

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.

*B. B.*  
BY WILLIAM B. SPRAGUE, D. D.

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alumni of any other Seminary in our land. You will be ready to say, What an iron constitution he must have had to enable him to discharge such multifarious duties, for so long a period, and to discharge them all so well. He was a person of large frame, well-built, and stately,—a man of presence, who could scarcely fail to arrest the eye of a stranger, in the street or elsewhere. At threescore and ten, he was as erect in his bearing as a soldier, and having all the marks of robust health, so that he looked much more like a hearty old country gentleman whose days were spent *sub Jove*, than a hard working student. In a word, even unto old age he was a noble illustration of the oft-quoted words, *sana mens in corpore sano*.

Dr. Wylie was not an eloquent Preacher in the sense in which that phrase is commonly understood. His voice, though strong, was wanting in flexibility, and his manner was perhaps somewhat modified by the necessity he was under of preaching extempore. But no one could listen to him without feeling that he was in the presence of a man of massive sense, thoroughly versed in Scripture, and master of the topic under discussion. From the few opportunities which I had of hearing him, I should judge that his sermons, in the main, were better adapted to instruct, console, edify the believer, than to arouse the careless; though the latter class was by no means overlooked. They had the rich unction of the Gospel, so that they could be relished by the humblest as well as the most cultivated Christian; but they were argumentative and expository rather than hortatory or sentimental. He won, and kept until his dying day, the devoted and reverential love of his congregation, which, under his able ministrations, became very numerous. A better instructed congregation, or one more fruitful in all good works, it would be difficult to find in Philadelphia or elsewhere.

I remain very truly yours,

JOHN FORSYTH.

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### JAMES RENWICK WILLSON, D.D.\*

<sup>1780</sup>  
1807—1853.

JAMES RENWICK WILLSON was born, April 9, 1780, in "the Forks of Yough," the neck of land between the Monongahela and Youghiogheny Rivers, about fourteen miles from Pittsburg, Pa. His paternal great-grandfather had emigrated from the County of Down, Ireland, in 1721, and settled near Back Creek, Dauphin County, Pa.; but the family subsequently removed to "the Forks," where they still resided at the birth of the subject of this notice. His father, Zacchæus Willson, was a Ruling Elder in the Reformed Presbyterian Church. His mother, whose maiden name was Mary McConnell, was also of Irish extraction. Both his parents were distinguished for earnest piety, for great vigour of mind, and, considering their limited opportunities, for a large measure of general intelligence.

His father was a farmer; and he himself pursued the same occupation until he had reached his twenty-first year. But, from his early youth, he evinced a decided intellectual taste, and was never satisfied unless he was adding something to his store of knowledge. His mind also early took a religious direction, as was evinced by the fact that at the age of fourteen he officiated in the family devo-

\*MS. from his son, Rev. Dr. S. M. Willson.

tions, in the absence of his father, and a year later made a public profession of religion. He originally joined the Associate Reformed Church; but, when he was in his eighteenth year, he transferred his membership to the Reformed Presbyterian Church, in connection with which he continued ever afterwards. He received his education at Cannonsburg, Pa., and the early part of it was chiefly under the Rev. Dr. McMillan. The institution of which he became a member was, at that time, only an Academy; but, after a year or two, it was incorporated as Jefferson College; and, having passed through the regular collegiate course, he was graduated in 1805. He was a most vigorous student, rarely allowing himself much more than four hours for sleep, and graduated with the highest honours of his class. During the last year of his collegiate course, he was employed as a Tutor in the institution. Shortly after he left College he went to New York, where, for some time, he prosecuted the study of Theology under the direction of the Rev. Alexander McLeod. In 1807 he was licensed to preach by the Middle Committee of the Reformed Presbytery.\* From 1809 to 1815 he was the Principal of an Academy at Bedford, Pa., and, during his residence here, he made the first analysis of Bedford Springs, the result of which was published. In 1815 he removed to Philadelphia, where he was engaged in teaching a Select School for about two years. During this period he often occupied the pulpits of several of his brethren, and, for a long time, preached regularly on Sabbath afternoon at what was called "the Neck," where he found a very interesting field of labour.

