March 1970

The Fourth William James

Harold A. Larrabee

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq

Recommended Citation
Colby Library Quarterly, series 9, no.1, March 1970, p.1-34

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Quarterly by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Colby. For more information, please contact mfkelly@colby.edu.
THE FOURTH WILLIAM JAMES

By HAROLD A. LARRABEE

The James family in America has long been noted for its three Henrys and three Williams. First in fame among the Williams is of course the philosopher and psychologist William James (1842-1910), whose grandfather William James of Albany (1771-1832) founded the family fortune; while a third William James (1883-1963), second son of the philosopher, gained a measure of recognition as a portrait-painter. Not many persons, however, are aware of a fourth William James (1797-1868), son of the original American William James of Albany, and thus second in chronological order, who is the subject of this memoir. His name completes an extraordinary roll of distinction accruing to a single name, William James, in no less than four successive generations.

He was one of the twin sons Robert and William of the family patriarch by his first wife Elizabeth Tiliman (or Tilghman, 1771-1797), and became a Presbyterian clergyman, D.D. (hon. Union College, 1854). His ministerial activities, though distinguished in some respects, could hardly demand our attention today. More relevant to our interests is the fact that he was one of three gifted Jameses to express himself volubly and distinctively on the subject of religion; and his career throws some light upon the disputed “sources of intellectual distinction in the James family.” In 1828 he delivered a Fourth of July sermon to the citizens of Rochester, New York, which is an almost perfect example of the case for America’s moral mission as savior to the rest of the nations of the world. That highly moralistic conception of what our foreign policy should be (sometimes exaggerated into “meddlesome self-righteousness”) has been deeply influential throughout American history up to and including the present generation.

William’s father William James of Albany came to this country in 1789 from the north of Ireland, where he had been born in Corkish,
County Cavan, on December 29, 1771, the son of an earlier William James and Susan McCartney. Tradition maintained that the family had emigrated from Wales to Ireland in the 18th century. They were not only Protestants, but “actual Calvinists” in theology and conduct. Family lore also had it that the eighteen-year-old William had arrived in America in true Horatio Alger fashion, equipped only “with a Latin grammar, a small sum of money, and a desire to visit the battlefields of the (recent) American Revolution.” For four years he drops out of our sight, turning up again in Albany, New York in 1793 as a clerk in John Robison’s Old Blue Store. By 1795 he was in business for himself (with a partner David Herren) dealing in tobacco and segars, and later in dry goods and groceries.

For quick returns he could not have chosen a better place than Albany at the turn of the century. It was a boom town astride the Hudson-Mohawk water-level route to the West. And if anyone could have been said to have possessed the Midas touch, that man was William James. His diverse business interests (including the first shipping line along the Mohawk and a slice of the salt industry of Syracuse) snowballed at an almost incredible pace, so that in 1818 he could retire from merchandising and devote all his time to his real estate holdings which stretched from New York City to Detroit, Michigan. At his death in 1832 he left an estate second in size only to that of John Jacob Astor, and consisting of an estimated three million dollars in real estate and other investments. As we shall see, he made a most complicated will, which had a considerable impact upon the lives of a dozen of his heirs, of whom the Rev­erend William James was one.¹

About our subject’s mother Elizabeth Tillman we know all too little, except that she came from a Mohawk Valley farm family, and was of German or Dutch descent. In a sketch of the life of Mr. James by a clergyman friend, he is described as “a mixture of Irish and Dutch: Irish on his father’s side; and Dutch on his mother’s. He carried in himself the fire and sensibility of the one nation, with the depth and power of endurance of the other; an extraordinary and splendid combination.”²

At the time of William’s birth in 1797, his father had just become established in business for himself, and had not yet achieved his later affluence and influence. Shortly after giving birth to the twin sons, the first Mrs. James died, to be succeeded briefly by Mary Ann Connolly, who also succumbed after having borne a daughter in 1800, and whose place in turn was taken in 1803 by Catharine Barber, who was to bear ten children, among them Henry James the Elder, the father of the two famous sons. Some authorities have attempted to trace a large share of

⁴ Reverend Henry Neill, “View of Mr. James’s Character and Life,” in William James, Grace for Grace (New York, 1876), 331.
the "intellectual greatness" of the later Jameses to the so-called "Barber inheritance" in which, of course, the Reverend William James had no share.

There is general agreement that the children of the dynamic merchant William seem not to have commanded any great share of his attention. He was an ardent Scottish Presbyterian, faithful in attendance at church and a constant entertainer of the clergy at the family table. So it was logical that as tutor for his twin boys he should engage the services of "the justly celebrated scholar and teacher, the Reverend John McDonald," Scottish-educated former pastor of Albany's First Presbyterian Church. This tutoring at home continued until the age of fourteen, when William was sent to the academy conducted by the Reverend Dr. Banks in Florida, New York.

**College Days at Princeton**

So excellent was his preparation at the academy that he was able to enter the Sophomore Class at Princeton in 1813 at the age of sixteen. There was actually little difference, in that era, between the courses studied in a good academy and in a college. The "most lasting benefits" derived from studies at either institution were said to be "the enriching of his character and mind, the introduction they gave to Greek and Latin literature and art, to natural science, and to philosophy and history." Princeton prided itself especially, however, upon the strictness of its discipline: "The utmost care is taken to discountenance vice and to encourage a manly, rational and Christian behavior in the students." The result was that "Nassau Hall to some of its younger denizens must have seemed like a prison."5

This state of affairs reached its peak during William James's college years under the administration of President Ashbel Green, when the institution "vibrated between revivals and rebellions" amounting to "well-nigh chronic anarchy." Green's policy of "Draconian discipline, by constantly tightening the screws upon the students, created a chaldron seething with resistance, which boiled over on more than one occasion with disastrous results."6

On the crest of a wave of reaction against the progressive policies of President Samuel Stanhope Smith, his chief orthodox opponent and ardent disciplinarian on the board of trustees, the Reverend Dr. Ashbel Green, had been persuaded to become president in the high hope that "Nassau Hall might become the seat of a series of religious revivals which would transform the worldly and vicious into meek, pious youths, some of whom would go forth to preach the Gospel." Doctor Green was wont to complain that he suffered from "a settled gloom of mind,

---

being (in Norris's words) “always in dead earnest, in piety unexcelled; pompous, zealous, devout, uncompromising, prejudiced, aggressive.” In an atmosphere “surcharged with suspicion and distrust,” he based his policies on the doctrine of total depravity of the young, and announced that if he could not “reform the students, he was determined to rule them.”

During the year previous to James's entrance, “every kind of insubordination the students could devise was indulged in,” and the explosion of harmless “crackers” led to the dismissal of eight students. When the ingenious Richard Bayard rigged a rope to his bedroom window, by means of which he could ring the college bell at will throughout the night, the faculty were summoned from their beds at 3 A.M. to meet and dismiss him on the spot.7 James's first year (1813-1814), we are told, “opened in perfect order for a fortnight. Then there were attempts in every imaginable form to promote mischief. Crackers were fired, the walls were scrawled in the refectory. All this riotous behavior culminated on the night of January 9, 1814, with the tremendous explosion of ‘the big cracker.’ A hollow log charged with two pounds of gunpowder was set off behind the central door of Nassau Hall. It cracked the adjacent walls from top to bottom and broke windows in all parts of the building.” As the result of what the trustees called “this extensive, deep-laid and most criminal conspiracy,” eleven students were found guilty and five were expelled.8

During the winter of James's second year at Princeton (1814-1815), to President Green's great joy, a wave of religious sentiment swept through the college. “The divine influence seemed to descend like the silent dew of heaven,” he wrote, “and in about four weeks there were few individuals in the college edifice who were not deeply impressed with a sense of the importance of spiritual and eternal things.” In many a chamber, says Wertenbaker, “where formerly mischievous youths plotted to burn an outhouse or to set off crackers in the lecture rooms, there was now earnest prayer and anxious discussions of religious matters. The students of divinity, usually despised and snubbed by their classmates, were sought after and requested to lead in prayer meetings.”9

“It was a period never to be forgotten by those who witnessed the remarkable impressions and transformations,” Green reported, adding that more than forty students had become “the subjects of renewing grace” and that twelve or fifteen more had received “promising impressions of religion.” Of the remainder a large proportion showed a hopeful “tenderness of conscience” and a “deep regard for religious duties.” A visitor commented: “I believe there was never such times in Nassau Hall before, the old college is literally a Bethel.” Green ascribed the

---

7 Wertenbaker, 154-156; Varnum Lansing Collins, Princeton (New York, 1914), 129-150.
8 Wertenbaker, 156; Norris, 132.
9 Wertenbaker, 165.
revival "to the Bible studies which he had introduced in the curriculum two years previously, to the moral discipline of Nassau Hall vigorously and vigilantly maintained, which had preserved the youth generally from those vicious indulgences which counteract serious religious impressions, and to the influence of a few students who spoke privately and tenderly to their friends on the subject of religion."{10}

"But the impulse seems to have come," says Wertenbaker, "from without as part of a widespread religious movement among undergraduates in the American colleges." "In addition to the revival of religion at Yale College, Dartmouth and Andover have also been visited with a season of refreshment," wrote Daniel Baker of the Princeton class of 1815, "I am informed that a society has been formed among the students at Yale with the express and specific object of praying for a revival in Cambridge."

