim, in Ireland, May 22, 1742. At a very early age, owing to his unusual proficiency in his studies, he was entered at the university of Edinburgh, where he graduated with high honor. He united with the church in his native town when fifteen, and commenced the ministry when only eighteen. Many troubles, involving an imputation upon his integrity, dated from this period, and concerned his licensure; a matter to be referred to in another place. When hardly twenty-one he came to New York, and thence to Boothbay. Dec. 22, 1763, the inhabitants assembled at the house of A. M. Beath, Esq., and unanimously voted to call Mr. Murray to be the stated pastor of the town; and five individuals at the same time obligated themselves to pay him an annual salary of ninety pounds sterling. He had resolved, however, to return to Ireland; and accordingly, notwithstanding the earnest importunities of the people, took his leave of them in the February following, 1764, but with the promise that if he ever returned to America, and their call was renewed, he would settle with them. For two years longer, they remained without a minister: Mr. Murray had, meantime, by a change of purpose, been received under the care of the Presbytery of New York; and subsequently, in May, 1765, ordained and settled as Gilbert Tennent's successor, in the Second Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia. After his settlement there, the people of Boothbay claimed his promise; but as he had heard nothing from them during his residence in New York, he replied that he had considered himself absolved from it. But in January, 1766, he again returned to

Boston, and the inhabitants of Boothbay now determined to push their call to a final result. For this purpose Andrew McFarland and Andrew Reed, Esqs., were sent as commissioners to the synod of New York and Philadelphia, and John Beath (afterwards a ruling elder in the church) was sent express to Boston to manage the matter there. Some difficulties interposed: the church in Philadelphia, notwithstanding the rumors circulated against his character, were very loth to give him up; and it was only after reiterated requests to the Presbytery, and the assurance of his determination not to return, that his dismissal was obtained. But finally, they "received the minutes of the First Presbytery of Philadelphia, whereby Mr. Murray was liberated in manner and form, as fully as they desired."

In July he arrived at Boothbay. A full meeting of the town was at once called by the selectmen, and at his desire assembled under the frame of the meeting house then being reared. Before accepting their call, Mr. Murray "opened at large the history of his education and degrees at the university, his licensure to preach, and of certain difficulties which had arisen between him and some ministers in Ireland, respecting a *certificate*, which he expressed great sorrow for attempting to support, after having discovered the error of its authors; begging pardon therefor of God and man. This, together with some censures which had since appeared in the public prints, he related at large; and also read all the minutes of the Presbyteries of New York and Philadelphia respecting him. He then asked the meeting to testify by the usual sign, if any were dissatisfied; and the whole meeting answered in the negative."

LABORS AT BOOTHBAY.

During his brief sojourn at Philadelphia, more had been added to the church than during the whole of Gilbert Ten-

nent's ministry, and but a short time elapsed before an extensive revival commenced at Boothbay, which reached other places also. Notwithstanding the unpromising nature of the field, and the prevailing inattention to religion at his coming, he formed a church there which was probably the largest in the State, and gathered from all the surrounding region; he being at the time the only settled minister east of Woolwich. People would go seven and even ten miles, regularly, on the Sabbath to hear him, returning at night. Mr. Murray was not merely an eloquent orator, but uncommonly active and faithful as a pastor — "a minister," says Williamson, "whose piety was as incense, both at the fireside and the altar." His whole soul was in his work. He went from house to house, examining into the religious state of individuals and families, and pressing upon all the duties of piety. A single extract from his private diary in 1766, after a day spent in visiting, will show the character of his zeal and the feelings with which he labored. "Alas! alas!" he writes, "what shall I say? I now fear the success of my ministry more than ever. O my God, enable me to be found faithful. O pour out thy spirit on these poor families, that they may not forget the promises this day made in thy sight, that thy worship shall be daily, morning and evening, maintained in their houses, and that they will never rest till they have received Christ into all their hearts. O let the convictions we hope begun on two of them be carried deeper and deeper until ended in conversion. Eight unbaptized — all prayerless. Alas! alas!" Not long had he thus to mourn. During the winter the revival commenced, a Presbyterian church was organized, and April 12, 1767, the sacrament was administered for the first time in Boothbay. Immediately after, at the call of several towns, beginning at Squam and Freetown, he visited Pownalborough, Sheepscoot, the head of the tide, Walpole, Harrington, and

other places, preaching every day for a fortnight. In Bristol the result was, that the *town* appointed a committee "to take measures to have a church organized on the Westminster confession and Presbyterian rules;" which was done by Mr. Murray in the course of the year. Religion, in those neighborhoods, now became the conversation of all companies. His lodgings were daily crowded, often till after midnight, and sometimes till three o'clock in the morning, with one company after another. And this revival continued during two years; so many being added to the church, that the communion table, which according to custom was spread in the broad isle, had frequently to be extended into the porch and on both wings of the building.

