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ANNALS

OF THE

AMERICAN PULPIT;

OR

COMMEMORATIVE NOTICES

OF

DISTINGUISHED AMERICAN CLERGYMEN

OF

VARIOUS DENOMINATIONS,

FROM THE EARLY SETTLEMENT OF THE COUNTRY TO THE CLOSE OF THE YEAR
EIGHTEEN HUNDRED AND FIFTY-FIVE.

WITH HISTORICAL INTRODUCTIONS

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BY WILLIAM B. SPRAGUE, D. D

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VOLUME II.
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NATHAN STRONG, D. D.*

1772—1816.

NATHAN STRONG was born in Coventry, Conn., October 16, 1748. He was a descendant in the fourth generation from John Strong, who came from England to this country in 1630; and, after sojourning successively at Dorchester, Mass., and Windsor, Conn., settled at Northampton, Mass., in 1659, was the first Ruling Elder of the church in that place, and died in 1699, at a very advanced age. His father was the Rev. Nathan Strong, a native of Woodbury, Conn., who graduated at Yale College in 1742; studied Theology under the Rev. John Graham of Southbury; was ordained pastor of the Second church in Coventry, October 9, 1745; and died October 19, 1793, in the sixty-eighth year of his age. His mother was the daughter of the Rev. Joseph Meacham, minister of the First church in Coventry.

Not much is known of his history, previous to his becoming a graduate of Yale College in 1769, a little before the completion of his twenty-first year. He belonged to a class conspicuous for illustrious names, and yet he graduated with the highest honour; though the Faculty considered him and Dwight (afterwards President of the College) upon an equality, and gave him the precedence only in consideration of his superior age. President Stiles is said to have pronounced him (doubtless taking into view the fact of his being a young man) "the most universal scholar he ever knew."

His first permanent religious impressions date back to a season of special interest in his father's congregation, about the time of his entering College. It does not appear, however, that he originally contemplated the ministry as a profession,—for we find him engaged, for some time after leaving College, in the study of law; but he ultimately changed his purpose, and, after a brief course of theological reading, was licensed to preach.

In 1772 and 1773 he was a Tutor in Yale College; and, during this period, there were various applications made to him from important vacant churches at a distance, all of which, however, he declined. The First church in Hartford, having become vacant by the death of the Rev. Edward Dorr, put in requisition his services as a candidate, in the autumn of 1773; and on the 5th of January succeeding,—the previous arrangements having been made,—he was duly constituted their pastor. The sermon on the occasion was preached by his father, from 2 Timothy iv. 4, and was published.

Mr. Strong was scarcely settled in the ministry before the war broke out, which, in its issue, gave us our independence. His energies were all enlisted in his country's cause; and every service that he could render her, he *did* render promptly and cheerfully. For some time he served in the capacity of Chaplain. His vigorous pen was often at work in endeavouring to vindicate the country's rights, and to quicken the public pulse to a higher tone of patriotism; and many of the papers which he produced at that time, are said to have teemed with the brightest and noblest thoughts. He published many valuable articles in relation to the state of the times, subse-

* Perkins' Fun. Sermon.—Thomas Williams' Cent. Sermon.

quently to this;—especially a series of about twenty, designed to aid in harmonizing public sentiment and action in respect to the adoption of the Federal Constitution. He was always an inflexible patriot,—ready alike with his tongue and his pen to do good service for his country, as occasion required or opportunity offered.

In the earlier periods of his ministry, Mr. Strong was sometimes not a little embarrassed in his pecuniary concerns. He was settled upon a salary of one hundred and thirty pounds; but, in consequence of the depreciation of the currency incident to the times, and some other circumstances, he failed, from time to time, of receiving his dues, until the parish had become indebted to him some six hundred pounds. A portion of the congregation seemed inclined to evade the obligation; but the late Chief Justice Ellsworth, who then belonged to that parish, being present at the meeting at which the subject was agitated, took decided ground in favour of the payment of the debt; and the meeting being convinced by his arguments, immediately adopted measures to secure the desired end. It was probably in consequence of the inconvenience to which he was subjected from the insufficiency and uncertainty of his support, that he was led, at a subsequent period, to invest his portion of his father's estate in a mercantile establishment. This false step (for such it undoubtedly was) was the means of bringing upon him manifold trials: it not only resulted disastrously in a pecuniary way, but, for a season, interfered, not a little, with his usefulness as a Christian minister. In the afflictions which he subsequently experienced, he humbly acknowledged a Father's chastening hand.