To President Green it seemed that his fondest hopes had been realized, that his policies had been justified, that all his problems of discipline had vanished. "Through the last session your officers have indeed enjoyed halcyon days," he reported triumphantly to the trustees. "They have experienced no ordinary pleasure in directing the studies and conduct of liberal-minded youth who have emulated each other in seeking their own improvement, in giving pleasure to their teachers, in obedience to the laws. I consider the youth who form our present charge as decidedly the most amiable and exemplary that I have ever seen. The public sentiment of the college, so far from being hostile to discipline, has called for it. When some spiteful youth to show his opposition to religion, fired a cracker, it filled the student body with abhorrence and detestation."{11}

"But Nassau Hall did not remain long under the influence of the religious awakening," writes historian Wertenbaker. "In September 1815 a large number of the converts had graduated, others had dropped out on account of bad health, still others because they could not keep up in their work; and of the new admissions President Green considered many to be 'bad in morals and religion.' Before the new session had been under way many weeks, as many crackers were going off as in the old evil days. A ray of hope appeared in mid-winter, when almost every member of the house, the profane as well as the pious, seemed to be held in still and solemn suspense, waiting for and expecting another religious revival." It did not, however, materialize, and the students returned to their old disorders.\{12\}

As a matter of fact they capped them off in January 1817 with "'the Great Rebellion,' one of the most serious riots in the turbulent history of Nassau Hall." To the authorities it seemed as if "Satan had fallen like lightning from heaven." The students, "considering their assigned

---

11 Ashbel Green, The Life of Ashbel Green (New York, 1849), 379.
12 Wertenbaker, 165.
reading too long, showed their resentment in the traditionally violent way. On Sunday, January 19th, in the early hours of the morning, they nailed up all the entrances to the building, together with the doors of the chambers of the tutors and the religious students. Then rushing to the top floor yelling 'Rebellion! Rebellion!' they broke window panes, rang the bell incessantly, and created a scene of the wildest disorder."

All the students summoned before the faculty professed complete innocence; they had been awakened but had "had no part in the mischief." President Green was nonplused until a student, "no doubt one of his favorite pious youths, came to his study and, going over the roll of the college, pointed out all who were disaffected." Since the students still refused to testify, Green resolved to proceed "without formal proof," and expelled fourteen of the "most criminal." This action aroused the wrath of the whole student body. "Bedlam broke forth, the college resounded with yells interspersed with the reports of pistol shots and the crash of glass, the walls were scrawled with charcoal," and the Prayer Hall furniture, "the students' pet aversion, was smashed beyond recognition."

Nassau Hall became a fortress in a state of siege from which the faculty had been routed. The civil authorities were appealed to, did not respond at first, but finally intervened and arrested seven of the students.\(^\text{13}\) Apparently the students of Columbia University in 1968 were not acting without precedents.

President Green now turned upon the student body with predictable fury. "The true cause of all these enormities," he wrote, "are (sic) to be found nowhere else but in the fixed, irreconcilable and deadly hostility . . . to the whole system established in this college by the chartered legislators and guardians, a system of diligent study, of guarded moral conduct, and of reasonable attention to religious duty . . . The more carefully such a system is administered, the more offensive it will be rendered to such youth. A perfect administration will be the most offensive of all . . . the tornado which has struck us, though it was violent and in passing shook us rudely, yet has carried away in its sweep much of the concealed taint of moral pestilence, and left us a purer atmosphere." Nevertheless in 1821 President Green's resignation was forced. "His administration," concludes Wertenbaker, "had been a failure. During his regime the disorders in Nassau Hall reached their zenith; scholarship and teaching their nadir."\(^\text{14}\)

Yet President John Maclean could point to the results of the 1815 revival as "in every view of the most happy. A number, large in proportion to the whole, became hopefully pious, and adorned a profession of their faith in Christ by a godly walk and conversation through life and not a few became ministers of the gospel and some of them quite eminent in their respective churches."\(^\text{15}\) One of these budding ministers of

\(^{13}\) Wertenbaker, 168; Norris, 136-137.

\(^{14}\) Wertenbaker, 169, 172.

\(^{15}\) John Maclean, *History of the College of New Jersey from its origin in 1746 to the Commencement of 1834* (Philadelphia, 1877), II, 162.
the Class of 1816 was William James. "He had had," says his seminary classmate and later Albany colleague the Reverend William B. Sprague, "religious impressions at different periods from early childhood, but it was not until the memorable revival of 1815 in the college of which he was a member, that he allowed himself to know that he had become the subject of a spiritual renovation, and, as a consequence, made a public profession of his faith."16

At Princeton Theological Seminary

William James received the degree of Bachelor of Arts in 1816, having among his classmates men of such future renown as Governor McDowell of Virginia, Episcopal Bishop McIlwaine of Ohio, and Princeton president John Maclean. Not many different professions beckoned to the 1816 graduate, and among them the ministry had in its favor the strong approval of William's father, to say nothing of the impetus of the revival and the passionate longings of President Green. The Theological Seminary of the Presbyterian Church at Princeton, which James decided to enter, had been established only four years before, largely at the instigation of Green and his followers. Its classes were held in the college buildings; and a student's expenses for the year (exclusive of clothes and travel) were estimated at $139.00. From small beginnings, however, the Seminary came gradually to influence strongly, if not to dominate the college, "to the detriment," says Norris, "of its liberal development for half a century. More than half of the trustees of the college were trustees, directors or professors of the Seminary," and they engulfed the college in "a tide of clericalism."17

Great care had been taken in advance to assure the unwavering orthodoxy of both faculty and students. Professors had to be ordained ministers of the Presbyterian Church, and had to swear allegiance to its Confession of Faith, its Catechism and its Form of Government. They were authorized to "dismiss any student unsound in his religious sentiments, immoral or disorderly in his conduct, or who may be, in their opinion, on any account whatsoever, a dangerous or unprofitable member of the institution."

Once admitted, a student's conduct was minutely regulated in an almost monastic fashion. He had to spend a portion of each morning in "devout meditation." On Sundays he had to forswear any "intellectual pursuit not connected with devotion, or the religion of the heart." On one day each month he had to observe "a special program of self-examination, and attend on suitable occasions to the duty of fasting." He was warned that if he should "exhibit, in his general deportment, a levity or indifference in regard to the practice of religion, though it do not amount

16 William B. Sprague, An Address delivered on occasion of the funeral of the Reverend William James, D.D. in the First Presbyterian Church, Albany, February 19, 1868 (Albany, 1868), 12. Dr. Sprague, a Yale graduate with D.D. degrees from both Harvard and Columbia universities, was pastor of the Second Presbyterian Church of Albany from 1829 to 1869.
17 Norris, 123-125.
to any overt act of irreligion or immorality, it shall be the duty of the Professor who may observe it to admonish him tenderly and faithfully in private and endeavor to engage him in a more holy temper and a more exemplary deportment.” The seminary student is, furthermore, adjured “to treat his teachers with the greatest deference, and all other persons with civility. Strict temperance in meat and drink is expected of every student, and all excessive expense in clothing is strictly prohibited.” On top of it all, he must take an oath of obedience, swearing that he will “readily yield to all the wholesome admonitions of Professors and Directors, who may, during his first six months of probation, summarily dismiss him for whatever reason seems good to them.”

Instead of quoting the curriculum of the seminary to which William James was exposed, the reader may readily infer its contents from the formidable list of requirements for graduation. The candidate for the degree of Bachelor of Divinity at Princeton must first of all prove himself “well skilled in the original languages of the Holy Scriptures. He must be able to explain the principal difficulties which arise in the perusal of the Scriptures. He must be versed in Jewish and Christian antiquities which serve to explain and illustrate Scripture. He must have an acquaintance with ancient geography and Oriental customs which throw light on the sacred records. Thus he will have laid the foundation for becoming a sound Biblical critic.”