CHARACTER AS A PREACHER.

In manner Mr. Murray was a little pompous, and his style touched the verbose; but his acquirements were extensive, his sermons thoroughly evangelical, solid in matter, often grandly solemn, pathetic, and experimental, and as set forth by his fine voice and appearance, and his energetic action, produced a powerful impression. Many who had heard them both, considered him not inferior to Whitefield. As his sermons were often two or three hours in the delivery, and he held his audience in rapt attention, he must, evidently, have had rare gifts as a preacher. His popularity was exceedingly great. Whenever he passed along through Maine, the churches were thronged. Mr. John McKeen, noticing some years ago that the old church at Brunswick was "shored up," found on inquiry that it was a precaution against accidents from the rush of people when Mr. Murray came along. Worthy Mr. Smith, of Portland, raised "a sad toss" among his people in 1772, by not inviting him to preach; and again in 1787 he writes in his journal, "a great

uproar about Murray's not preaching." In extemporaneous utterance, as a good test of his powers, Mr. Murray was always ready. Judge Hinkley, a descendant of the pilgrims of Plymouth, a disputatious man, one who thought nothing right which lacked the savor of Independency, and a leader in opposition to the Scotch Irish in Brunswick, was one Sabbath in meeting when Mr. Murray occupied the pulpit. Something in the sermon displeased the Judge. Whereupon he stepped into the aisle, and asked the preacher if he "knew in whose presence he stood?" Mr. Murray replied yes, he knew that he stood in the presence of "a judge of the *Inferior Court of Common Pleas*." "Then," answered the Judge, "I will say unto you, as the Lord said unto Elijah, 'What dost thou here,' John Murray?" Mr. Murray immediately repeated Elijah's answer, (1 Ki. xix. 10), and taking it for his text, preached an hour thereon. The difficulty ended, and the congregation were more pleased with him than ever. It is related that one of his early opposers at Newburyport, (where he subsequently settled), gave him a text at the church door as a trial of his qualifications. He laid aside his intended sermon, and discoursed with such ability as disarmed prejudice, and called forth from Rev. Mr. Parsons the extravagant eulogium, that he had not been surpassed since the days of the apostles.

INFLUENCE DURING THE WAR.

The Revolutionary War pressed with severity upon Boothbay and other towns on the seaboard. The operations of the enemy at different times greatly distressed the people, and obliged many of them to remove for a season. Mr. Murray appears to have entered zealously into the sentiments of his adopted country and parishioners. In 1775 he was sent as a delegate from Boothbay (or Townshend)

to the provincial Congress, which met that year at Watertown. He was at one time president *pro tem.* of that body, and also acting secretary, and was also, while a member, chairman of the committee for reporting rules and orders for Congress; and his reports bear evidence of his thorough acquaintance with parliamentary usage. The basis of these reports is still preserved in the rules observed in the Legislature of Massachusetts.¹ So great was his influence over the people around Townshend, and so well known, that Commodore Sir George Collier, who visited the harbor in 1777, with the British ships *Rainbow* and *Hope*, having cause of complaint against the inhabitants, addressed the matter to him, at the same time inviting him politely to come on board his ship. Mr. Murray accordingly went, and was received with civility; and after some further correspondence as the organ of the officers and council, appears to have settled the difficulty. A writer on board the ship describes him as a "cunning, sensible man, who had acquired a wonderful ascendancy over, and had the entire guidance of all the people in the country around Townshend. His house," he says "was on an eminence not far from the water side, and appeared to be a very handsome edifice, with gardens and shrubbery happily disposed around it. Sir George offered him some trifling presents, which he refused for fear of giving jealousy to his fellow rebels."² It was, probably, before this, that the following incident occurred, as related to Dr. McKeen of Topsham, by old Mr. Reed of Boothbay, who witnessed the scene. Early in the war the British cruisers were in the habit of putting into Townshend harbor, and the sailors would frequently go ashore and pilfer from the Whigs or patriots. The people remonstrat-

¹ Hist. of Newburyport, by Mrs. E. Vale Smith.