Mr. Strong was one of those who, towards the close of the last century, had a primary agency in giving a new direction to the public mind, in respect to the religious interests of the country and the age. Being fully persuaded that the theory of revivals which then generally prevailed in the orthodox churches, was both reasonable and scriptural, he laboured with all his might, in reliance on God's blessing, to reduce that theory to practice; and, at several different periods in the latter part of his ministry, he had the pleasure to witness the fulfilment of his hearts desire. In 1798–99, was the most extensive and powerful revival that occurred under his ministry; but in 1794, there was a state of things among his people which issued in considerable accessions to the church; and in 1808, and again in 1815, a yet more copious blessing was poured out upon them. On these occasions particularly, his labours were most abundant; and no one perhaps knew better than he how to conduct such a work so that the best result might be obtained and incidental evils avoided.

In 1796, he sent forth an elaborate Theological Treatise entitled, “The doctrine of Eternal Misery consistent with the Infinite Benevolence of God;” in reply to a posthumous work by the Rev. Dr. Joseph Huntington of Coventry, Conn., entitled “Calvinism improved &c.” In this work Mr. Strong has taken a wide range of thought, and has evinced a degree of acute discrimination and familiarity with all the points of the controversy referred to, which must always give him a high place among the Calvinistic writers of the country.

In 1798, he published a volume of Sermons, well suited, as they were specially designed, to give aid and direction to a revival in its incipient state. In 1800, he published another volume, of the same general character,—only adapted to a more advanced stage of a revival. Without the least preten-

sion to any thing like studied elegance, these Discourses are written with uncommon vigour and force of thought, and are fitted to work with great power, especially upon the conscience.

In 1799, was published the "Hartford Selection of Hymns;"—a work projected by Mr. Strong, and executed principally, though not exclusively, by him. It was a popular compilation in its day, and several of the best hymns contained in it were from his own pen.

In 1800, commenced the "Connecticut Evangelical Magazine." This too he originated, and in a great measure sustained; though he had the aid of many influential clergymen in different parts of the State. It was continued in a first and second series, during a period of fifteen years. This work has been highly prized, not only for the amount of excellent doctrinal and practical instruction which it contains, but especially for its record of the numerous revivals of religion, by which that period was distinguished.

It may be doubted whether he ever rendered a more important service to the church or to the country, than in the part which he took in establishing and sustaining the Connecticut Missionary Society. He had a primary agency, not only in its organization in 1798, but in the direction of its movements till the year 1806; and his usefulness in this department is to be estimated by the vast amount of spiritual blessing which this institution has ever since been diffusing over the land.

In 1801, he was honoured with the degree of Doctor of Divinity from the College of New Jersey.

His domestic life had its full share of bereavement and solitude. He was married in 1777 to the eldest daughter of Dr. Solomon Smith, a respectable apothecary of Hartford. She died, leaving two children, in 1784. In 1787, he was married to Anna M'Curly of Lyme, who died within less than two years after her marriage, leaving an infant son, whom he named *John M'Curly*. During the rest of his life,—a period of nearly twenty-seven years, he lived a widower. The child of his second marriage, after having graduated with high reputation at Yale College, in 1806, and entered upon the study of the Law under Lieut. Governor Goodrich, was thrown from his horse, in an attempt to cross the ferry at Hartford, and was drowned.

Some months previous to his death, Dr. Strong was brought by a severe illness to the margin of the grave. But, contrary to his own expectations and those of his friends, he recovered strength ere long to resume his accustomed duties; though, from that time, it became evident to all that his course was nearly finished. Beside the bodily infirmities that were clustering upon him, there was a tenderness and mellowness of Christian feeling, and an entire devotedness to the interests of the world to come, that seemed to indicate that he would soon have his summons to depart. But one Sabbath intervened between the close of his public ministrations and his death; and on that Sabbath, both his discourses had direct reference to the scenes in which he was so soon to mingle.