Furthermore, the candidate “must have read and digested the principal arguments and writings relative to what has been called the deistical controversy. Thus he will be qualified to become a defender of the Christian faith. He must be able to support the doctrines of the Confession of Faith and Catechisms by a ready, pertinent and abundant quotation of Scriptural texts for that purpose. He must have studied carefully and correctly Natural, Didactic, Polemic, and Casuistic Theology. He must have considerable acquaintance with General History and Cosmology, especially Church History. Thus he will be preparing to become an able and sound divine and casuist.”

But that is not all. “He must have composed at least two lectures and four popular sermons that shall have been approved by the Professors. Thus he will be prepared to become a useful preacher and a faithful pastor. He will also be qualified to exercise discipline, and to take part in the Government of the Church in all its jurisdictions.” All the above matters will be ascertained orally by the Professors and Directors, and “any Director may put to any pupil such questions as he may deem proper during or after the examination.”

It is hardly to be wondered that out of a total of eighty-seven students registered in the first five classes at the Seminary (1812-1816), only eighteen (or 20%) were awarded the degree of B.D. In the class

18 A Brief History of the Theological Seminary of the Presbyterian Church at Princeton, New Jersey, together with the Constitution, Bye-laws, etc. (Princeton, N. J., 1838), 17, 19-20.
19 Ibid., 18-19
of 1819 William James was a successful candidate; and we have the testimony of his classmate Sprague that "James's career in the Seminary left no one who witnessed it in doubt that he possessed talents of a very high order, especially the talent for writing and public speaking, and if my memory is not at fault, the very finest specimens of pulpit oratory that I ever heard from him, were before he had yet entered the pulpit."

But Sprague also testified that there was a period of self-doubt and uncertainty during James's seminary days. He knew him, he says, "at first only in class, but even then and there he developed traits of character that seem to foreshadow the man of mark. Our acquaintance became intimate, and one of the first revelations he made to me was that he was doubtful and dissatisfied in respect to his own spiritual condition. I knew of his going to unburden his spirit to our venerable Professor Dr. Alexander, whose familiar acquaintance with all the various phases of Christian experience rendered him a most competent counsellor."

Sprague hastens to add: "I do not think that this season of darkness was of very long continuance, though I believe his religious exercises often took on a marked cast, and always received a tinge, in a greater or less degree, from his peculiar, I might almost say unique, intellectual and moral constitution." 20

There are hints here and elsewhere of a mentality somewhat out of the ordinary, and which as time went on was to be subjected to the stresses and strains of mental illness. But we also need to remember that, according to his friend the Reverend Henry Neill: "James had a most vigorous physical constitution, a fine head, a glowing, warm, discerning and expressive eye, a high and expansive forehead, and a movement indicative of power and good breeding, and a presence that, by its elevation, frankness, and fearlessness, would vitalize an assembly before he spoke a word . . . His nature was regal: he never assumed a posture or a tone; his manners were the undulation of his morals, and so identical with them that, as with the old Romans, but one word, mores, was necessary to express both." 21

Study Abroad and First Preaching

On emerging from Princeton Seminary with every imprint of orthodoxy, William James was licensed to preach by the Presbytery of Albany, New York in September 1820. Already signs of an impairment of his health, attributed to the intensity of his studies, had begun to appear, and he decided to combine further graduate study with a change of scene by crossing the ocean to Scotland. There he spent twenty months, chiefly in Glasgow and Edinburgh. The ocean voyage was apparently beneficial. What he encountered in Scotland was, according to Dunning, "a cloud no larger than a man's hand" on the horizon of the Established Church of that country. "Those who, a few years later were

20 Sprague, 15-16. Archibald Alexander, D.D., LL.D., was Professor of Didactic and Polemic Theology at the Seminary (1812-1840).
21 Neill, 331-332.
to become the moving central figures of the great disruption period were then, so to speak, in training. Particularly of one of them Mr. James became a very ardent admirer. This was Dr. Robert Gordon, at that time minister in the old chapel of ease at Edinburgh. From acquaintance with him and from his thoughtfulness and inspiration the young American student derived the greatest benefits.”

The “great disruption” was the breaking away of the evangelical divines of the Established Church of Scotland to form the Free Church, which occurred about twenty years after James’s studies at Edinburgh. Neill notes that James “was led to Dr. Gordon rather than to Dr. Chalmers,” although both men were leaders in the Free Church movement. Sprague points out that a certain lack of gregariousness in James’s disposition became evident in Scotland. “During this period he lived in comparative retirement, conversing more with books than with men, and though within a few minutes' walk of some of the greatest spirits of the age, he seems to have studiously avoided an introduction to them.”

On his return to this country, James preached for six months “to crowded assemblies” from the pulpit of the Murray Street Church in New York City, made vacant by the resignation of Dr. John Mitchell Mason, “the Nestor of the American pulpit.” This was considered “a tremendous undertaking for a young man.” James must now seek a permanent post. It was common at that time for young ministers of the Presbyterian Church to start their careers by missionary endeavors on what was still the frontier of New York State. So he became the stated supply of a congregation “formed partly from Clarkson and partly from Brockport” in the presbytery of Rochester. Clarkson was a town less than two miles west of Rochester, and Brockport was a handsome village about two miles away on the new Erie Canal. That was his address when, on November 16, 1824, the Reverend Mr. James was married to Marcia Lucretia Ames, two months younger than himself. She was the daughter of Ezra Ames, artist, of Staatsburgh and Albany, who painted excellent portraits of most of the prominent New York personages of his time.

In the year 1825 Mr. James was still listed in the Statistical Report of the Presbyterian Church as “without charge,” but soon afterwards he was summoned to Rochester, a city of less than 8000 inhabitants, which was about to enter upon a period of rapid and remarkable growth.

22 Homer H. Dunning, Lest We Forget: The Lives and Labors of Those Men Who Have Served as Pastors of the Third Presbyterian Church of Albany (Albany, N. Y., 1905). 28. Robert Gordon, D.D. (1780-1853) was “a very popular preacher and a man of profound piety and comprehensive learning, amiable and conscientious in the discharge of his duties.” He acted as Moderator of the General Assembly in the critical year 1841, and with Dr. Chalmers and hundreds of other clergymen he left the Established Church in 1843 to set up the Free Church of Scotland.
23 Neill, 323. Thomas Chalmers, D.D. (1780-1847), Professor of Theology at Edinburgh, was “a decided Evangelical, regarded as facile princeps among pulpit orators of his day.”
24 Sprague, 12.
Colby Library Quarterly

Only a decade earlier the "straggle of muddy lanes, cabins and shacks" had been known as "Shantytown" and then, until 1822, as Rochesterville. In 1823 its section of the Erie Canal had been opened, freight rates dropped, and land values rose precipitously. By 1827 there were nine sawmills turning out lumber for the building of canal boats, and Rochester had already earned the name of "Flour City" by sending thousands of barrels of milled wheat to New York by canal.

A later visitor, Nathaniel Hawthorne, caught the spirit of the place in 1835 when he told of "the hum and hustle of the instantaneous city" which had been created out of the surrounding forests, with streets and sidewalks crowded with traffic, "all hurrying, trotting, rattling and rambling in a throng which passed continually, but never passed away." The first church organized and built in Rochester, in 1812, had been Presbyterian, and from the beginning it had prospered under the Reverend Comfort Williams. In 1825 it numbered one hundred and twenty-five members, and it was decided to create a second church in the swiftly-growing community. Twenty-five members of the First Presbyterian Church volunteered to form the nucleus of the Second Church, the members of which invited William James to become their first pastor. He was duly installed on July 2, 1826.

The intellectual tone of Rochester at the time was strongly "New England Puritan" in character. But one of the problems confronting the young minister was that of "making Congregationalists into Presbyterians." This was because the early settlers had been mostly Congregationalists, but had come to feel that "the control of a governing presbytery would be more effective in promoting piety and morality under frontier conditions than the more democratic forms of Congregationalism." By 1829 the Second Church reported 111 communicants, while the First still had 120. By 1831 James's congregation had grown to 225, and its name, because of its new building, had been changed to Brick Presbyterian Church. Its first pastor had laid well the foundations of a church which was to continue to grow, reaching, as many as 2200 members in the year 1905. The expansion of the city had necessitated the creation of a Third Presbyterian Church in the late 1820s, which set the stage for a historic controversy in which the Reverend William James was to play a leading part.

