

Charles B. Moore

A Biographical Sketch
of the
Rev. William Buell Sprague

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OF THE

REV. WILLIAM BUELL SPRAGUE, D.D., LL.D.

BY CHARLES B. MOORE,

LIFE MEMBER OF THE NEW YORK GENEALOGICAL AND BIOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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REV. WILLIAM BUELL SPRAGUE, D.D., LL.D.

THE life of so remarkable a man—one so long active in various walks among us—cannot be permitted to pass beyond notice without recording its outlines and some points deserving especial remembrance.

WILLIAM BUELL SPRAGUE, youngest child of Benjamin Sprague and Sybil (Buell) his wife, was born at Andover, Tolland county, Connecticut, on the 16th day of October, 1795. He early exhibited a very decided taste for study, and for its development in speaking and writing. After attending the common school of Andover and neighboring towns, and the academy at Colchester, he was placed at the age of fourteen under the tuition of Rev. Abiel Abbot, of Coventry, for preparation to enter college. At an early age he took charge of a district school as teacher, which was then a common course for students. He was occupied in study and in teaching until the year 1811, when he entered the Freshman class of Yale College. His studies in college were for a time seriously interfered with by an affection of the eyes, which compelled his absence; but he recovered, rejoined his class, and graduated with honor in 1815. From early childhood he felt and expressed a strong desire to enter the ministry, and he had taken his college course in preparation for that profession. It was his intention to enter a theological seminary immediately upon receiving his college diploma. But during the latter part of his senior year in college, he was invited, through the Hon. Timothy Pitkin, and Professor Silliman, of Yale, to go to Virginia and become an instructor in the family of Major Lewis, the nephew of Gen'l Washington, whose wife, Eleanor (Custis) Lewis, was an adopted daughter of Washington. He accepted the invitation, and accordingly in the autumn of 1815 he set out for Major Lewis's home at Woodlawn, which had been a part of Washington's plantation near Mount Vernon. Here he was cordially received, and he remained a private tutor in Major Lewis's family until June, 1816. This was a remarkable change of scene, relieving the seclusion which too often mars the effect of theological studies. From Mrs. Lewis and others he learned much of Washington's private and domestic life, which served only to increase his veneration for the great man's memory; and much also of

many of the heroes of revolutionary fame. He learned, too, to regard the members of the family at Woodlawn with sincere affection; and he became accustomed to speak of his sojourn among them as one of the pleasantest recollections of his early life.

In the fall of 1816, having returned to the North, he enrolled himself among the students of the Princeton Theological Seminary, and entered upon his professional studies under the superintendence of Drs. Miller, Alexander, and Green. Both at the college and in the seminary he came in close contact with a select class of learned and able men, and his subsequent life showed that he improved his opportunities and associations. He graduated from the seminary, in due course, in 1819.

He was immediately thereafter settled in the ministry, over the Congregational Church in West Springfield, Mass., as a colleague with the Rev. Dr. Joseph Lathrop, who was then in the 88th year of his age, and in the 63d year of his ministry in that parish; and who died in the following year (1820), leaving him sole pastor.

He remained in charge of that quiet rural parish until the fall of 1829, and it afforded him many opportunities for exercise and improvement. He commenced writing for publication.

In the year 1826 he received a unanimous call to become pastor of the Cedar Street Church of New York, as successor of the Rev. Dr. Romeyn, which he declined. Among his successors at West Springfield have been the Rev. Drs. Vermilye and Field, of New York.

In the year 1828 the degree of Doctor of Divinity was conferred upon him by Columbia College. He became known as an author as well as preacher. In that year he made his first voyage to Europe, and passed about two months in France and England, where he made many friends, especially Wilberforce and Hannah More, with both of whom he afterwards had some correspondence.

In the fall of 1829 he received and accepted an invitation to succeed the Rev. Dr. John Chester as pastor of the Second Presbyterian Church at Albany. While there he was on terms of communication and close friendship with his previous select acquaintances, with the professors of Yale and Princeton, with many New York pastors and eminent men, and "with a wide and numerous circle throughout the country." "Successive governors and legislators sat under his ministry." During much of the time it was the practice of each branch of the Legislature to invite the Albany pastors, in turn, to open the daily sessions with prayer. Many members became his acquaintances and his welcome guests.