The illness that immediately caused his death was brief, but painful. His mind remained unclouded to the last, and his faith clung to the promises of the Gospel with an unyielding tenacity. In conversation with a friend, just before his departure, concerning the darkness that hangs over the future world, he remarked,—“But I trust I am going where God is, and that is all I desire.” He died on the 25th of December, 1816, in the sixty-ninth

year of his age, and the forty-third of his ministry. A sermon was preached at his funeral by the Rev. Dr. Perkins of West Hartford, and was published.

Besides the several works mentioned above, Dr. Strong published the following:—A Sermon at the execution of Moses Dunbar, 1777. A Sermon at the ordination of Joseph Strong, 1778. An Election Sermon, 1790. A Sermon at the ordination of Ichabod L. Skinner,* 1794. A Sermon at the execution of Richard Doane, 1797. A Thanksgiving Sermon, 1797. A Discourse on the death of Washington, 1799. A Sermon on the death of Mrs. Sarah Williams, 1800. A Thanksgiving Sermon, 1800. A Century Sermon, 1801. A Sermon on the death of the Rev. Charles Backus, D. D., 1804. A Sermon at the funeral of the Rev. James Cogswell, D. D., 1807. A Sermon at the Consecration of the new Brick church in Hartford, 1807. A Discourse before the Hartford Female Beneficent Society, 1809. A Sermon on the Mutability of human life, 1811. A Sermon on the use of time, 1813. A Sermon at the funeral of the Hon. Chauncey Goodrich, 1815.

FROM THE REV. THOMAS ROBBINS, D. D.

HARTFORD, December 16, 1847.

My dear Sir: Dr. Strong was, for many years, my neighbour and intimate friend. I had an opportunity of observing him under various circumstances, and in different relations; and there is perhaps no man who has departed, in respect to whose character I have a more definite and well considered opinion. The reverence which I bear for his memory renders it only a labour of love for me to comply with your request by furnishing you some of my many recollections concerning him.

As a man of intellect, I set him down as belonging to the very first class. He seemed to me never to get to his limit. Judge Daggett has lately told me that the late Chief Justice Mitchell, who was his Tutor in College, pronounced him a man of the greatest original powers of mind he ever knew. He had the most perfect command of all his faculties. When writing on a most critical, profound, or solemn subject, he would leave it, at any time, for business or relaxation, and return to it, and take up the train of thought without the least apparent embarrassment. He wrote with great rapidity, and usually depended on his first thoughts. On this account, most of his printed works bear marks of haste, and are no doubt less perfect, as compositions, than they would have been, if he had subjected them to a careful revision. But a small portion of his work entitled "Benevolence and Misery," was written, when the printing began; but the manuscript was constantly supplied, as it was called for.

He was a great economist of time. He was habitually an early riser; and all the hours that could be spared from the active duties of his profession and other necessary engagements, were sacredly devoted to study. By this incessant application, he not only became eminent as a Divine, but was possessed of extensive and varied erudition. His memory was at once minute and retentive, in an extraordinary degree. Such was his original power of investigation that it seemed necessary to give him only a single hint on a subject, to his working it out, by an independent process, in all its various ramifications. And for nothing perhaps was he more distinguished than his almost intuitive insight into the human character. It was this particularly, in connection with his sound judgment, that gave him an influence, which to many appeared wholly unaccountable, and enabled him

* ICHABOD LORD SKINNER was born in Marlborough, Conn.; was graduated at Yale College in 1793; was ordained as colleague pastor with the Rev. Nathan Strong, Senior, at Coventry, October 23, 1794; was dismissed October 10, 1798; went into civil life; spent his latter years at Washington, D. C.; and died in 1852.

to realize most of his expectations. I will only add, in respect to his high intellectual character, that the most eminent men of his day, and those who had the best opportunity of judging of his powers,—such as Judge Trumbull, Doctors Bellamy, Goodrich, Smalley, Edwards, Dwight, and many others, fully sustained the representation that I have given of him.