² Town's "Details," &c.

ed with the officers, but without effect. They then went and got Mr. Murray. Donning his canonicals, — the white wig and gown and bands, — he was carried on board ship, and there talked with so much force and eloquence, that the inhabitants had no further trouble. Mr. Reed likewise said, that “the dignity of his appearance was such, that all the ministers in Maine put together would not equal him; that he was superior in personal knowledge to any other man that ever walked God’s footstool; that if he had not said a word, such was the grandeur of his looks that he would have carried his point; and that the officers were greatly surprised to see such a specimen of dignity coming from the coast of Maine.” With proper abatements for the warmth of personal friendship, Mr. Reed undoubtedly was correct as to the impressiveness of Mr. Murray’s appearance and manner. It was an enthusiasm he inspired.

But civilities were not long extended to him by the British naval officers. When in 1779 another armament descended upon the coast, he was considered so particularly obnoxious, from his active efforts for the defense of the eastward, that a reward of five hundred pounds was offered for his apprehension; and as the British had besides a post in the neighborhood, he was obliged to leave everything and flee elsewhere for shelter. One more incident may be here related, as illustrating both his eloquence and ready zeal for his country. During the war and at a period of peculiar gloom, Newburyport was called upon to furnish a full company, officers and men, for actual service. But the officers and gentlemen to whom the business was entrusted labored day after day in vain. On the fourth day it was moved that Mr. Murray should be invited to address the regiment then under arms. Accordingly, he was escorted to the parade, and thence by the whole regiment to the Presbyterian church. There he pronounced an address so spirited and animating, that his

audience were all attention, and tears fell from many eyes. Soon after the assembly was dismissed, a member of the church stepped forward to take the command, and in two hours the company was filled.¹ On occasion of the public Thanksgiving for peace, (Dec. 11, 1783), he published a most thrilling and able discourse, entitled, "Jerubbaal, or Tyranny's Grove Destroyed, and the Altar of Liberty Finished;" which was considered a wonderful performance at the time, and unlike the printed productions of Whitefield, fully sustains his reputation as a great orator.

REMOVAL TO NEWBURYPORT.

Mr. Murray himself would have been content to live and die in his remote locality. He had married Susan, the eldest daughter of Gen. Lithgow of Phipsbury, an influential family, and had considerable property at Boothbay. Besides, his political troubles and private sorrows led him to court retirement and obscurity. "There," he writes, "I find my comfort, and, I hope, my God; and there I see less danger of being a stumbling block in Zion, the very idea of which to me is worse than death." But much to the annoyance of his parishioners, who had such hard work to get him, several persistent attempts were made to remove him to other spheres, and many long contests were the result in presbytery. With Newburyport his people at length became quite indignant. In 1768, and again in 1769, Rev. Mr. Parsons and his session, of the First Presbyterian Church in Newburyport, sent a request that he should supply their pulpit for some months every year. And from "some inuendoes" in the letters, the Boothbay session began to suspect (no doubt justly) a design of removing their pastor from them entirely. They therefore replied in terms

¹ Miltimore's Funeral Sermon.

of high compliment to them, — “recognizing the reverend and worthy Mr. Jonathan Parsons, his session and congregation, as the patrons and friends of oppressed truth in the worst of times; who had nobly struggled in the cause of God, at Newburyport. for many years, through a continual torrent of opposition and persecution; and in the year 1768 dared to stand up, though almost alone, and espouse the cause of a persecuted stranger, whom others had conspired to destroy, whilst all the country stood silent by;” — but they declined anything more than an “exchange” for a number of Sabbaths. In 1773, he received the unusual compliment of a call from the wardens and parish of Green’s Chapel (Episcopal) in Portsmouth, N. H., with the offer of a high salary, — showing in them very advanced, not to say singularly correct ideas, for gentlemen of their persuasion, of what constitutes true apostolic succession! He replied, however, that he was conscientiously a Presbyterian; and that, whilst the revenue they offered did honor to their generosity, of that species of earth called gold he hardly now knew the value, and that it was not beneath the sun that he desired to have his portion.

