

“The Dead of the Synod of Georgia.”

NECROLOGY:

OR

MEMORIALS OF DECEASED MINISTERS,

WHO HAVE DIED DURING THE FIRST
TWENTY YEARS AFTER ITS
ORGANIZATION.

PREPARED IN OBEDIENCE TO THE ORDER OF THE SYNOD.

WITH A

HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION.

BY

JOHN S. WILSON, D. D.,

PASTOR OF THE FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ATLANTA, GEORGIA.

The memory of the just is blessed.—Prov. x: 7.

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REV. WILLIAM McWHIR, D.D.*

William McWhir was the son of James and Jean (Gibson) McWhir, and was born in the parish of Moneyrea and county of Down, Ireland, on the 9th of September, 1759. His father was a farmer, in comfortable circumstances, and both his parents were exemplary professors of religion. In his early childhood he lost the sight of one eye, and came very near losing his life, by means of the small-pox. His father and grandfather had both been elders in the Presbyterian Church, and his parents were desirous that one of their children should be a minister; and contrary, as it would seem, to his better judgment, they conferred the honor on *him*. After having for some time attended a school in the neighborhood of his father's residence, he was transferred to another school, of a higher order, in Belfast, to be prepared for college. Here he was brought into intimate relations, for some time, with an unprincipled and profligate young man, whose influence upon him, temporarily at least, was very disadvantageous. He remained at this school until 1778, when he was sent to the University of Glasgow, being then about nineteen years of age. Here he passed three sessions, which was the period prescribed for their candidates by the Synod of Ulster. It does not appear that, even at this time, his mind was at all awake to a sense of Christian obligation, notwithstanding he had made a profession of religion, and his studies were directed with particular reference to the ministry.

Immediately after leaving the University, he put himself under the care of the Presbytery of Killiheagh, in the county of Down, and having gone through with his trials and exam-

* MSS. Autobiography—Mr. E. J. Hardin, Esq., Sprague's Annals.

inations, was licensed to preach the Gospel on the 24th of December, 1782. He was ordained by the same Presbytery on the 25th of September, 1783.

Having, from the age of about twelve years, been deeply interested in America, by reading Carver's Travels, he early formed a purpose, with the consent of his father, (his mother was now dead,) to find a home on this side the water. Accordingly, immediately after his ordination, he sailed from Belfast for Philadelphia, where, on his arrival, he received from various distinguished individuals, a cordial welcome to the country. After a few weeks, he went, in compliance with a request that had been sent to him previous to his leaving Ireland, to engage as a teacher at Alexandria; and he now became the head of a large and flourishing academy, which was liberally patronized by General Washington, and to which the General sent two of his nephews. This brought him into quite intimate relations with that illustrious man, as well as with many other men of note in that neighborhood. The following is his account of his first visit to Mount Vernon:

"A few days after General Washington's return to Mount Vernon, I visited him, in company with a countryman of mine, Col. Fitzgerald, one of Washington's aids. At the dinner table Mrs. Washington sat at the head of the table, and Major Washington at the foot—the General sat next Mrs. Washington, on the left. He called upon me to ask a blessing before meat. When the cloth was about to be removed, he returned thanks himself. Mrs. Washington, with a smile, said, 'My dear, you forgot that you had a clergyman dining with you to-day.' With equal pleasantness he replied, 'My dear, I wish clergymen, and all men, to know that I am not a *graceless* man!'" He goes on to say, "I was frequently at Mount Vernon, and saw him frequently at Alexandria; nor did I ever see any person, whatever might be his character or standing, who was not sensibly awed in

his presence, and by the impression of his greatness. The vivacity and grace of Mrs. Washington relieved visitors of some of that feeling of awe and restraint which possessed them. He was uniformly grave, and smiled but seldom, but always agreeable. His favorite subject of conversation was agriculture, and he scrupulously avoided, in general society, topics connected with politics, or war, or his own personal actions."

In the year 1792, Mr. McWhir was applied to by an influential friend in Georgia, to visit Augusta, with a view to taking charge of both an academy and a Presbyterian Church in that town; and as he found that his expenses of living in Alexandria were too great to justify the expectation of being able to lay up any part of his income, he was inclined to listen to the application. He accordingly, after making arrangements for a temporary supply of his place in the academy, proceeded to Augusta on horseback; but on his arrival, found that the affairs of both the Church and the academy were so identified with the movements of political parties, that there was little encouragement to him to remain. He therefore returned almost immediately to Alexandria, only, however, to resign his place in the academy, and to get ready to seek a more southern residence. As soon as he could make the necessary arrangements, he left Alexandria, and went to Savannah, and thence to Bryan county, to visit some of his friends. During his sojourn there, he accepted an invitation from the people of Sunbury, in Liberty county, to take charge of their Church and academy, both of which were at that time vacant. Here his labors as teacher and minister overtaxed his strength, though his preaching was remarkably well attended, and his school grew constantly in numbers and popularity.