In September, 1817, he was installed Pastor of the Coldenham and Newburgh Congregation, in the State of New York. In 1824 a distinct Congregation was formed at Newburgh, and he remained in charge of the Coldenham Congregation until 1830, when he removed to Albany, and took charge of a very small church in that city. He, however, returned to Coldenham in 1833, and resumed his pastoral charge there. He was engaged, more or less, during the greater part of his ministry, in giving instruction to theological students; and, in 1838, was appointed, by the Synod, Professor in the Eastern Theological Seminary. In 1840 the Eastern and Western Seminaries were united and fixed at Allegheny, near Pittsburg; in consequence of which he resigned his pastoral charge at Coldenham, and removed his family to Allegheny. In 1845 the Seminary was removed to Cincinnati; and, in 1849, into the interior of the State, he moving along with it.

He continued his labours as Professor till about a year and a half previous to his death. His constitution was uncommonly vigorous, and his health almost uninterrupted until 1847, when he experienced a partial stroke of the sun, from the effect of which he never fully recovered. The winters of 1851-'52 and 1852-'53 he spent with his son in Philadelphia. The last public service which he performed was "serving a table" at the Communion in the Reformed Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, on the 18th of March, 1853. He spent the summer of 1852 and also of 1853 with his friend, Mr. John Beatrice, at Coldenham, eleven miles west of Newburgh; and here he closed his earthly career. The immedi-

\* The Reformed Presbytery, which had been constituted in 1798, had, in 1803, become too widely extended to allow its members to attend meetings with sufficient frequency; in consequence of which they formed three Committees,—Northern, Middle and Southern, which met twice a year or oftener, and attended to the ordinary routine of business, reporting to Presbytery at its annual meetings. The Middle Committee was located in the State of Pennsylvania.

diate cause of his death was a fall, which fractured the neck of his thigh-bone. His system did not react, and, after a gradual decline of six weeks, he sunk calmly to his rest, on the 29th of September, 1853.

He was honoured with the degree of Doctor of Divinity (from what College I have not been able to learn) in or about the year 1828.

The following is a list of Dr. Willson's publications:—

Historical Sketch of Opinions on the Atonement, interspersed with Biographical Notices of the Leading Doctors, and Outlines of the Lectures of the Church from the Incarnation to the Present time. With translations from Francis Turretin on the Atonement, - - -	1817
The Subjection of Kings and Nations to Messiah: A Sermon preached in the Reformed Presbyterian Church, New York, - - -	1819
Civil Government: A Sermon preached at Newburgh, - - -	1821
Dr. Watts an Anti-Trinitarian, demonstrated in a Review of Dr. Miller's Letter to the Editor of the Unitarian Miscellany, - - -	1821
Honour to whom Honour is Due: A Funeral Eulogium delivered at Goshen, at the Interment of the Bones of those who fell at the Battle of Minisink, - - -	1822
Anniversary Address delivered before the Newburgh Lyceum, - - -	1823
A Sermon on the Book of Life of the Lamb; preached in New York, - - -	1824
The Glory and Security of the Church of God: A Sermon preached in New York, - - -	1824
Dissertation on the Musquito, read before the Newburgh Lyceum, - - -	1824
Political Danger: A Sermon preached on a Fast day observed by several Churches in Newburgh, - - -	1825
The American Jubilee: A Discourse delivered at Walden, N. Y., on the Fourth of July, - - -	1825
Alphabetical Writing and Printing: An Anniversary Address before the Walden Library Association, - - -	1826
The Sabbath: A Discourse on the Duty of Civil Government in relation to the Sanctification of the Lord's Day, preached in Coldenham, - - -	1829
The Bow: A Sermon preached in Newburgh, - - -	1831
Prince Messiah's Claims to Dominion over all Governments, and the Disregard of his authority by the United States in the Federal Constitution: A Sermon preached at Albany, - - -	1832
Tokens of the Divine Displeasure in the late Conflagration in New York, and other Judgments: A Sermon preached at Newburgh, - - -	1835
An Address before the Newburgh Library Association on its First Anniversary, - - -	1836
The Written Law, - - -	1840