The Rev. John Morehead of Boston having recently deceased, in 1774 his congregation earnestly besought Mr. Murray; although their late pastor had been his public and decided opponent. The case was delayed till 1776, and then decided adversely. But at the same meeting of presbytery, the congregation at Newburyport urged a “supplication” for his translation to become the colleague of Rev. Mr. Parsons.¹ It was not granted at that time; but subsequently, owing to his constant exposure to capture by the British, his people themselves consented to a temporary removal from them, to any place of safety; they, however,

¹ Mr. Parsons soon after died, aged 71.

added, "with the exception of Newburyport." This proviso the presbytery overruled. He preached there some twenty months, and in June, 1781, was dismissed from Boothbay, and without any farther formality constituted the pastor of that church. His salary was one hundred and fifty pounds, — one hundred pounds "additional" being also voted to him from year to year. For his labors previous to settlement, he received the *apparently* munificent sum of *nine thousand pounds* and house rent.

Mr. Murray preached, after his settlement at Newburyport, not quite twelve years. His congregation was immense for that day, — estimated at two thousand, — and in their attachment to him enthusiastic. Whilst there his zeal and labors were unremitted, although not blessed, as at Boothbay, with revivals. The war greatly affected the state of religion. He had a number of theological students under his care, and assisted many of the young in obtaining an education. Considerate kindness to the young, indeed, marked his Irish heart, and also his wisdom as a teacher. On one occasion, a little fellow in the public school sketched the reverend gentleman on a blank leaf of his Testament, when he should have been thinking of his catechism. Of course, in that day, it was very irreverent to make pictures of the minister, however well done; but Mr. Murray saved him the flogging, and had him placed under the instruction of a portrait painter. In the way of anecdote I will only add here, that another John Murray was at this time gaining some notoriety as a preacher of Universalism. To distinguish the two, his adherents denominated the one as *Salvation*, the other as *Damnation* Murray. Being at an auction in Boston, Mr. Murray gave his name. "What Murray?" said the auctioneer. "Rev. John Murray." "Which Rev. John Murray, *Salvation* or *&c.*?"

Mr. Murray's health at length failed him. A long sick-

ness of two years' duration came upon him. But one marked in the midst of many sorrows, as his previous life had been, by great patience, resignation, and piety. His enemies and his trials had been, and were, many and bitter; but when dying he remarked that they had but increased the frequency of his errands to the throne of grace. The testimony as to his closing hours is that of exalted aspiration and Christian triumph. His steady denial of certain accusations which had pursued him through life, was neither amended nor reversed in that "honest hour." He died at Newburyport, March 13th, 1793, aged 51.

THE CHARGE RELATIVE TO HIS LICENSURE.

Some reference to this is necessary to complete the present sketch of his life, and for information in writing up the history of the churches and ecclesiastical bodies with which he became connected. He was widely charged with having "forged his license;" and his name is recorded in the printed "Extract of Minutes" of the Presbytery of Philadelphia, as a "deposed" minister.

From dissatisfaction with certain ministers of the Presbytery of Ballymena in Ireland, whom he charged — and probably with offensive warmth — with doctrinal defections, he was induced to go to England for licensure; which he obtained from the class of Woollers, at Alnwick, Northumberland. But on his return his credentials were questioned, and he sent the paper to Edinburgh to be attested. A *certificate* was sent back to him, signed by two young friends of his, (ministers), designating themselves untruly "moderator" and "clerk" of presbytery. They afterwards informed him of their misdemeanor in thus counterfeiting an official document; beseeching him, however, not to ruin them, as their prospects were good in the church. And