About this time he was married to a Mrs. Baker, a lady of an excellent character and about his own age, and shortly after he purchased a plantation a few miles from Sunbury,

to which he gave the name of *Springfield*. After continuing in his school about five years, he removed with his family to his plantation, in consequence of finding that his health suffered from the excessive labor which the two offices of minister and teacher devolved upon him. He however, in compliance with the urgent solicitation of his friends, soon opened a select school at Springfield. For awhile he continued to preach at Sunbury, but as the school became large, he held religious services on the Sabbath at Springfield. His school he kept up for several years, until the labor and responsibility became so great that he resolved once more to abandon teaching.

Still, however, he was not willing to lead an inactive life, and the great destitution of the means of grace in the surrounding region, impressed him with the obligation still to preach, as had opportunity. About the year 1809, he commenced preaching at the Court House in McIntosh county, about twelve miles from Darien, where, in the midst of great darkness, and the most violent opposition to religion, he succeeded in organizing a Church. His labors here were almost entirely gratuitous. From this station he went to Darien, where he labored for some time; and after the building of a new place of worship, the McIntosh Church was transferred to the latter place.

An event now occurred in the life of Mr. McWhir, which, to those who have followed his history to this point, will be a matter of no little surprise. Notwithstanding he had always been a minister, in regular standing, of the Presbyterian Church, he had been, even from the time he commenced his education, *privately* a Unitarian. Having occasion to re-examine the Scriptures, about the year 1812, with a view to prove their Divine authority, he was led to take a new view of the doctrines they contain, and, at no distant period, became thoroughly satisfied that the creed which he had before only *professed* to receive, really embodied the true sense of

the Word of God. This change of religious opinion, led, of course, to a corresponding change in his preaching, which did not escape the observation of those to whom he ministered.

In September, 1804, there was a tremendous hurricane, which desolated the coast of Georgia, sweeping directly over his plantation, and occasioning him a loss of about fourteen thousand dollars. Being now urged to take charge again of the Sunbury Academy. He did so, partly with a view to repair his fortunes. After a few years, he relinquished it again, on account of his health; he again returned to it, and continued his connection with it awhile longer. On leaving it the third time, he gave up teaching as a profession, though he occasionally received a few pupils to instruct in a private way.

In 1819, he suffered a severe affliction in the death of his wife. After this, his health being much enfeebled, he determined on a visit to his native country. Accordingly, in the spring of 1820, having attended the sessions of the General Assembly at Philadelphia, he sailed for Liverpool, and after remaining there a short time, passed on to London, where he was knocked down in the street by robbers, and so severely injured as to be confined to his room for a month. Thence he went to Ireland, and visited the few of his relatives and acquaintances that remained after the lapse of forty years; and in the spring of 1821, proceeded to Scotland, where he had the pleasure of making the acquaintance of Dr. Chalmers, and being present at the session of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. He returned to the United States in the autumn of that year, with renovated health.

In 1824, in consequence of a representation which had been made to him of the deplorable destitution of the means of grace in East Florida, he was induced to visit St. Augustine, with a view to making an effort for the promotion of the

Redeemer's kingdom. He accordingly constituted a Presbyterian Church, and ordained elders there; and, for several years after this, was engaged in collecting funds requisite for building a Church edifice, and, in due time, he had the pleasure to see the object accomplished.

From 1827 to 1835, he was engaged in supplying vacant Churches in Bryan, Liberty, and McIntosh counties, and in various efforts for the promotion of the cause of education. In 1838, he disposed of his homestead and went to Savannah, where he remained more than a year. He then accepted an invitation from his friend Major Wm. J. McIntosh, of Bryan county, to reside in his family, and he actually lived there till 1847, when he returned to Savannah, and fixed his home in the family of his grandson, (by marriage,) Edward J. Hardin, Esq. At the age of nearly ninety, he became a volunteer colporteur of the American Tract Society, and continued in this service till he was too feeble to labor. For several years previous to his death, he was unable to preach, but he never lost his interest in religious meetings, and was a regular attendant at Church, even down to the Sabbath immediately preceding his death. He died at the house of a friend in Liberty county, in perfect peace, on the 31st of January, 1851, in the ninety-second year of his age. His funeral was attended at Midway Church, whence, in accordance with his expressed wish, his remains were carried to Sunbury, and buried beside those of his wife. In the disposal of his property, which was not large, he made several bequests to charitable institutions. He left no descendant and no relative in this country.