The Fourth of July Sermon

Before the church dispute began, however, it was hardly a cause for wonder that the rising young minister of the Brick Church was chosen to deliver the Fourth of July sermon to the citizens of Rochester in 1828, or that it should afterwards be "printed by request." 1828 was a presidential election year, and, in the words of Samuel Eliot Morison: "It was the first that really smelled . . . the most degrading campaign that the United States had experienced up to that time." The so-called

“Era of Good Feeling” under President Monroe had come to an end in 1824, when a minority President John Quincy Adams had been elected by the House of Representatives (each state having one vote) by the margin of a single vote. Andrew Jackson had shown surprising strength at the polls, and his followers had not hesitated to raise the cry of “We was robbed!”

When the Reverend William James arose to begin his sermon, he could hardly have foreseen that the beginning of a new era in American history, “the rise of the common man,” was only a few months away. In November 1828, Andrew Jackson was no longer to be denied, winning 178 electoral votes to Adams’ 83. Even New York State went for Jackson (though by only about 5000 votes), and the old Republican state machine was supplanted by the new “Albany Regency” under Martin Van Buren and William L. Marcy.

Facing a congregation already largely familiar with the New England version of Calvinism, James announced his holiday theme as “The Moral Responsibility of the American Nation,” and his text Deuteronomy XIV:2: “And the Lord hath chosen thee to be a peculiar people unto Himself, above all nations that are upon the earth.” To an exiled New Englander there was nothing new about identifying his people with the children of Israel as chosen carriers of a lofty morality to the rest of mankind. As Edward McNall Burns remarks: “The sense of mission runs like a golden thread through most of American history.” It runs from before Herman Melville, who said: “We Americans are peculiar, chosen people, the Israel of our times, we bear the ark of the liberties of the world” and Walt Whitman: “We are custodians of the future of humanity” to Adlai Stevenson (in 1952): “God has set for us an awesome mission: nothing less than the leadership of the free world.” In its religious version, the “idea of mission” amounts to the claim that Americans, like the early Hebrews, have been especially “chosen by God because of their virtues to guide and instruct the rest of the nations in lessons of justice and right.”

To establish his thesis, James moves rapidly from the contention that “the highest attribute of man is responsibility” to the further assertion that “the highest conception which can be formed of human power . . . is that which arises from viewing man in his associated capacity, attaching the attribute of moral responsibility to the character of a whole nation, viewing the myriad of minds as constituting one individual being, and that being responsible to God for its actions, as affecting the character and interests of an indeterminate posterity.”

28 William James, *The Moral Responsibility of the American Nation*, A DISCOURSE delivered in Rochester, July 4, 1828. Printed by request. (Rochester, N. Y., 1829), 1. This was the second discourse by Mr. James to be
To the extent that the speaker is relying upon the analogy between Israel and New England-Rochester, there is a flaw in his reasoning which should be pointed out. He glides over the important difference between the Hebrew covenant and that of the Puritans. As Eugene R. Fingerhut makes clear: "The Hebraic covenants were almost always between God and the people represented by a spokesman." The New Englander, on the other hand, regarded his mission in the world as originating "in what was essentially a one-to-one relation between the person and God." The mission of the Massachusetts Bay Colony was "a projection of the goals of individuals." 

Rochester, New York in 1828 was by no means a homogeneous tribe of consciously identical people, "one individual being" in the Hebraic sense, but a fairly loose aggregation of independent-minded individuals sharing a religious tradition of rebellion against an authoritative church. Nevertheless James felt that there was enough similarity between Israelites and Americans to enable him to identify the moral responsibilities of the two peoples. Both tended to see themselves as true believers exiled among heathen in lands to which God had led them, and in which they would prosper if they kept the terms of His covenant with them. In James's mind there was no doubt that the American nation was "chosen of God to be a peculiar people to Himself above all the nations of the earth; that is we shall endeavor to show, a people who have received, through the agency of a special Providence, and the influence of religious truth, a richer inheritance of special blessings, than has fallen to the lot of any modern nation, whereby they are invested with a power to affect incalculably the interests of unborn generations."

That American national "felicity and glory" is something totally "unparalleled in the experience of other countries," James regards as indisputable. The only possible shadow on the claim is that "your privileges are too great to last; your happiness is too abundant to be of long duration; it resembles too much the fable of the golden age to prove permanent." The preacher then asks: "What accounts for this extraordinary bestowal of riches?" He finds the answer elementary: God raises up certain peoples as His favorite children, "the apple of His eye," sometimes abasing others to exalt those whom he has chosen. American history consists of a series of such special Providences.
"The conquests of other nations," he avers, "have been achieved with their bows and their sword . . . the race to the swift, and the battle to the strong. But how different has been the case with our own country . . . Ask your elders and they will tell you: how odious they were for their principles, and contemptible for their numbers, how they sojourned in a land of deserts and savages, and how, whilst they were yet the fewest and most scattered of people, they sustained a triumphant conflict against the mightiest empire of the globe; when you have considered the lowness of their origin, the trials of their pilgrimage, the poverty of their means, and the shortness of the period in which this great continent has been settled, subdued, and planted with the most perfect governments, the purest of religious institutions, and the happiest societies the world ever saw — can you refrain from the language of Jewish acknowledgment: 'We got not the land by our own sword, neither did our own arm save us; but by Thy right hand, and Thy arm, and the light of Thy countenance, because Thou hast a favor unto us.'

In addition to these "proofs of the particular favor of the Almighty," James goes on to cite the special American "knowledge of religious truth" which, he believes, accounts for the lofty motivation of the American founding fathers. He sees them as "acting upon the great principle of first seeking the Kingdom of Heaven." Referring to "the men who moulded the Constitution and governed society," he conveniently forgets, like most preachers, the fact that a large proportion of them were Deists. Nearly all of "the other nations of the earth have had their origin in the worst principles which can influence the nature of man — in the lust of carnage, rapine, and glory . . . a few in commercial speculation . . . in the natural desire for independence; but they all may be referred to one principle: the hope of improving their temporal economy . . . To this principle, we know but two exceptions in the history of nations: these are, the pilgrims of Canaan, and the pilgrims of New England — the bond-men of Egypt, and the bond-men of modern Britain. These are the only people who have had mainly in view, not the improvement of their temporal economy, but the enlargement of their moral rights, and the security of their moral interests."

"What is it then," asks James, "that distinguishes an American? Wherein are we better conditioned than the other nations of the world?" He rejects in turn the answers that Americans are more richly endowed by nature, or more advanced in the arts of civilization, or that they excel all others in martial prowess, or that they have any valid claim to intellectual superiority. He doubts that "the mantle of poetick or philosophick inspiration has fallen upon us. Where are our lyceums, our museums, our universities, or our libraries? Where are the scholars, the poets, the artists, or even the schoolmasters, who can vie in their

respective professions with those of the older countries? Our highest praise as to this article should be, that we know enough to be sensible of our ignorance; and that we know enough to feel the vanity of mere science to the higher ends of our existence.”

America may justly claim a share of all of the above advantages; and perhaps “no one nation combines them as happily as our own.” But to them all we add “the first and grand privilege of SELF-GOVERNMENT . . . which dignifies and enriches every individual of a nation . . . it makes a man a lord, who would otherwise be a slave; it gives him an interest of his own, who was before but a servant to the interests of others.” To emphasize the priceless character of this new freedom, James launches into an indictment of “the governing classes of the old countries” as scathing as that of Karl Marx many years later. “They possess all the property of the country — all the growth of its soil, and all the labor of its animals and men are theirs by natural inheritance. What distinguishes the other class who may yet form ninety-nine hundredths of the whole is, that they own nothing, not even their own labor — for how far their labor shall avail them, whether it shall suffice for their food and clothing, or whether they shall go naked and starve, depends on laws, with the enactment of which they have no more to do than with the ordinances of day and night. The design of all their laws is, briefly, to advance the peculiar interests of the governing classes, and to make the labor of the people serviceable to their interests; or still more briefly, to prevent the people from attaining the capacity and the privilege of self-government. To fill their mouths, and to make them serviceable to national aggrandizement, and keep them tolerably quiet, whilst their betters are enjoying, their leisure or their dignity, this is the utmost that is expected from their political provisions.”