He was also the editor of *The Evangelical Witness*, a Monthly, from 1822 to 1826; of the *Christian Statesman*, a Weekly Journal, 1827-28; and of the *Albany Quarterly* from 1831 to 1833. In connection with the last mentioned he published a History of the Church of Scotland, of three hundred octavo pages.

In 1807 he was married to Jane, daughter of John Roberts, a merchant of Cannonsburg, originally from Ireland, but immediately from Pendleton County, Va. They had nine children,—three sons and six daughters. The eldest son died in 1838—the two that survive are ministers, and one of them,—*James M.*,

*D.D.*, is Professor in the Theological Seminary of the Reformed Presbyterian Church, at Allegheny. The three surviving daughters are married to Reformed Presbyterian Ministers. Mrs. Willson died in March, 1839.

I was quite well acquainted with Dr. Willson during the two or three years that he lived in Albany, and had much pleasant intercourse with him. I was always greatly impressed with the vigour of his intellect, the extent and variety of his knowledge, and I may add with his genial and kindly spirit. I do not remember to have ever heard him utter an expression that savoured of undue harshness concerning any body. But it was currently said that in the pulpit he seemed to breath another atmosphere; and sometimes his eloquence there combined both the majesty and the fury of the tempest. I remember his preaching here on one public occasion—I think it was before the Albany County Bible Society—when his denunciations against certain forms of evil were perfectly terrific. Hence those who saw him only in the pulpit, while they could not but admire and reverence him as a power, were not likely to give him credit for those finer and gentler qualities which he really possessed. I recollect his showing me, on one occasion, letters from some prominent clergymen in Scotland, which evinced a very high estimate of his talents and acquirements.

FROM THE REV. JAMES M. WILLSON, D.D.

PHILADELPHIA, February 15, 1865.

Rev. and dear Sir: Your request for my recollections and impressions of my ever venerated father I will comply with in the best way I can, though I am quite sensible of the delicacy of the task it has imposed upon me.

His appearance indicated no common man. His frame, large and massive, but not corpulent; his stature considerably above the ordinary standard; his elevated and expanded forehead; his dark, piercing eye; his thin, firm, compressed lips; his grave and thoughtful visage; his vigorous and elastic step; all gave evidence of extraordinary physical and mental energy. In his youth he delighted and excelled in the athletic sports so common in the then frontier portions of the country, and, by these, in connection with the toils of the farm, his naturally strong constitution was admirably developed, rendering him, in after life, until enfeebled by advancing years, almost a stranger to fatigue. Though he did not commence his literary course until he had attained his majority, yet, when he had once begun, he studied with untiring diligence, and soon passed all his competitors. His studies took a wide range—his learning became in a few years varied and extensive. He acquired some knowledge of from twelve to fifteen languages, ancient and modern—most of these he could read with ease and pleasure—of some of them he was a master. He conversed in French and German. History he had read largely. He was quite familiar with the modern sciences. In *Belles Lettres* he was a finished scholar. In early life he studied Medicine more or less for several years. But Theology was his principal study. He resorted constantly to the original fountains of Divine truth, and to the weighty tomes of the Reformation. He began the day, for many years, with the Hebrew Bible, and closed it with the Greek Testament, studying each critically.

His habits were social, and he was never happier than when bringing forth his stores of knowledge for the benefit of those with whom he conversed. In his frequent travels he never hesitated to accost strangers, either to give or to obtain information. He cared little for etiquette; and, though free from any thing like rudeness or coarseness of manner, he was not what would be styled a polished gentleman. His original rusticity never fully wore off. He asso-

ciated much with distinguished men, and abounded in anecdotes illustrative of their character and times; and he could relate them well.