In 1836 he made a more extended trip through England and Scotland, and on the continent of Europe, forming the acquaintance of Neander, Humboldt, Southey, Rogers, Campbell, Dr. Chalmers, Miss Maria Edgeworth, Dr. Abercrombie, and many others of note. In 1848 he received the degree of D.D. from Harvard, and in 1869 the degree of Doctor of Laws from Princeton.

His pastorate in Albany extended over a period of forty years. His hospitable house became the resort of hundreds, including strangers from abroad and persons from all parts of the Union. "His manners were courteous and engaging," and, with many attractions, it is "probable he was personally known and honored by as wide a circle of friends as any private individual now living." At the end of that period, and just as he was completing his 74th year, he resigned his charge, and removed with his family

from Albany to Flushing, L. I., where he died on the 7th of May, 1876, aged 80 years.

Funeral services at Flushing were performed on Wednesday afternoon, the 10th of May. A condensed, comprehensive, and eloquent review of his life was published in the *N. Y. Observer* of 11th May. In the afternoon of that day, funeral services were performed in the Second Presbyterian Church at Albany, and a memorial address delivered by the Rev. Dr. Halley, who had enjoyed his friendship for 35 years. This was published in the *Albany Argus* of May 12th. A brief, but spirited sketch, signed "Sentinel" (Mr. W. H. Bogart, of Aurora), was published in the *N. Y. World* of 22d May. An appreciative article by an old friend, the Rev. Ray Palmer, D.D., appeared in the *Boston Congregationalist* of 24th May. An editorial respecting him was inserted in the *Interior* newspaper of Chicago on 25th May. A sermon on his life, character, and services was preached in his old church at Albany, to a crowded audience, by the Rev. A. I. Upson, on the 28th May, which was published in the Albany papers of 29th. And there are doubtless others, which have not come under view. Selections from any of these are deemed admissible. The difficulty is to decide where to begin and where to end. Errors on this point are designed to be covered by this general reference to them all.

Three distinct divisions are traced in which he was remarkable: the first, the most private and personal, was as a relative, friend, acquaintance, and neighbor; the second, more public and better known, as a celebrated and successful preacher and pastor; and the third, for the world and for posterity, as an eminent and voluminous author. And it strikes attention as most unusual, that he possessed the happy faculty and habit of harmoniously combining these, without allowing one to trespass upon the other, and "without interfering with his highest success in every religious and literary duty."

He was a most laborious and attentive pastor, and his teachings "practical in reference to the duties and relations of life," while "full of consolation to the afflicted and the mourner." "With an imposing stature that rose to the majestic, with a voice of singular sweetness and modulation, and with a manner in which there was nothing to offend the most fastidious taste, he was equally fitted for interesting and instructing the simplest and most cultivated portions of his audience. So acceptable were his services to the American churches that they were largely sought, and he was frequently invited to plead the causes of missions and benevolent societies in New York, Philadelphia, Boston, and other cities." Many of these addresses have been published. "No minister in this country was ever called upon to preach so frequently on special public occasions." The number of his published sermons and addresses was about 175.

After the extensive publication of the correspondence of Washington, by Dr. Sparks, full liberty was given to Dr. Sprague to select what he desired from the correspondence; and a very large number of interesting and valuable letters and documents, including much of the General's revolutionary correspondence, came into his possession, and now form part of the collection of original MSS. left behind him. The collection includes parts of the correspondence of President Monroe, of Vice-President Burr, and of Samuel Huntington of Conn., besides a large number of other MSS., foreign and domestic, ancient and modern. Early in life he acquired a taste for autographs; the gathering of them became a

pleasure to him, and he continued the practice through life, perhaps with increased enjoyment. Competent judges have pronounced his collection the finest in the world, save only that contained in the British Museum.

But the first and second divisions of his character must be passed over with this brief summary, and without attempting to do them justice—other writers being better qualified—in order to pay more attention to the third, his authorship.

In 1822, while at West Springfield, aged twenty-seven, he published "Letters on Practical Subjects to a Daughter," afterwards called "The Daughter's Own Book." This was republished in many editions here and in Great Britain, and it had many reviews. It was afterwards adopted by the American Tract Society, and by the London Tract Society. It was republished in England under another title, and again in Boston as an English book. His first knowledge of this was through casually taking up the book in a Boston book-store. In 1828 there were published "Letters from Europe." In 1830, "Lectures to Young People," of which several editions were published, and of which there were several reviews. The lectures were republished in England.