“Now just the reverse of this condition,” says James, “is ours. It is not the interest of our government, that a single individual of the body should be depressed. It gives them all the same unlimited freedom for acquiring and holding wealth — a freedom limited only by the moral law.” Far from imitating “those impositions of unnatural and little-hearted custom, which create and rule the higher ranks of European society,” James tells his hearers, “both nature and religion summon you to a higher calling; your work is to reform the nations, not to imitate them — not to contaminate your soil with the importations of their worn-out vices, but to purify theirs by the exhibition of your original virtues; ransomed and regenerated by the spirit of freedom they look to you for a new illustration of manhood — for deeds of moral greatness, not the little achievements of manual skill, nor the sickly affectation of their social refinements. Let the dead bury their dead — but wing your way to a nobler destiny.”

31 Ibid., 9.
The speaker then turned to a discussion of the nature of national power, disdaining “the high and swelling words of vanity with which many of our patriot orators will set off our martial achievements on this anniversary.” James was not bothered by the inferiority of our “armies, fortifications, and treasure.” Our true “capacity of self-defense,” he points out, lies in our “love of freedom — in the resolve never to be slaves — in the spirit of our fathers, which we inherit with their blood . . .” Thus we are unconquerable by “the tyrants of the world,” and we in turn cannot overcome them by our military might. America’s national power lies in the “moral example” displayed to others in our own institutions. It is this which has “loosed the loins of kings, and shaken their foundations . . . our very name operating as an inspiration upon the energies of their subjects.” With a remarkable clairvoyance which foresaw the European revolutions of 1830 and 1848, James envisaged “the public mind of all these nations . . . strongly setting to revolution.” Americans need only “to be faithful to the interests of freedom, and their kingdoms are numbered and finished.” Our children must be especially impressed that “it is not in a martial, but only in a moral sense that we are a powerful nation.”

“Our power,” he continued, “will not end here. Having taught them the first right and interest of manhood, to us will the nations look for every lesson in the art of human amelioration and improvement.” But this “exalted influence upon the character of other countries” can be exercised only if our freedom is safeguarded and wisely used. “The destinies of America, then, depend at last upon the unanimity and magnanimity of her people. We must have one mind, and that a great one. Unparalleled privileges must lead to exalted achievements. We must regenerate the nations by our example. To this we were chosen, and if we rest till our warfare is accomplished, other countries will perish by the example which should have saved them.”

The young minister summed up his message to the people of Rochester in two principles: “In the first place, we must provide for the formation of A VIGOROUS AND INTELLIGENT PEOPLE, OR A PEOPLE CAPABLE OF SELF-GOVERNMENT. Secondly, we must as a nation, ACKNOWLEDGE GOD, AND MAKE HIM OUR FEAR AND OUR CONFIDENCE.” National immorality results in national misery. He invited his audience to “look at modern France” as an example of the awful consequences of godlessness: “Did ever the cannibals of the southern zone, did ever the panthers and hyenas of the forest, exhibit less of political capacity, or more of brutal degradation, than these worshippers of nature?”

“Freedom, it should never be forgotten, while it is the hardest of all blessings to obtain, so it is the most difficult to preserve, and it becomes

33 Cf. Walter Lippmann, 140 years later: “We can have great influence in human affairs by force of our example — not, as we have thought, by force of arms.” New York Post, May 18, 1968.
34 James, 10-11.
the most deadly evil when abused . . . In exercising a proper concern upon this subject, lies the whole responsibility of every American; and in the fact, that no one-fiftieth part of our nation are awake to its importance, lies all our danger. They are living upon the precious legacy which they have received from their fathers, as if no account were to be given of improvement, or as if no use could be made of it for further amelioration of their kind.

James sees America in danger, not from any external crisis but from moral apathy induced by increasing wellbeing. "It is prosperity that blinds nations, as well as individuals." A prosperous people swells with pride, saying: "My power, and the might of my hand hath gotten me this wealth." So he finds his countrymen "glorying in the increase of our population and of our physical resources; and it is true, that if no change takes place in the course of nature, before the children of some now living shall die, this country will contain two hundred million of inhabitants; this is averred, not as the blustering of national vanity, but as the result of sober calculation." Again, James went on, "we are glorying in the freedom of our civil constitution . . . the birthright of every American. But now, assemble your political diviners, and let them tell us by their enchantments, how these myriads under such a constitution are to be held together? Or if they must be parcelled out among several governments, then let them tell us how we are to escape that flood of revolutionary horrors, which has desolated the fields of Europe — how we are to save this continent from being what every other continent has been, a slaughter-house of nations — how we are to preserve our children from military vassalage, and our land from soaking with carnage, in a word, by what process it is, that while in every other country, and in every other age, civilized and barbarous, man has proved the natural foe of his fellow-man, and nations have been but bands of rival gladiators; by what process it is, that in these ends of the world, they are to become of one heart and one way? As man has ever been, such a result is impossible."

The verdict of James's peroration seemed to him inescapable: "Nothing can save us but the favor of Him, who can cover us with the shadow of His hand, whilst he deals round the cup of trembling among His adversaries. Nothing can save us but walking in the policy of our fathers, establishing it as the ordinance of our land, from Maine to Mississippi, and from the Atlantic to the Rocky Mountains, that our children shall HOPE IN GOD, AND NOT FORGET THE WORKS OF GOD, BUT KEEP HIS COMMANDMENTS."

35 A remarkable prophecy, when it is remembered that the population of the United States at the 1830 census was placed at 12,568,000 persons. It reached 200,000,000 in 1967, so that a child born in 1828 might reasonably produce offspring at age fifty (in 1878) who would be 80 in 1967.
36 One attempt at "parceling out" was made, with bloody consequences, in 1861-1865.
37 Ibid., 16-17.
Although there is a lack of contemporary evidence, there can be little doubt that the Reverend Mr. James's "discourse" was well received by his Rochester audience. In the light of the burgeoning prosperity of their infant city, with its apparently insatiable demand for both labor and capital, they must have listened with gratification to their young minister's assurances of divine approval of private property accumulation "limited only by the moral law," and of democratic self-government as the blessing they had been chosen to bring, by their example, to the benighted nations of the planet. They could conveniently overlook the fact that the resolve "never to be slaves" somehow failed to apply to black Americans.

The Sabbatarian Controversy

William James's six-year tenure of his Rochester pulpit was not to be unmarred by controversy. The Third Presbyterian Church of Rochester came to be dominated by a strong personality called Elder Bissell. He was an ardent follower of the later-famous evangelist Charles G. Finney, who in 1824-1825 had conducted a series of revivals in nearby Oneida. In his role as a crusading Finneyite, Elder Bissell had unlimited access to that "unrivalled mouthpiece of local religious zealots, The Observer." A sermon delivered in Rochester by a young Andover student named the Reverend Joel Parker on "The Merits of Evangelical Evidences of Salvation" incited Bissell and his followers to mount a wave of attacks upon theaters, wax works, circuses, billiard rooms, Masonic lodges, and "any mirthful enterprise" that might profane a strict Sabbath.

Elder Bissell was especially aroused by what he considered the iniquitous practice of stage travel on Sunday, and became the founder and chief backer of the Pioneer or Six-Day Stage Company and (on the Erie Canal) the Six-Day Packet Line. Having tried and failed to secure a mail contract for the Six-Day Line, he petitioned Congress to stop all mail transportation on Sunday, but without success. According to Rochester historian Dr. Blake McKelvey, Bissell's personality was too volatile to provide the community with stable leadership. Moreover, he made enemies too easily. Not only the unregenerate tavern folk and worldly-wise readers of The Craftsman, but respectable church people were frequently antagonized by his outspoken condemnation of all who patronized the seven-day stage, even on week-days. "Pioneerism—the policy of dealing only with strictly Christian enterprises—could be carried too far, as those who organized an anti-Pioneer Ball at a nearby tavern apparently felt."

Reverend William James had been on terms of close friendship with Elder Bissell. But the time came when, by the literal taking of a step, probably on a week-day in 1830, the pastor of the Brick Church provoked "a controversy full of portent for Rochester." The fateful step was taken when Mr. James deliberately boarded the regular seven-day

stage for a journey instead of the Pioneer Line. This act branded him as a Sabbath-breaker in the eyes of the Bissellites. The fiery elder moved at once to upset the amicable relations existing between James and his parishioners by suggesting that his action called for a change of ministers.

This flagrant act of intermeddling in Brick Church affairs evoked a strong protest from the Reverend Joseph Penney, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church and acknowledged leader of the Rochester clergy. Penney told the presbytery that “he would not sit by silently and watch William James, who ‘does not draw well in Bissell’s harness’ be replaced by the Reverend Asa Mahan from Pittsford.” That would, he said, “give the zealous Elder an obedient team — Mahan and Parker.” He went on to characterize Bissell with accuracy as autocratic and overzealous, making no distinction between the harmless and harmful aspects of whatever he disliked, and pursuing each with equal zeal and energy.