rather than ruin them, and give his own enemies a triumph, "to which," he writes, "my infernal pride could by no means consent," he defended the paper as genuine. He was then accused of "forging;" but this — whilst confessing repeatedly and with sorrow the above-mentioned offense — he ever strenuously denied. The charge was sent after him to Philadelphia; yet only a few days before he left that city, his presbytery gave him a testimonial, as having "conducted with such meekness and piety as adorn the sacred character, and must endear him to all lovers of religion and virtue." But after his departure, acting on fresh papers from Ballymena, and some allegations besides, never judicially investigated nor proven, although influencing their minds as suspicious, the presbytery, apprehensive that "the honor of religion suffered while he continued in good standing," in June, 1766, suspended, and in April, 1767, deposed him. These proceedings were published in the Massachusetts Gazette of May 12, 1768, as he continued to preach at Boothbay, together with the manifesto of eleven ministers of Boston, publicly withdrawing all fellowship with him; which called forth his "Appeal to the Impartial Public." Mr. Murray and his friends, his church, and afterwards the "Presbytery of the Eastward," of which he became a member, claimed that he had previously been dismissed from all connection with the Presbytery of Philadelphia, and by them recommended to the church at large, and that, therefore, they had no right to depose him. But this that presbytery denied, having only dismissed him from his church, they said, and continued him under their jurisdiction. Still, their proceedings were evidently loose, and would be so considered at this day: he was not present, had no proper citations, no judicial hearing; neither were his alleged crimes and the testimony judicially sifted. They might have sentenced him for contumacy in not appearing, sup-

posing him still a member of the body, and regularly cited, but not for moral turpitude. For these reasons, as well as his humble confessions and devotedness, the Presbytery of the Eastward, in 1771, annulled the censure, and always sustained him as in good and regular standing. But owing to these unhappy difficulties, he encountered bitter prejudice throughout life; and his usefulness was greatly circumscribed. He lived a suspected man. He had warm friends, among whom Rev. Mr. Parsons and the distinguished Rev. Simon Williams of Wyndham, N. H., had carefully examined the whole case. But many pulpits were closed against him, and some of his neighbors at Newburyport would not even speak to him. Dr. Samuel Spring, a man of strong and decided tone, whether for or against, once put his hand behind his back when Mr. Murray offered his; and at a funeral where both officiated, he left the room during Mr. Murray's prayer.¹

Having now, however, the finished record of his life and death before us; and in addition, the decided convictions of Rev. Mr. Parsons, who wrote to England and took special pains to reach the truth—we can, perhaps, judge concerning him more impartially and correctly than did his

¹ Some rhymesters composed and used to sing the following catch:—

“Parson Spring began to fling,
And seemed to be in a hurry;
He could n't stay to hear him pray,
Because 't was Parson Murray.”

Dr. Spring was a Hopkinsian and preached against the doctrine of original sin. Mr. Murray preached some sermons to meet him. Being a man of keenness and wit, he likewise wrote the following on the title page of a book the doctor had published. It was afterwards found in his handwriting:—

“What mortal power, from things unclean,
Can pure productions bring?
Who can command a vital stream,
From an infected *spring*?”

immediate cotemporaries. He was but eighteen when his offense in using the certificate was committed; his life, from the age of twenty-three, was public and unimpeached; and his confessions were public, frequent, and most humble. "Though I was not concerned as an author of that paper," (he writes in 1774) "nor knew I at that time of life any great evil in receiving it when sent to me, as I was very sure its contents were nothing but facts, and its signers had written their real names in the signature; yet in using it as genuine I thereby made their crime my own—I can truly tell you, that the daily views I have had of the multiplied enormities which this occasioned me, all of which, with the unhappy consequences to the church of Christ, have been continually before my eyes, have made me wish my name blotted out of remembrance by all mankind. The Searcher of all hearts does know my agonies of mind on every review; and that but for the application of Gilead's balm, I had perished of my wounds years ago not a few." This unextenuating penitence marked his life; but the forgeries, and the other misdemeanors afterwards alleged against him but never proven, he firmly denied.

Mr. Murray's questionable position as a member of one presbytery, while another held him deposed—there being at that time no General Assembly, and the Presbyterians being independent of each other—prevented harmonious action among the presbyterial bodies in New England. The attempt to consolidate into a "synod" in 1788—90, failed from this cause, and these differences of opinion and feeling deeply injured Presbyterianism and caused it to decline in New England. We here leave this gifted man; the successor of Parsons, and predecessor of the now venerable Dana; and whose great distinction it was, that in the very place of Whitefield's ashes, he rekindled Whitefield's fires.