In Theology, as on every other subject, he would call no man master, but formed his opinions by a careful study of God's word. Nevertheless, he did not think it necessary to his independence that he should needlessly dissent from others; and he was glad to concur with them as far as he could. He was not fond of oral discussion; being, in this respect, like President Edwards the elder, but quite the opposite of President Edwards the younger. During a time of revival, Dr. Edwards, being at Hartford with Dr. Strong, said to him with much emotion,—“Why do the influences of the Holy Spirit attend your preaching so much more than mine; when our congregations are so much alike, and we preach the same system of truth?” Said Dr. Strong,—“The reason is that *you* present Gospel truth as a proposition to be proved, and go on and prove it; whereas *I* endeavour to exhibit it as something already admitted, and to impress it upon the heart and conscience.” I should think that the most striking peculiarity of his preaching consisted in direct, concise, and effective statements of the doctrines and precepts of the Gospel.

He was eminently devoted to the interests of his flock. In seasons of revival especially, he laboured with the utmost fervour and assiduity. His house was always open for religious meetings, and his study always accessible to serious inquirers. It was not uncommon for him, at these seasons, to preach four or five times a week; and there is little doubt that, during the last four years of his life, he preached a greater number of sermons than any other settled minister in the State. When the last revival under his ministry commenced, and he became fully satisfied that the Holy Spirit was in the midst of his congregation, his mind was so much agitated with alternate fears and hopes for a fortnight, that he did not,—as he stated to a friend, have an hour of uninterrupted sleep at a time.

Dr. Strong exerted a commanding influence in a deliberative body. He was accustomed to make himself thoroughly acquainted with every difficult question that came up, and it was seldom that an opinion contrary to his own prevailed. He would fasten at once on the main points of a question, however involved, and by a few sentences would relieve it from all difficulty, and throw it into the light of noonday.

With all his constitutional cheerfulness, approaching,—it must be acknowledged, too near to levity, he had still a deeply spiritual mind. I remember to have been present on one occasion, when a neighbouring minister put to him the question,—“Are you ready to go yet?” and he replied,—“Yes, to-morrow, if God pleases;” but, after a brief pause, he added,—“if God will do with me as He does sometimes, I am ready.” In seasons of revival he seemed desirous to keep himself out of view as much as possible, that God might be all in all. In times of trouble, he manifested a truly submissive spirit; and appeared chiefly concerned that his afflictions might make him a better Christian and a more devoted minister. One of the greatest trials of his life was the loss of his second son, who was drowned in Connecticut river. Various circumstances conspired to give to that affliction an unwonted sting. But he conducted in a most becoming manner, fixing his mind firmly on the appointment of God. He refused to be informed of the particular circumstances of the event. But I suppose he never crossed Connecticut river after this occurrence. Several years after, he inquired of me about the bridge and causeway, in a time of high water, and said he had never seen them. The bridge was built shortly after his son's death.

Hoping that the above reminiscences may avail to your purpose, I am as ever, sincerely yours,

THOMAS ROBBINS.

FROM THE REV. DANIEL WALDO.

GEDDES, November 7, 1851.

My dear Sir: Dr. Strong was so remarkable a man, and his memory is still so fresh, that you can hardly need any of my recollections concerning him; and yet, since you request it, I am willing to write out for you what most readily occurs to me. I knew him first at Hartford, when I was preaching as a candidate in the year 1790. Soon after that, I became a member of the same Association of ministers with him, and our relations were somewhat intimate from that time till his death.