Rochester was divided into two camps, and “so acrimonious did the controversy become that the pastors involved soon sought other charges.” William James was the first to depart for a better parish, the First Presbyterian Church of Schenectady, New York in 1831. There he was the successor of the eloquent Erskine Mason, who had gone to the Bleecker Street Church in New York City. To the intense gratification of Elder Bissell, Charles G. Finney came to the Third Church in Rochester, so that there the triumph of the zealots was complete.

William James’s Inheritance

Some events in 1832 brought about marked changes in the Reverend Mr. James’s mundane circumstances. His health had permitted him only a brief stay as pastor in Schenectady, where he preached “much to the satisfaction of the congregation.” If a local legend is not apocryphal, there may have been one exception. It is said that on one winter morning the congregation had assembled, but there was no one in the pulpit. Two elders were despatched to the parsonage next door for an explanation. Ushered into the parlor by a maid, they found Mr. James comfortably seated before a fire. Whereupon this dialogue is said to have ensued. “Good morning, Mr. James.” “Good morning, gentlemen.” “Were you . . . coming over to the church, Mr. James?” “No, gentlemen.” “But why not, Mr. James?” “Because I have nothing to say.”

In 1832, on the advice of his physician, his family, and friends, he returned to his old home in Albany to recuperate. Meanwhile his father had, as we know, retired from mercantile business in 1818, one of the reasons being that he felt that his “commercial concerns” could be entrusted to his son Robert (William’s twin), then twenty-one years old. It was the unanimous verdict of his contemporaries that Robert James had inherited a full share of his father’s exceptional business energy and acumen. The firm was re-christened Robert James and Company, and the son seemed well launched upon a prosperous business career in his

59 Ibid., 180.
father's footsteps. But unhappily in 1821 Robert James died, and with him the elder William's dream of a family business dynasty.

He had no lack of other offspring, of whom, however, only his eldest son Augustus (1807-1866) by his third wife Catharine Barber displayed any aptitude for business. During the summer of 1832, Albany was visited by an epidemic of cholera. Thousands fled the city, but not William James, Sr. He did, however, consent to make a will dated July 24, 1832. It was an extraordinary document, said to be a subject of study today in some law schools. For it was designed by its maker "to preserve my estate from being wasted by my numerous offspring (nine sons and four daughters by three wives, two of the sons having died in infancy). James decreed that "in view of the lamentable consequences which so frequently result to young persons brought up in affluence from coming at once into the possession of property," he was placing his estate in the hands of three trustees, who are not to divide it until "the youngest of my children and grandchildren living at the date of this will and attaining the age of twenty-one shall have attained that age."

But that was not all. The testator vested in his trustees certain wide discretionary powers: "In order to discourage prodigality and vice and furnish an incentive to economy and usefulness," the trustees were empowered and admonished to withhold the share of any heir who "leads a grossly immoral, idle, or dishonorable life." He stipulated that this "painful provision" was to be enforced with "rigid impartiality, sternness and inflexibility." Yet even such a Jamesian wastrel was not to be allowed to starve. "In order to provide for the decent maintenance of those, if unhappily there should be such, whose portions shall be wholly withheld, I order and direct that to every such individual an annuity for life shall be given of such amount as shall be sufficient to supply the probable wants of such individual."\[40\]

It is not known whether exertions caused by the epidemic of cholera led to the apoplectic stroke which William James the Elder suffered on December 15, 1832. He lingered in full control of his faculties until December 19th. The mourning at his departure was indeed "city-wide" and more, for, as the obituary in the Albany Evening Journal said: "He has done more to build up the city of Albany than any other individual."

What is astonishing to learn is that the only two children of William of Albany against whom the annuity provision was invoked were the two sons who had received the benefits of higher education (William at Princeton and Henry at Union). Both of them wrote and spoke, in very different veins, about theological matters, and both differed from their inflexible father upon fine but vital points of Calvinism. During the years 1833-1836 inclusive, the Reverend William was paid an annuity of $2000 in quarterly installments of $500; and Henry, who was twenty-one when his father died, got $1250 a year during the same period.

One clue to the religious differences between William and his father is supplied by recalling the stage-line incident in Rochester. It is virtually certain that William of Albany was one of the signers of the pledge drawn up by the members of the First Presbyterian Church of that city in 1829 "to use their best endeavors to dissuade the owners of steamboats, canal boats, stages, and hacks from travelling on the Sabbath, and to encourage and patronize such of them as should cease running on that day." On this heated matter of controversy, the father was a Bissellite; the son was not. As for the other annuity-recipient, Henry James the Elder, we know that he had fallen from his father's good graces by running away to Boston (to earn his own living) from Union College during his senior year in 1829. That was an action which brought from his irate parent the prediction that it would "lodge him in a prison of some kind directly" (he had left behind some unpaid bills for "sorrows and oysters", although it turned out quite otherwise.

William of Albany’s will was taken to court, and in 1837 it was ruled invalid, probably because such terms as “immorality,” “idleness,” and “vice” could not be legally defined with precision. The trustees were ordered to begin the division of the estate to the heirs in accordance with the law. The court litigation brought about the publication of the accounts of the executor, Gideon Hawley (1785-1870), who had already served as New York State's first Commissioner of Education (then called Superintendent of the Common Schools). He was able to report that in the five years since William James's death, the estate had received $538,369.80 in income, and had paid out $534,398.50. Of this sum, for the period ending in July 1837, the Reverend William James received payments in cash (apart from his annuity, which had terminated) amounting to $17,713.86 as "his share of the estate" to that date. The other heirs, including his half-brother Henry, received like amounts, and the widow Mrs. Catharine Barber James, was paid $64,504.98.

Once the will had been ruled invalid by the court, the Reverend William James was in possession of a substantial competence. In addition to the widow and her right of dower, there were eleven direct heirs to the estate, and it is reasonable to suppose that each one eventually received upwards of $100,000 in cash or real estate. Like the elder Henry, William now found himself "endowed" for life with an income probably in the neighborhood of $10,000 a year.

His pastorate of Albany's Third Presbyterian Church lasted only from October 1833 to February 1835. Once again his health failed, and

41 Ibid., 14.
43 Gideon Hawley, Executor. Report of Master Rhoades Upon the Accounts of the Executors under the last will and testament of William James, deceased, from December 19, 1832 to July 31, 1837. (Albany, N. Y., 1837), 11, 47, 42.
his request to be relieved was "reluctantly granted." But that by no means meant, says Dunning, "that he ceased from discharging the functions of his office in the church militant. It was with no desire to withdraw from responsibility, or to rid himself from the obligations which belonged to him as a preacher of the Gospel, that he decided upon his future course. To the end of his life his door-plate had upon it 'Rev. William James,' which witnessed to the fact that he was desirous that people should still remember that he had withdrawn from nothing which he had assumed at the time of his ordination."44

His friend and colleague Dr. Sprague remarked that "James doubtless judged correctly, in retiring from the regular duties of the ministry in his later years, for while he had great power in the pulpit which he never ceased to exercise occasionally as long as his health would permit, he was fully aware that his peculiarities of temperament were not in harmony with the uniform routine of pastoral life." Sprague gives only hints of the nature of these "peculiarities." James, he says, "was naturally impulsive, and sometimes the 'sober second thought' changed his judgment and his purpose altogether, for he was too magnanimous to hold an error for the sake of being consistent. His mind was generally teeming with profound thought, and was never in its element while going in a beaten track. His taste in composition was so remarkably exact as to set in defiance the sternest criticism. His discourses for the pulpit were generally elaborated with the utmost care, and it must be acknowledged were better fitted to furnish material for thought to thoroughly disciplined minds, than to minister to the gratification of the superficial and emotional hearer; though I have scarcely known any preacher who was more generally acceptable to all classes than he. His manner was a striking compound of earnestness and energy, that left no one in doubt that his utterances were from his inmost heart, and I have sometimes heard him, especially in his earlier days, when he rose to a pitch of enthusiasm that might have been likened to a rushing torrent."45

There are other testimonies to his pulpit effectiveness. Dunning acclaims him as "to the last a great and painstaking preacher. That was a high compliment to him, when of him it was said, that in tone of voice, in emphasis of utterance, in deliberate and organized thought, and in purity of diction, he reminded many of Robert Hall.46 His every deliverance, even his devotional exercises, were always most carefully prepared. He was completely absorbed in whatever he had under consideration. A judge of the Supreme Court of Massachusetts, who often

44 Dunning, 27.
45 Sprague, 17-18.
46 Reverend Robert Hall (1764-1831), Baptist clergyman regarded as "the foremost preacher of his time;" it was said that "for maturity of thought and expression and impressiveness of delivery it is doubtful that he has ever been surpassed." Dugald Stewart declared his writings to be "the English language in its perfection."
used to hear him preach, once said: ‘I should be amply repaid for com­
ing to church could I hear only his invocation.’”