The degree of Doctor of Divinity was conferred upon him by Franklin College, in Georgia, in 1832.

From the Rev. C. C. Jones, D. D.

RICEBORO, LIBERTY COUNTY, GA., }
 March 24, 1855. }

MY DEAR SIR:

I knew Dr. McWhir in my childhood, and as a friend and frequent visitor in our family, and was afterwards a pupil in his school. He was one of my examiners when received into the Presbytery of Georgia, and also when I was ordained by that body. The friendship which he entertained for my parents, he transferred to their son, and were, for some twenty years, on terms of intimacy and confidential friendship.

He was a man of medium stature, of good proportions, muscular and quick in his movements, and with uncommon powers of endurance. He had a pure Irish face, and having been disfigured in childhood by the small-pox, was homely, and, becoming prematurely gray and bald, he carried the appearance, in his countenance, of a man advanced in years, when he was not as yet past middle life. His personal habits were the neatest imaginable. I do not remember ever having seen him dressed otherwise than as a gentleman and a clergyman. He possessed great self-respect, and a high appreciation of his office. He desired always to be recognized and treated as a clergyman. He never himself forgot, nor suffered others to forget that he was one. His manners, in the family, and in his association with all classes, were uncommonly polished and dignified; and aside from the politeness, which seemed natural to him, he was formed upon the model of a gentleman seen in the Old Dominion at the period of the Revolution.

Dr. McWhir exacted in society much attention, but it was fully returned, and seemed a spontaneous movement, on his part, to preserve that elevation of manners, and that mutual respect, which add so great a charm to the intercourse of life. He was the most perfectly social man that I have ever known. Warm and sincere in his attachments, it was a real, heartfelt pleasure to him to be in the society of his friends, and to mingle with men of distinction; and his effort was, by cheerfulness of spirit, and ready and easy powers of conversation, to convert the hour or the day, as the case might be, into one of high social and friendly enjoyment. Fond of children, they never escaped his notice.

In intellectual power, he was, perhaps, not superior to the general mass of his brethren; yet an excellent scholar, well grounded in Latin and Greek, and in the usual branches of English education, and had no superior, in his day, as a teacher and disciplinarian. His reputation as such was unbounded, and he is remembered more as a teacher and a friend of education and a patron of learning, than as a minister, although he ranked among our first Presbyterian ministers, and bore his part reputably in the early efforts to establish our Church in the State. Of real courage, and of mercurial temperament, of a high sense of honor and

justice, and of strict integrity, energetic and prompt in decision and action, his schools were always models of morality and of order. He was a terror to evil doers. No fear of personal consequences to himself, nor family connections, nor wealth, nor friendly relations, nor poverty on the part of his pupils, served to screen the guilty. He used the rod sparingly, but, when necessary, most effectively. He was long a teacher, and educated fathers and their sons. Scholars were sent to him from all parts of the State, and when not engaged in teaching, he traveled in our own country, and in England, and Scotland, and Ireland, to perfect himself, and to become master of improvements in that great art. His energy and perseverance were such as to secure him success in whatever he undertook. Never having studied Theology systematically, and coming, as he believed, to a saving knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ, some years after his migration to the United States, and the period of study with him was waning, and much of his time occupied in teaching, and constant engagements adverse to close application, he could not be ranked among accomplished Theologians, although he was firmly settled upon the doctrines of our Confession of Faith. He adhered conscientiously to the Old School branch of our Church, through every trial and difficulty. His preaching, after I knew him, partook more of the practical and hortatory, than the doctrinal. He had a habit of yielding to his feelings in preaching, and most commonly was affected to tears. He contributed liberally to our benevolent societies and objects, while he had a special interest in the circulation of the Scriptures, and in our missionary operations, both at home and abroad. He was one of the earliest advocates of the Temperance Reformation, and adhered to its principles to the day of his death. Towards the close of his life, his heart was more than ordinarily interested in the progress of the Gospel on the earth, and in its success he greatly rejoiced. His reading was chiefly religious and devotional, and he seemed to be rapidly maturing for Heaven. The lamp of life literally burnt to the socket, and mind and body wasted away in extreme age unto death.

My last conversation with him, which occurred not many weeks before his death, found him fixed upon the "Rock of Ages." Said he, "My dear friend, I cannot say that I have the faith of assurance, but I think I can say I have an assured hope."

Wishing you success and usefulness in your work,

I am very truly yours in the Lord,

C. C. JONES.