His imagination was peculiarly powerful and excitable. He *saw* every thing. He dealt with no abstractions—all was, to him, concrete, living reality. Hence some of his peculiarities. The invisible world of the good and the bad had to him not only a real but a present existence. In this I have often been struck with the resemblance between him and Luther.

Intellectual activity was one of his most remarkable traits. He was always busy, but never seemed wearied with mental effort. I never saw him listless—whatever he did, he did with his might; and, partly from the force of his imagination, which invested every thing with its own radiance, and partly from his habit of referring every thing to God's providential agency, nothing seemed trifling to him.

He had great discernment of character, and yet he was unsuspecting. Indeed, a certain childlike simplicity was one of his striking characteristics. He was no financier—the accumulation of property he never thought of.

Of his moral character I should say that the most marked trait was unwavering fidelity and integrity. He knew nothing of a calculating expediency. Duty, right, faithfulness—these were his mottoes. He was incapable of artifice or intrigue. He was vehement in his denunciations of sin, and never hesitated to trespass upon what might be regarded as the sphere of politicians, when the occasion demanded stern rebuke. His passions were originally strong, partaking of his constitutional energy and ardour. At times he was impatient, nor could he ever bear with equanimity opposition to what he deemed important truth.

He had every physical attribute of the Orator,—great bodily vigour, a powerful and sonorous voice, a flashing eye, an elastic frame. These, with his wide range of information, enabling him to gather from every quarter arguments and illustrations, his vivid fancy, his ready command of the best language, his highly cultivated reasoning powers and absorbing earnestness, rendered him a commanding and attractive public speaker. He was equally at home in the pulpit and on the platform, and never declined a call either to the one or the other, when he *could* respond to it. He always spoke extemporaneously. His notes, which he never used in speaking, did not occupy more perhaps, than a hand-breadth of paper. But he meditated closely, and was never at a loss.

He was eminently a man of prayer, and not unfrequently spent hours together in devotional exercises. He was accustomed to carry all matters, even the least, to the throne of grace. This gave to his prayers, both in public and in the family, somewhat a peculiar character.

He was a very ready writer, and wrote legibly but not beautifully. Except in respect to his journal, which he attended to daily, he had no fixed hours for composition. Indeed, times and seasons had little influence upon him as a student.

Though he had no disrelish for social pleasantries, he was not, either by nature or habit, a wit. His mind, from the time I became capable of observing, was almost constantly occupied on themes which he deemed of momentous import. I may add that he was an ardent friend of the Bible Society, and took an active part in the cause of Temperance, and in opposition to Slavery, preaching and writing abundantly on all these subjects. His death was singularly serene and happy.

With best wishes, I am, Rev. and Dear Sir,

Yours truly,

JAMES M. WILLSON.

FROM THE REV. JOHN FORSYTH, D.D.

NEWBURGH, November 16, 1858.

Rev. and Dear Friend: I send you, with much pleasure, my recollections, such as they are, of the late Dr. James Renwick Willson—at the same time you will allow me to express the hope that you have secured the aid of some one who was brought into closer contact with him than I ever was, and therefore better qualified than myself to portray his character.