A similar verdict comes from the Reverend Henry Neill (although clerical eulogies sometimes approach hagiography): “How did he preach? With the truth so deeply planted, not only in his intellect, but in his sensibilities, it was to be expected that Mr. James would be an impressive preacher . . . his voice was like an organ for depth and compass, and also resonant with feeling . . . each separate sentence was full of meaning, and closely related to that which went before and followed after . . . He was accustomed to read and meditate much before he wrote, so that his manuscripts contained the invincible judgments of his soul, and his style of speech manifested this. In his conversation, it was often rapid and enthusiastic; from the pulpit, it was more measured. There he spoke ‘as one having authority.’ No one could hear his discussion of such themes as he presented in his sermons in his exhaust­ive manner, and not feel that the fire of intense convictions, relating to the life and death of the soul, burned in the breast of him who was giving his thoughts to his hearers.”

Yet many who knew Mr. James have declared that he was at his best in the person-to-person exchanges of “private intercourse” on subjects of religion. Dr. Sprague cited the experience of “a Rochester gentleman now occupying one of the highest military positions in the land who went to Mr. James with a deep sense of sinfulness. Instead of making particular inquiries concerning his state of mind, as would have seemed natural, James looked at him for a few seconds in silence, and then opened the Bible, and bade him read and study the first chapter of the Second Epistle of Peter, and endeavor to bring his heart and life into unison with its teachings and spirit, after which he offered a deeply solemn and fervent prayer in his behalf, and allowed him to retire. That interview resulted in the conversion of one whose whole subsequent life furnished the proof that there is power in religion to withstand the temptations incident to the exercise of the highest military authority.” It was, says Sprague, “an example of the peculiar manner which James exercised his ministry. It is safe to say that his noble qualities of mind and heart have impressed themselves deeply upon his contemporaries, while the peculiarity, I may say the originality of his entire character will help to keep the impression more vivid, and to render it more enduring.”

**Philanthropy, Research and Letter-Writing**

The year 1835 marked both a midpoint and a turning point in William James’s career. He virtually abandoned outward public achievement for inward private cultivation of his spiritual resources and those of others. Although Neill declares that he was “singularly indifferent to natural be-

---

47 Dunning, 27.
48 Neill, 336-337.
stowment and external advancement (in which, also, he largely shared), and was not self-conserving; he sought not his own preferment . . . ”; we know from James’s own letters that “nothing has been so memorable in my own life as the persistence with which Providence has thwarted my deeper worldly aspirations.” He speaks in another place of “the wrack and ruin of worldly ambition” in his life; and then adds: “My consolation in regard to all my failures (public) is that they were all a private gain. Through such losses I think my soul has been saved.”

In his retirement he had no more time to spend with his growing family of three daughters (an infant son had been stillborn in 1830): Anna McBride (1826-1907), who married Isaac Edwards; Elizabeth Tillman (1835-1888), who became the wife of Dr. Julius Hawley Seelye (1824-1895), president of Amherst College; and Katharine Barber (1834-1890), the “Kitty Prince” of William the philosopher’s letters, who was the second wife of William Henry Prince, M.D. (1817-1883), a psychiatrist of note. The clergyman’s interchanges of letters with his daughters are, like most James family correspondence, affectionate, lively and also serious. On July 22, 1856, for example, he did not hesitate to confess to Kitty that “he had spent at Saratoga one of the most interesting Sabbaths (in private exercises) I have ever enjoyed—occasioned by the apprehension of a great trial under which I feared that my heart might depart from God—a thing which has so often happened before in like circumstances that every energy was aroused to prevent a recurrence of it.”

We catch one domestic glimpse of the retired but vigorous clergyman in The James Family, where one of his meteoric descents upon the Fourteenth Street household of Henry James the Elder is described: “There was no end of figures which came and went in that New York house. Uncle William from Albany who throws his nightgown, nightcap, brushes, etc., from the omnibus window en passant from the Albany train to the lower Broadway from which he is to return late in the day—signalling to the awestruck servant on the steps that these things are his and that he will return for the night. ‘Tell Henry and Mary’ is lost in the rumble of the wheels on the high cobbles of the roadway.”

The Reverend Henry Neill tells us that “it was a splendid sight to see him from 1852 to 1856, as I did every summer at Lenox, with his vigorous intellect, his wealth of feeling, his firmly knit frame, his eye that kindled and expanded so immediately as ideal themes were introduced.” The same friend testifies regarding James’s generosity, in both time and money: “He never hesitated to preach for weeks and weeks for churches or ministerial brethren whose burdens were heavy.” Sprague adds that “he had a large and generous heart, that responded readily to

---

60 Letter from James to his daughter Mrs. Katharine Prince, dated Albany, July 22, 1856; Colby College Library, gift of Dr. J. Seelye Bixler.
51 F. O. Matthiessen, The James Family (New York, 1947), 270. This episode must have occurred between 1851, when the railroad from Albany was completed, and 1860, when the Jameses moved to Newport, R.I.
the claims of want and wo, not only in Christian sympathy but in liberal contributions.” Dunning remarks that “as he was possessed of a comfortable fortune, many were the brethren, many the weak churches, many the worthy families and deserving causes which he assisted, but of which the public knew nothing.” Neill also speaks of “the purchase and distribution of books in uncounted numbers which might further his purpose,” and of his “never hesitating to journey a hundred miles to visit one whose doubts or fears he could not allay by his pen.”

It was the understanding of James’s friends that, in the words of one of them, “he had engaged with intense enthusiasm during his later years, upon a work to which he brought all the treasures gathered in a lifetime from devout study, from rare spiritual discovery, and from the practical experience of a nature rich in feeling and profoundly receptive of Divine communications. The subject was . . . What Christ does for the fallen soul in the way of redemption and conquest, and how the soul can obtain the sanctifying effects that flow from His salvation.” Sprague refers to this “philosophical and theological research” as occupying some forty years of James’s life, but adds: “I am not aware that any of the results of these labors have been given to the world.” Dunning says: “It may be said that it has often been a source of regret for many of his friends that he never chose to give to the world in permanent form any of the results of his profound study.” At various points in his posthumously published letters, none of them dated, James speaks of the state of his “work,” though nowhere does he tell us what it was: “I am going on famously with my studies, and in perfect health . . . ” and “My work, suspended for some time, now renewed with the order of high expectation . . . ”

Probably the most accurate description of Mr. James’s ministry during the last thirty-three years of his life would be “epistolary.” There can be no better testimony in regard to his gifts as a letter-writer than that of his half-brother Henry James the Elder, replying in 1873 to a request for any letters he might have from and to William. He wrote: “I regret to tell you that I have none of your father’s letters (he was writing to Mrs. Seelye) remaining in my hands. They were generally of a personal character, and I used to destroy them as soon as they were answered. He had a decided epistolary gift, and his letters were always interesting in substance and in form, and if I could have foreseen the posthumous demand for them, I should have been most happy to preserve them. They turned chiefly on our theological differences, and were full of that frank intellectual curiosity, eager confession of error and insufficiency of his own view of the gospel, and alert spirit of accommodation to his antagonist, which made him so remarkable and magnetic in personal

52 Neill, 333, 334, 336; Sprague, 19; Dunning, 27.
53 Sarah W. Humphrey in Preface to William James, op. cit., 7-8; Sprague, 13; Dunning, 27.
54 William James, op. cit., 246, 251.
intercourse. He had the best heart in the world, but his head in matters of speculation disowned its control, and deferred to foreign guidance. I always regretted this habit as pusillanimous, but though it naturally weakened the impression his intellect made upon me, it never for a moment dimmed the immense personal respect and affection I bore him."55 We learn from other correspondence that the theme of the above interchange of letters was the doctrine of Justification.

Lest it be supposed that every letter written by the Reverend William James was theological and relatively humorless, there is a brightly spoofing epistle addressed to his then-professorial son-in-law at Amherst, Dr. Julius Hawley Seelye, and dated from Albany, New York on April 26, 1862.

