

[Mitchell, William]

Deaths. In Perry, Nov. 1st, Hon. WILLIAM MITCHELL of that village, in the 68th year of his age. His health had been affected by repeated attacks of paralysis, and for the last few weeks confined him to his house... The sermon preached at his funeral, and a brief sketch of his life, will be published in our next.

*Christian Ambassador*, Auburn NY, Sat. 15 Nov 1856  
[a Universalist newspaper]

....

A brief notice of the outer and inner life of our deceased friend seems called for on the present occasion [of his funeral], and with it I will close.

He was born in Chester, Windham co., Vt., August 20, 1789, of very poor and honest parents, who lived in a sparsely settled portion of that town. Of course the advantages for obtaining an education were few and scanty; and consequently he received not to exceed six months of schooling. But by a persevering use of the knowledge thus acquired, and of the few books he could borrow for study during his infrequent hours of leisure, he qualified himself for teaching school at a very early age. By aid of a neighboring clergyman he mastered English Grammar, so as to teach it successfully, in three weeks. Thus constantly acquiring, and teaching his acquisitions to others during the winter seasons—laboring on a farm or in the woods during the Summers—he continued to prepare himself for usefulness and duty some time after his removal to this (then Genesee) county.

In January, 1812, he married Miss Rachel Parker, of Cavendish, in his native county and State, and removed with her to Hadley, Saratoga co., N.Y. in September following. In 1816 he again removed, with his family, to Middlebury, then in Genesee county—where he was successively appointed Justice of the Peace, Assessor and Supervisor of that town. The office of magistrate he held, by appointment and elections, for a period of 24 years.

In April, 1825 he removed his family to Bethany, where, in the winter of 1826, he was appointed one of the Judges of Genesee county court. He filled this position for ten years, when he was appointed President [Presiding] Judge for five years. During his residence in Bethany, he also held the office of Superintendent of the county poor for six years.

But his skies were not all brightness, nor was his lot always prosperous. In April, 1840, he was bereaved by death of the wife of his youth and the mother of his six children. And while engaged in mercantile pursuits his confiding and generous disposition enabled his partner in business to involve the firm in debts, which not only swept away the accumulations of years of toil, but left our friend deeply involved.

In October, 1840, he was united in marriage to Mrs. Laura Dickinson, of this place, who now survives him, with their daughter, the only surviving child of this union. In 1841 he removed with her to this village, and opened here an office as Attorney and Counselor at Law, to which was added some years afterward, the appointment as postmaster, which latter he held at his decease.

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During the last 15 years in which he has resided here, he has been honored with the confidence and business of his fellow citizens...having always performed the duties confided to him in an eminently honorable and satisfactory manner.

It is unnecessary, therefore, for me to speak to you of his many useful services and estimable qualities, as a citizen, as a man, and as a neighbor—as a member of your social organizations, and a promoter of education—among you... Nor need I speak to his family of his constant affection and tender faithfulness in the discharge of his duties of every relation he sustained toward them, and of his generous hospitality to the visitors under his roof.

But I may say, that few men in so busy a life and with such few advantages, have better stored their minds than he did, with varied useful and interesting knowledge. His retentive and ready memory enabled him to quote at great length from the best authors in almost every walk of literature, besides many rare extracts which he had gleaned in his miscellaneous reading. So that even after paralysis had impaired his memory and his powers of utterance—as was the case before I became acquainted with him—he was still an uncommonly interesting and entertaining companion.

But I cannot allow his grave to close forever...without speaking of his *inner* life, as revealed in our relation as Pastor and Parishioner...

You all knew his genial spirit, his generosity when benevolence made appeal to his sympathies or his purse... These prevented the rapid accumulation of property, and probably occasioned its loss when fortune flowed in upon him, until repeated sufferings and increased experience taught him the necessity of sparing, that he might have something to give—and of saving, that the loved ones dependent upon him might not be left utterly dependent on others. With a similar freedom—carelessness—I might call it—he dealt with the highest and greatest interests of his being, in early and middle life.

Educated in belief of the strictest "Orthodoxy," so called, of the Eastern states at that period, he soon found its faith too stern, its hopes too exclusive, and its tenets too irrational, to become the creed of his soul, in understanding or in heart.—And so, without much investigation of its claims or search for a substitute, he not only discarded its errors, but much of its truth; and believing that it derived much of its support from the Bible for its worst teachings, he rejected Christianity with it. And through the best part of his life for investigation...his principal theological reading was of writings *against* revealed religion.

Unfortunately, as he afterwards found, and frequently and freely lamented to me, the believing faculty of the soul became weakened by disuse, and disbelief became a habit of the mind and a desire of the heart, rendering it difficult to examine the evidence of our divine religion fairly and impartially. Even after he became a regular attendant...and was convinced, to use his own language, "...that Universalism was the best form of Christianity he had ever met with, the most rational and Scriptural, the best adapted to...the wants of humanity..." —yet even after this, there were many periods when he doubted its divine origin, and feared that it might prove only a beautiful and glorious delusion, and its doctrine of life immortal beyond the grave be "too good to be true."

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But as, for a year past, he drew nigher to the grave, and held almost daily converse with death as a near and familiar acquaintance, he became more and more dissatisfied with such a halting and hesitating faith in what his soul, his large heart so ardently desired.

Hence he spoke more frequently of his undoubting confidence in God's goodness and paternal love; and from that stand-point contemplated the inevitable conclusion, that there must be a happy immortal destiny for all that Father's family.

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His last request was that I should prepare a sermon on the recognition of friends in a future state, and preach it when he could be present.—And when it became evident that he could never more occupy his accustomed seat in our house of worship, he wished the neighbors and a few friends assembled some Sunday evening in his room, and have it delivered there. That would have been done yesterday evening, but—alas, for us, though joy for him!—he was then in the greater Temple above, where, not arguments to strengthen faith, but the *knowledge* itself, full and perfect, is the food of the soul!

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And now it is a deep, sacred joy to me, as it must be to his friends, to believe that could he have heard the sermon I have just preached, it would have met the full believing response of his soul, and the hearty concurrence of his understanding and his heart.

In this faith and trust our brother departed, at about 3 o'clock P.M., on November 1st, 1856—aged 67 years, 2 months and 12 days. May his frailties and errors be buried with his mortal frame, and his many virtues be held in everlasting remembrance. His spirit has departed to the God who gave it.

The body was buried in the village Cemetery, with Masonic honors, attended by a large concourse of sympathizing neighbors and friends, on the 3d inst.

A. B. G. [Rev. Aaron Bort Grosh]

Perry, N.Y., Nov. 5th, 1856

*Christian Ambassador*, Auburn NY, Sat. 22 Nov 1856

[considerably abridged]

Transcribed on 8 Sep 2008 by Karen E. Dau of Rochester, NY