When Dr. Willson first came to Newburgh, I was too young to be cognizant of his arrival and settlement as a Pastor. My father, though not one of his parishioners, often went to hear him of a Sabbath evening, and regarded him as a valued friend. My earliest recollection of him is on this wise. For some reason I had been allowed to sit up with my mother, one Sabbath evening, much beyond my bed-time, while my father was away hearing Dr. Willson. On his return home he gave what must have been a glowing account of the sermon—for he was an excellent *raconteur* of such matters—and I well remember with what childish wonder, not unmingled with terror, I listened to the startling intelligence that “a city, New Jerusalem, was coming down out of Heaven,” and asked what in that case was to become of Newburgh. The words first quoted, I dare say had formed the theme of the Doctor’s discourse. Dr. Willson was then Pastor of the Reformed Presbyterian Congregations of Coldenham and Newburgh—the latter consisting of a mere handful of people, though it rapidly increased under his able ministrations. I cannot recall the time when I first heard him; but, though too young properly to appreciate his preaching, I distinctly remember how eager I was to accompany my parents whenever they attended his church. There was nothing in the forms of the service to attract me, there was no well-trained choir, nor organ “breathing its distant thunder notes or swelling into a diapason full.” Our Reformed Presbyterian brethren, as you know, abjure such aids to devotion, as savouring of will worship. The Preacher was the great attraction, and you will agree with me that his eloquence must have been of no mean kind, when it could thus draw a mere child, as well as the crowds of men and women who thronged his church.

When I was old enough to appreciate him, Dr. Willson was in the full maturity of his powers, physical and mental—a man of imposing presence, with a bodily frame capable of enduring almost any amount of work or of study, and in neither respect was he sparing of himself. He had attracted attention in Philadelphia before he came to Newburgh, and Dr. Ely, who was then on terms of intimacy with him, in a review of one of his publications, (Willson on Atonement,) described him as a “man of genius, whose fancy sometimes runs away with his judgment—a man of fervour, faults, and powerful intellect.” The whole passage sounds like an outburst of admiring friendship, but those who knew Dr. Willson will recognize the truthfulness of the description of the man; and you will thus see that he had some of the most essential elements of the Orator. It has been my good fortune to hear Melville, of Camberwell; Neale, of Liverpool; James, of Birmingham; Candlish and Guthrie, of Edinburgh; Monod and Coquerel, of Paris; and I can honestly say that, in the power to arrest and fix the attention of an audience, the ablest of these distinguished men were scarcely superior to Dr. Willson. The first time I heard Adolphe Monod, his style of speaking reminded me of my old Newburgh friend. Both were eminently natural in manner. In the exordium and the expository parts of his discourse Dr. Willson was quite colloquial, though never vulgar in his tone,—a tone which he maintained until he reached some elevating sentiment. Then he began gradually to rise on the wings of a

fine imagination, like a bird, so perfectly conscious of its mastery over its pinions as to seem unconscious of the least effort in using them. There were no violent transitions, nor sudden outbursts of passion, no extravagant emphasis, nor over-strained declamation. You rose with the Preacher as high as he chose to go, and were then brought down to the ordinary conversational plane of the discourse. Soon again, and almost before you were aware of it, you found yourself borne away on a second and somewhat higher flight. And so it went on, the levels, if I may be allowed the word, becoming shorter, and the flights higher, as you advanced, until the sermon ended in a prolonged and grand, but never grandiloquent, climax. Such, in the main, was Dr. Willson's style of speaking, even in his ordinary services; but it was on the evening of a Sacramental Sabbath, or when discussing "the signs of the times," or the predicted glories in the future of the Church of God, or the Millennial reign of Messiah the Prince, that the qualities of the Preacher were best brought out, both in the matter and manner of his discourse; and then he exemplified the kind of eloquence described by Cicero—"Quod non solum delectet sed etiam sine satietate delectet." You were sorry when he said *Amen*.

The reputation and the influence of Dr. Willson as a public man were necessarily limited by reason of the smallness of the denomination to which he belonged, and its distinctive views in regard to ministerial and Christian communion. Within the County of Orange, however, he was widely known in all branches of the Church; and on those public occasions when a special Sermon or Oration was expected, Dr. Willson was generally the man to whom the community looked to perform the service.