The first thing that would impress you on being brought into Dr. Strong's presence, was that he was intellectually an extraordinary man. Such a countenance and such an eye as he had, you would say, could never be associated with mental inferiority or mediocrity. And when he spoke, your first impression would be confirmed—no matter what might be the subject, his words were full of pertinence and power. He could wield a sledge hammer, and knock a man down at a blow; or he could use a surgeon's knife so delicately and skilfully, that it would do fearful work, before the subject on which it was operating had begun to suspect what was going forward. His propensity for fun was so inveterate that he often did not control it, even when circumstances seemed actually to forbid its indulgence. Those who were not afraid of the tongues of other men, usually counted the cost before bringing themselves very closely in contact with his. David Daggett was attending Court, or the Legislature, at Hartford, and one Saturday afternoon, on going into Hudson & Goodwin's book-store, found Dr. Strong there; and he jocosely said to him—"Well, Doctor, I think I shall go over to East Hartford and hear Mr. Yates to-morrow—I do not think we can expect much from you, from seeing you away from your study Saturday afternoon." "That's right," said Dr. Strong, "I advise you to go, Sir; for I am going to preach to Christians to-morrow." Col. Dyer of Windham, who had served as Judge for a number of years, had been dropped from his office by the Legislature. He happened to be at Hartford at the next session of the Court, and was standing in the lobby with several others, who had been similarly treated, as Dr. Strong came out, after having prayed at the opening of the Court. Said Judge Dyer, "Why don't you pray for us too?" "I don't pray for the dead," said Dr. Strong. He was unusually negligent in respect to his personal appearance, and certainly was not the most refined in all his habits. Adverting once, in conversation with one of his neighbours, to this feature of his character, he said to him—"What would people be likely to think of me, who should judge me only by my appearance?" "They would think," answered the neighbour, "that you had come into town with a drove of horses."

You can scarcely imagine a greater contrast than Dr. Strong's appearance presented in the pulpit and out of it. The moment he crossed the threshold of the Sanctuary, he became as solemn as eternity. I never heard of his uttering a word in the pulpit, that was in the least inconsistent with his character as a minister, or with the decorum that belongs to the place. His sermons were short, but clear, strong, and pithy. Not a few of his thoughts were strikingly original. His manner was earnest and deeply impressive; his countenance spoke as well as his lips; but I think he rarely, if ever, moved a hand. He had great facility at extemporizing; and I have heard him say that he used sometimes, in order to save appearances with his people, to lay one sermon before him and turn over the leaves, while he was preaching another that he had not written. When he actually read his manuscript, it was with so much freedom that it would scarcely have disturbed the most scrupulous objector to the use of notes. His sermons, like every thing that he wrote, were in an insufferably bad hand; and I have been told that, instead of being able to help the printer make out his manuscript, he was actually obliged sometimes to call in the printer's aid to enable him to decipher it himself.

Dr. Strong was of a remarkably dark complexion. On a certain occasion, Sampson Occum, the celebrated Indian preacher, had agreed to preach for Dr. Edwards at New Haven, but failed to fulfil the appointment. Dr. Strong, being at hand, was put in requisition; and, however the preachers might have differed in other respects, they were not strikingly different in the hue of their faces. An eccentric fellow who wished to make fun at the Doctor's expense, took his seat at the door of the church, and kept saying audibly to the passers by, as if they were really listening to Occum,—“See how the black dog lays it down.”

You would have supposed that Dr. Strong's passion for the humorous and jocose would have interfered materially with his usefulness as a minister. So no doubt it did; and yet,—owing to the great amount of counteracting influence,—not so much as might have been expected. In his later years particularly, though his wit never left him, it was more chastened and restrained, while the general habit of his mind evidently became more spiritual and solemn. Few men in New England had, during the period in which he lived, so much influence as he. Not a few feared his sarcasms; those who knew him best, appreciated most highly his virtues; while the whole community awarded to him the honour of being one of the noblest specimens of human intellect.

Yours faithfully,

DANIEL WALDO.

FROM MRS. L. H. SIGOURNEY.

HARTFORD, November 22, 1848.