In 1832 he published "Lectures on Revivals," with an introductory essay by Dr. L. Woods, etc., of which there were repeated editions and many reviews. They were republished in London with other introductions, 12mo and 8vo, and a new edition, 8vo, in 1840.

In 1834 he published "Hints Designed to Regulate the Intercourse of Christians." There were several editions, and the work was republished abroad.

In 1837 he published "Lectures Illustrating the Contrast Between True Christianity and Various Other Systems." These were republished in London in 1838. At one time he ranked them among his best productions. They are still deemed deserving of a wider circulation than they attained. The true and solid value of books is too often in the reverse order of their popularity.

In 1838 he published the "Life of the Rev. Edward Dorr Griffin, D.D., President of Williams College."

In 1844, "Letters to Young Men, Founded on the Life of Joseph," which were republished at London in 1846, and the eighth American edition was published in 1854.

In 1847, "Aids to Early Religion."

In 1848, "Words to a Young Man's Conscience."

In 1855, "Visits to European Celebrities," and "Monitory Letters to Church Members."

In 1864, "Memoirs of the Rev. John McDowell, D.D., and the Rev. Wm. A. McDowell, D.D." In 1874, "The Life of Jediah Morse, D.D."

In the years 1865 to 1868 he contributed to the *N. Y. Observer* a series of articles, eighty-four in number, consisting of biographical sketches of "American College Presidents." He acquired a great facility in biographical writing, and frequently furnished sketches of men in public life. He preserved in manuscript the important dates and facts in the lives of noted men, so far as he became acquainted with them. Some have been published, but many sketches yet remain among his unpublished papers. Perhaps his taste for autographs encouraged this; for no one of such habits of thought could look over such a gathering as he possessed without seeking to discover and collect whatever was remarkable and worthy

of remembrance in the lives and conduct of the penmen. In this biographical part, so attractive to our society, however prompted, he became a proficient—a master. The great work of his life, not yet well known, was left among the last, called “Annals of the American Pulpit,” being not only “the most complete history of the churches and ministers in this country ever attempted,” but one that on a careful perusal will be found to contain the greatest gathering of the history of the people of this country, in every variety of position, that can be preserved for future generations. “It can never be supplanted.” He first formed the plan of the Annals and commenced his labor upon them in 1847, when 52 years of age, and the work became a subject of daily labor with him for at least 15 years. It contains notices, brief or extended, of all the principal clergymen of the United States, with historical introductions, and personal histories of unquestioned authenticity, to which many eminent writers have contributed, and which have been received with universal favor by all classes of men, and all denominations of Protestants. Nine volumes have been published, and the tenth, in MSS., is ready for publication. It is so arranged and divided that the different sects, jealous of each other, may read only their own history, if they choose. But a library which contains only one sect will betray its owner, if of sufficient means, as a narrow-minded sectarian.

In 1857, vols. 1 and 2 were published, embracing “Trinitarian Congregationalists.” In 1858, vols. 3 and 4, embracing “Presbyterians.” In 1859, vol. 5, “Episcopalian.” In 1860, vol. 6, “Baptist.” In 1861, vol. 7, “Methodist.” In 1865, vol. 8, “Unitarian.” In 1869, vol. 9, embracing five different sects in different parts, but generally “Lutheran” and “Reformed;” and the 10th, unpublished, embraces Quakers or Friends, 32 sketches; German Reformed, 32; Moravian, 22; Cumberland Presbyterian, 19; Freewill Baptist, 8; Swedenborgian, 8; and Universalist, 6.

At the commencement of the publication in 1857 there were many and favorable reviews of the first two volumes; and in 1858, of the third and fourth. The others have been noticed in the publications of the denominations to which they related, and in a report by a committee of our society, but a good general review of the whole is yet wanting; and it is believed that in mass they are not very widely known. Yet their general character is well established.

It will be noticed that a large part of the work appears in the form of letters signed by the personal acquaintances of the clergymen described, and generally of the same sect. A little examination shows that some of the letters must have been rewritten by the accomplished author, and have been sent back for approval and signature by the letter-writer; for they betray in parts his more finished style, while they preserve the peculiar marks also of the signers. Short reflection suffices for the inference that this was the safe way for a writer of one sect, or a stranger, to secure the details, and to publish a true and creditable sketch of the personal characteristics and course of another. Errors often seriously impair the reception of biographical sketches; and one, almost the only way to check these is to submit the MSS., or read them to friends personally near to and familiar with the facts. It occasions more labor and delay, and does not destroy responsibility. The official editor must determine what shall be inserted, and what omitted. But once accomplished, the gain is manifest.