Let me add that in private life he was no less attractive than in the pulpit. His conversational powers were of an unusually high order. He had a pretty large acquaintance with public men. He had travelled extensively in our own country and the British Provinces, and no object of interest, physical, agricultural, educational or religious, escaped his notice. He examined them not only with the curiosity common to travellers, but with the eye of a man of science. He was a zealous student of Natural History and Chemistry; and his reading had taken a wide and various range. The bent of his own mind and his habits as a Covenanter had made him specially observant of the "sings of the times" in the old world and the new, in politics, literature and social movements. A tenacious memory gave him perfect command of the materials of instruction or entertainment gathered from so many fields. Then, too, he was of a very companionable temper, dignified in bearing but never starched, his talk plentifully seasoned with wit, humour, anecdote, so that his hosts or his guests would often find their converse kept up with such interest that midnight had come and gone ere they were aware, and they were ready to say of him what Dr. Ely said to him—"Thou man of genius."

Although precluded by the rules of his Church, and his own views of order, from communion with other denominations, Dr. Willson was not wanting in catholic sympathies. He loved good men of every name, and was warmly loved by not a few in return. In all that related to the cause of our common Presbyterianism, and the welfare of the Church Catholic, he ever felt a lively concern. For the "Cloud of Scotland's Witnesses," especially those who lived and died in "persecuting times," he had an almost unbounded veneration. Few things would sooner rouse his indignation than a sneer at their principles, or a slur upon their memory. He was familiar with the minutest details of their history, and I have no doubt that he had imbibed, in some measure, their heroic faith and courage. Whatever faults he may have had, cowardice, certainly, was not one of them. In avowing what he deemed truth, and in denouncing what he deemed sin, no one could be bolder—he neither feared the face of man nor ever stopped to count consequences.



His views of the relations between Christianity and Civil Government, and of the duty of nations to own Christ as King, naturally led him to comment on civil constitutions and the conduct of public men, so that many would have charged him with bringing politics into the pulpit. Those who heard him only on such occasions might have gone away with the notion that his preaching was too polemical and political to be edifying. If so, I am sure they would have done Dr. Willson injustice. The staple of his preaching, as I have reason to believe, was the simple Gospel, and though his fine fancy might sometimes carry him into the region of speculation, when treating matters pertaining to "the Church of the future," yet his sermons were, in general, and in a high degree, scriptural in structure as well as sentiment.

His published discourses, if collected, would make a handsome volume. Most, if not all, of them were written out for the press, after their delivery in the pulpit. None of them, however, would give the mere reader a proper conception of his abilities as a Preacher. Though he wrote a great deal on various subjects, scientific and theological, the style of his sermons is somewhat stiff and dry, as if the author was not much accustomed to handling the pen,—a fact all the more remarkable, considering his copious command and felicitous use of language on the platform and in the pulpit. I will only add that the savour of his ministry still survives in this region, and his memory is cherished by many who "for a season rejoiced in his light," though they were never under his pastoral care.

Believe me, very affectionately yours,  
JOHN FORSYTH.

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### GILBERT McMASTER, D.D.\*

1807—1864.

GILBERT McMASTER, a son of James and Mary (Crawford) McMaster, was born in the Parish of Saintfield, a few miles from Belfast, Ireland, on the 13th of February, 1778. His ancestors, who held a respectable standing in both civil and religious life, and who were distinguished for their uncompromising adherence to the system of doctrine, worship and Church polity, of the period of the Westminster Assembly, and for their hatred of all political usurpation and oppression, removed from Scotland to Ireland about forty years before his birth. His father was a man of intelligent and earnest piety, and of singular and even scrupulous probity of character. His mother was very respectably connected, was a person of superior intellect and great force of character, of fine womanly virtues and graces and of an exemplary religious life.

The subject of this sketch enjoyed the advantages of a most faithful Christian education; and the appropriate fruits of this culture began, in due season, to appear. From an early age he was the subject of serious thoughts and impressions which never left him. These, with the advance of years and the development of his natural faculties, became gradually more clear, constant, habitual and controlling; issuing in a settled religious character of great exemplariness, and, about the eighteenth year of his age, in a public profession of religion;—a profession sustained with much uniformity and consistency by the whole tenor of his subsequent life.

\* MS. from his son, Rev. Dr. E. D. Macmaster.