My dear Sir: I have had pleasure in recalling, at your request, a few reminiscences of that distinguished and venerable man, the late Rev. Dr. Nathan Strong. I first saw him while attending school in Hartford, in my early years. The acquaintance was then restricted to hearing him from the pulpit on Sundays, and occasionally in the more familiar services in his conference room, during the week. My judgment, at that period, cannot be supposed to have been very critical, but coincided with the impression common to all who listened attentively,—deep admiration of the force and simplicity of his manner, the conciseness and fluency of his style. He had the ability of sustaining a great weight of labour, without apparent fatigue. He was not often relieved by exchanges on Sunday, and was in the habit of preaching twice on that day, and again in the evening at his Conference room, as well as on the evenings of Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday, during the week. The sermons at the latter place were extemporaneous, and more eloquent and modified by feeling than his studied discourses.

When afterwards engaged as an instructress of young ladies in the same city, I was favoured with somewhat more of personal acquaintance. This, however, was but slight, as he never visited, except when his ministerial services were definitely required; and his own time was held too valuable by his people to be broken in upon, for the common uses of society.

On account of nearness of sight, or dimness, which might have been the effect of advanced years, he was usually attended, at his evening lectures, by a boy carrying a lantern. I remember a few occasions when I was invited to “walk home by his light,”—my residence being near his own, at the hospitable mansion of the late Madam Wadsworth, where now stands the “Wadsworth Athenæum.” These attentions from so revered a man were prized as they ought to have been, and but for them I never could have known his remarkable powers of conversation. He seemed pleased to unbend his mind by narrative or varied remark, showing the fulness of his resources and his knowledge of human nature. As his only brother, the Rev. Dr. Joseph Strong of Norwich, had been my neighbour and pastor from infancy, there were many inquiries flowing from these circumstances, that relieved the embarrassment of a young stranger in the presence of one so distinguished. His maxims seemed to me worthy to be written in letters of gold, yet some-

times the flow of his humour, a flash of his native uncontrollable wit, would burst forth, until I lost in it, and not without regret, some portion of the impressions which the solemnity of the sermon, so recently from his lips, had created.

In his last sickness, which was not long, I once saw him. He was pallid and exhausted, but his smile was sweeter than any I had seen him wear in health. Faith in him seemed almost changed to sight. "Death," he said, "is to me but as going into the next room; and to that next room most of my friends have already gone,—many more than are here among the living."

I would, my dear Sir, that my recollections of that great and good man were more numerous and worthy of your acceptance; but such as they are it gives me great pleasure to contribute them in aid of an object so worthy as your request contemplates.

Yours respectfully,

L. H. SIGOURNEY.

The Rev. Dr. JOSEPH STRONG of Norwich was a younger brother of Dr. Nathan Strong. He was graduated at Yale College in 1772; was settled at Norwich, as a colleague with Dr. Lord, March 18, 1778; was married, soon after his ordination, to Mary, daughter of the Hon. Jabez Huntington; received the Rev. Cornelius B. Everest as a colleague in 1829; and died on the 18th of December, 1834, aged eighty-one,—in the fifty-seventh year of his ministry. He received the degree of Doctor of Divinity from the College of New Jersey in 1807; and was a member of the Corporation of Yale College from 1808 till 1826. He published a Sermon at the funeral of Governor Huntington, 1796; a Sermon on the death of Washington, 1799; a Sermon on the death of Dr. Joshua Lathrop, 1808; a Sermon at the funeral of the Rev. Jonathan Murdock,* 1813; a Sermon at the funeral of the Rev. Asahel Hooker, 1813. Miss Caulkins in her History of Norwich, says of him,—“He was distinguished for the benevolence of his disposition, and the fervency and solemnity of his prayers. In social intercourse he exhibited the manners of the gentleman, and the character of the Christian.” I had the pleasure of visiting Dr. Strong at his own house in 1824, and was greatly impressed by his bland and winning manner, and the rich stores of information which he seemed to possess, illustrative of the olden time. He was a large and well formed person, and had a more than commonly dignified expression of countenance.

* JONATHAN MURDOCK was a son of the Hon. Judge Murdock, and was born at or near Saybrook, Conn.; was graduated at Yale College in 1766; was settled for a number of years as pastor of the church in Rye, N. Y.; was installed pastor of the church in Bozrah, Conn., October 12, 1786; and died January 16, 1813, in his sixty-seventh year.