Professor Goodrich, so far as he viewed the annals, wrote that, "taken as a whole, considering the difficulty of inducing so large a body of men even to promise contributions, the necessity of seeing most of them in person, perhaps repeatedly, to explain more fully the plan or urge on its execution, and the delicate task imposed upon the author of reducing those contributions to the proper length, and excluding or modifying much of the matter offered—considering all these, this work must be regarded as one of the most remarkable ever attempted." It contains many personal anecdotes, and they illustrate not merely the characteristics of the individual described, but "the times in which he lived." It embraces more than 1,000 original letters, and sketches the lives of more than 1,300 persons, with numerous references to and partial sketches of 500 others.

Of the importance and usefulness of biographies, no one could be more thoroughly convinced, and this crowning and lasting work, of such immense labor, is the greatest proof of the fact, as well as of his opinion of it. It is written that "he fairly luxuriated in biographical details," and that he felt "the nobility, yes, almost heroism of the duty of rescuing from the grave of oblivion the memory of the lives and services of so many self-sacrificing men." "It was for him a labor of love. It was a work precisely suited to his nature."

"In his preface to that most interesting series of sketches entitled 'Visits to European Celebrities,' he said of himself: 'In both my visits to Europe I was more interested to see men than things.'"

"His passion for biography grew with his years. He could hardly write a formal discourse without making use of biographical illustrations." At Salem, Mass., "he would not fail to allude to Elias Cornelius and Samuel Worcester." At Harvard, in his Phi Beta Kappa oration, "the fact that he was of a different school of theology did not prevent his honoring the memory of his early friend, while he dwelt upon the endeared and classic name of Buckminster." Before the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions he spoke of "the posthumous influence of foreign missionaries," and before the Alumni of Yale College he took for his subject that apparently immense, unattractive, dry, and difficult theme, "The Triennial Catalogue of the College," and that address is called "a great casket of the jewels of his *Alma Mater*, gathered and brought and laid at her feet."

The writer above quoted agrees with us, that in no country is biographical writing "more desirable than our own, where families are being continually lost in each other, where institutions of church and state are continually fluctuating, and nothing is fixed but the rocks and mountains" (and he might have added that some of these were moved). "We need chroniclers and biographers, especially of those who might otherwise be forgotten."

With great practice "he wielded the pen of a ready writer. He wrote with amazing rapidity and with great facility of expression and elegance of style, and yet with such accuracy that his manuscripts scarcely show a single erasure or correction." "One manuscript of fifty-six pages has but three erasures." He was "one of the most valued writers for the *New York Observer*." His known works, "and hundreds of miscellaneous articles from his pen, have made his style and name familiar."

He wrote his ordinary sermons, not trusting his readiness of speech. "Writing with the utmost facility, rising early and not sitting up late, with his writing tablet on his knees, he went through an amount of composition that is scarcely credited as possible."

He was a great collector of books and pamphlets. His own pamphlets were numerous, "and as his name was widely known, pamphlets were sent to him by thousands." These he had bound in volumes and catalogued, and those on secular subjects he presented to the N. Y. State Library at Albany; and with his donation of pamphlets on religious subjects, a large niche is filled in the Seminary Library at Princeton. He proved in these various ways "one of his own maxims, that variety in labor may be as refreshing as rest from toil."

"In the quiet of Flushing, within half an hour of the great city, he could easily mingle with his friends; but as the borders of fourscore were approached, he preferred the circle of wife and children, whose ministries to his comfort, and assistance in his herculean literary tasks, are not surpassed in any records of domestic devotion."

Dr. Sprague was first married September 5, 1820, to Charlotte, daughter of Gen. William Eaton, of Bromfield, Mass. She died June 25, 1821. The only child of this marriage, a daughter, lived until 1872, and died at Flushing. The "Daughter's Own Book" had this introduction.

On August 2, 1824, he was married (2d) to Mary, daughter of Samuel Lathrop, of West Springfield, Mass. She died September 16, 1837. On 13th May, 1840, he was again married to Henrietta B., another daughter of Hon. Samuel Lathrop, who survives him. All the children of the second and third marriages, who survived infancy, are yet living. There are two sons and one daughter by the second marriage; two daughters and one son by the third.

The Doctor was a member of the State Historical Societies of Vermont, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Georgia, Iowa, and Wisconsin, also of the Old Colony Historical Society, the American Antiquarian, our own Genealogical and Biographical Society, and many other similar associations.

Our associates will not be content to disregard the Genealogical part. The names of Sprague and Buell have too often appeared in our history, to be deemed immaterial. Only the direct lines of these can be briefly traced. There were several emigrants named Sprague, and relationship may probably be traced to the Spragues of Salem and of Rhode Island. "The Genealogy of the Spragues in Hingham" was published in 1828, and a "memorial of the Sprague family" in 1847, both imperfect. Many of the name are mentioned in other publications.

I. Among the passengers of the Anne, which arrived at Plymouth in July, 1623, were FRANCIS SPRAGUE, his wife, and daughter. He lived at Plymouth until about 1633, and removed to Duxbury, where he was living in 1666. He was a man of property and influence, and was one of the original purchasers of Dartmouth. He had one son, John, and three daughters.

II. JOHN SPRAGUE, only son of the preceding, lived first at Marshfield, and afterwards at Duxbury. He mar. Ruth, dau. of William Bassett, and had three sons and four daughters. He was killed at the fight of Pawtuxet, in King Philip's war, March 26, 1676.

III. JOHN SPRAGUE, one of the sons of the last preceding; mar. Lydia, and removed to Lebanon, Conn. He had two sons by this marriage, of whom one was Benjamin. He was mar. a second time, in 1710.

IV. BENJAMIN SPRAGUE, one of the sons of the last, by his first wife, was b. at Duxbury, 15th July, 1686, and was mar. to Mary Woodworth

on 29th Dec., 1707. They had seven ch., of whom John was the eldest. Benjamin mar. 2d, in 1726, Abigail Tisdell, by whom he also had seven children.

V. JOHN SPRAGUE, eldest son of the last, was born 5th Sept., 1709, and was mar. to Susannah Hodges, of Taunton, on 26th March, 1733. Ten children were born of this marriage, of whom Benjamin was the youngest but one. John, another of the sons, died while a soldier in the Revolutionary army, at Greenwich, Conn.

VI. BENJAMIN SPRAGUE, son of the preceding, was born December 18, 1772, in Andover, Tolland county, Conn., to which place his parents had removed shortly after marriage. He was a farmer. He mar. Sybil, dau. of Benjamin Buell, of Hebron, and Sybil his wife, and had four children: John, Mary, Benjamin, and WILLIAM BUELL, who became so noted. He died at Andover, 31st January, 1837, and needs no better eulogy. His wife died May 26, 1828, and her family deserves a separate trace.

I. WILLIAM BUELL emigrated from Wales to this country early in the 17th century, and was one of the early settlers of Windsor, Connecticut. He married Mary —, by whom he had two sons, one named Samuel, and five daughters. He died at Windsor, Nov. 16, 1681. His widow died Sept. 1, 1684.

II. SAMUEL BUELL, son of the preceding, was born at Windsor, Sept. 2, 1641, and married Deborah Griswold on Nov. 13, 1662. He was a magistrate at Windsor, and afterwards at Killingworth, Conn., to which place he removed about 1664 as one of its early settlers. He had seven sons, one named Benjamin, and five daughters. He died July 11, 1720, and his wife died Feby. 7, 1717.

III. BENJAMIN BUELL, son of the last preceding, was born at Killingworth in 1686. He married Hannah Hutchinson, and had three children, Benjamin and Mary (twins), and Submit. He died February 18, 1723.

IV. BENJAMIN BUELL, son of the preceding, was born at Killingworth, April, 4, 1722. He early settled in Andover, Conn., where he married another branch of the Hutchinson family. The only child of this marriage was John Hutchinson Buell, who entered the army at the commencement of the Revolution, was engaged at Bunker Hill, and rose to the rank of major. Benjamin Buell's second wife, Sybil, was a daughter of William Buell, of Marlboro, Connecticut, whose name was taken by the subject of this sketch. By this second marriage he had three sons and three daughters, one named Sybil, who became the wife of VI. Benjamin Sprague. Benjamin Buell mar. 3d Abigail Bartlett, of Bolton, Connecticut, by whom he had two daughters. He was a magistrate in the town of Hebron (in Tolland county, south of Andover), and several times a member of the Legislature; and died May 11, 1810. Any one familiar with genealogies, or who will take the trouble to trace them, will discover numerous connections of this Buell family in the history of our own State, which they have made no less attractive.

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