My dear Caesar:

We have a man in this town of the name of Durant . . . one of the pillars (sleeper he might be called) of brother Sam-oo-el’s church. I believe him to be a very good kind of man, but singular. He walks with his eyes half-closed, and talks, when he does talk, like a man just out of a dream and half awake. He came to ask me to supply brother Sam-oo-el’s pulpit next Sunday . . .

He then had a great deal to say about you . . . but to distinguish you from your brother he constantly repeated your Christian name in connection with your surname but invariably through the ten minutes which he devoted to you in which he used your name about as many times, he called you Julius Caesar. “If Julius Caesar will supply Dr. Eddy, etc.” I never corrected him once nor changed my countenance.

I have merely to announce that you have now a name which will stick. So with the distinguished consideration due to so eminent a personage, and with my kind regards to Mrs. Caesar, I remain, ever honored Caesar,

Yours, etc.

W. James56

Grace for Grace

One can be sure that the Reverend William James would regard what has been said about him so far as a totally inadequate summary of his “real life,” especially in his later years. For too little has been said of his spiritual quest for complete sanctification, or a state of holiness in the sight of God. “I want holiness so much,” he wrote in a letter dated December 1856, “that I may say I want nothing else.” Or again: “Cer-

55 Letter from Henry James the Elder (signed “Uncle Henry”) to Mrs. Elizabeth Seelye (addressed as “Dear Libby”) dated Cambridge, Mass., December 16, 1873; Colby College Library, gift of Dr. J. Seelye Bixler. One letter from the Reverend William James to his half-brother Henry, dated Albany, New York, November 20, 1890, has survived and is in the Amherst College Library. It is quoted below.

56 Letter from William James to Professor Julius C. (sic) Seelye, Amherst, Mass., dated Albany, N. Y., April 24, 1862; Colby College Library, gift of Dr. J. Seelye Bixler. James misspells Caesar as “Ceaser” throughout.
tainly no sojourner in the desert of Sinai was ever more exercised about setting his foot upon the land of promise than I have been, I might almost say for forty years about leading a chosen band out of the wilderness of legal and worldly temptation to that glorious inheritance which is described by the term Sanctification."57

This intense craving for complete union with the Divine dominates the only substantial published work which bears his name, entitled Grace for Grace, and consisting of his pastoral and personal letters written to his "chosen band" of friends. As far as he was concerned, the volume was totally unpremeditated and unplanned, for it was brought out posthumously, eight years after his death in 1868. Its editing was largely the work of an admiring friend of the family, Miss Sarah Wetmore Humphrey (1829-1896) daughter of President Heman Humphrey of Amherst College.58 During the two years following the publication of Grace for Grace in 1876, and in which she appeared only by her initials signed to the Preface, Miss Humphrey taught "history and social culture" at Smith College, founded only six years before, and acted as house mother of a student residence there.59

Her work of editing William James's letters began in 1873 with the approval and cooperation of Dr. and Mrs. Seelye and the other members of the family, and with the "advice and assistance" of the Reverend Henry Neill of Philadelphia, who wrote the tribute which appears at the end of the volume. The tone of the collection is so overwhelmingly theological that Miss Humphrey suggested to Mrs. Seelye that "it will be well for us to put in now and then some of the human touches which were often in your father's letters and were so peculiarly beautiful." In the course of soliciting and editing the letters, she told Mrs. Seelye that most of those received give "your father's views of the nature of Justification and Sanctification, though somehow the word has become distasteful to me — it is used to variously, and sometimes almost flip­pantly — mixed with a good deal of cant. But I do think that your father's healthy, strong gospel views — clearly and attractively stated as they are in these letters, would meet a special need at this time."60

57 William James, op. cit., 8.
58 In September 1861 Miss Humphrey wrote to James expressing her "happiness and thankfulness" at "dear, dear Kitty's marriage to Dr. Prince, the man of all the world to whom I could most willingly and gladly commit our beloved Kitty ... " Letter from Sarah W. Humphrey to the Reverend William James, D.D. dated Pittsfield, Mass., September 12, 1861; Colby College Library, gift of Dr. J. Seelye Bixler.
59 Miss Humphrey appears in President Laurens Clark Seelye's The Early History of Smith College, 1871-1910 (Boston, 1823), as "a friendly and dignified lady ... who was to direct the social life of the fourteen young ladies of Dewey House in addition to her academic duties ... " It was said by a student of the time that "she stood for the amenities of life." The experiment with small residential houses, however, was not a success, and was terminated after two years of trial.
60 Letters from Miss Sarah W. Humphrey to Mrs. Elizabeth Seelye, dated Honesdale, September 18, 1873; Brooklyn, September 29, 1873; and Philadelphia, November 3, 1873; Colby College Library, gift of Dr. J. Seelye Bixler.
Although the book is divided into four parts entitled "The Gift of Grace," "Growth in Grace," "The Fruits of Grace," and "Triumphs of Grace," its theme, as stated by Miss Humphrey, remains constant throughout: "The life of God in the soul, as it is imparted, nourished, strengthened, and perfected by His abounding grace . . . or the way for the soul to pass from the bondage of sin and the law to the liberty of joy to be found in Christ." James, himself a troubled soul who had found great if not perfect relief for himself, was writing his letters to other troubled but promising souls in order to encourage them to follow the pathway he believed he had discovered to the highest reaches of sainthood.

The first step must be absolute reliance upon the Divine love, and the complete abandonment of any merely human effort, "leaving it to God to give you at present just what He pleases. The only condition of justification is faith . . . salvation needs only to be appropriated . . . I shall be saved in spite of myself." Say to the Lord: "Whatever is necessary to break in pieces the selfish heart, and to create an entirely new heart within me, a heart in which Thou shalt entirely reign, that is all I want."

James acknowledges that "for some years . . . I inclined to a more philosophical interpretation of the method of salvation . . . viewing faith as something else than the mere hand that receives salvation. But I feel now that we have nothing to do but receive." He speaks of "a long time during which there was a variance between my religion and my philosophy. I had received a system not only of doctrine but of experience, so unlike what I needed as to be a perfect incubus upon my nature. When I interpreted the Gospel according to my own instinctive sense of what I needed, I was obliged to believe that God stood to man in a relation of Paternity, and that His love was the atmosphere in communication with which my life wholly depended."

His mistake had been to regard "man as merely one of God's works — a Thing . . . " and God's love for this world as merely a metaphor "as if He loved it." This "mechanistic philosophy held him in a state of miserable legal bondage . . . for a long and dreary period." Supposing that "all my difficulties arose from the want of sanctification . . . how to attain it was the only question which seemed to have any significance. I naturally wanted freedom from bondage, and, therefore, I wanted sanctification, supposing that always to be its essential condition or cause, whereas it really is its effect . . . our Union with God . . . must be the fruit of that life which comes only from our belief in the unchanging favor of God to us, for Christ's sake . . . Then sanctification follows of course." (Italics his.)

James is here asserting the limitlessness and all-sufficiency of grace, and he believes that he has discovered the secret of both justification

and sanctification, namely — passive receptivity on the part of the totally dedicated believer. Not only are human efforts toward salvation utterly ineffectual. We are told that “Christ's love to you, not yours to Him in the slightest degree, must be your whole dependence.” It is true that life is a fight, a struggle, but not to save ourselves by any of our own efforts, rather to attain “the power of yielding yourself wholly to God.” You must see man “not simply as the work of God, but as born of Him, the offspring of His bosom which He could not but love . . . How this could be so, I know not.” James says he has become convinced that “God looks upon me as a child, an invalid child. That, though I had not been successful in my struggle against sin, He accepted the struggle as the true test of my character, and that all my personal sufferings were but His fatherly chastisements intended for my purification — not for retribution.”

The writer of the letters denies specifically that “reason can do the work of faith,” and warns against “reason separated from the Word.” Faith to him was “simply reliance on the Word of God, in preference to the dictates of our natural reason, and in opposition to the current of our worldly passions.” He maintains that “the only pure theology is the mystical, which each soul must attain for itself through Divine discipline . . . The essence of Christianity lies in gracious affections.” James declares that “any restraint, or limitation, or qualification of the doctrine of Grace, where a soul is conscious of a sincere desire for holiness, is from the devil.”

The Christian, according to James, must yearn for sanctification with his whole heart, yet he must not labor for his own spiritual advancement. “I learn daily that concern about sanctification is not the way to advance in it. Let it drop out of your care, and be filled only with thoughts of Christ's love for you — His mysterious love.” He warns a correspondent: “Let us guard against the perversion of this doctrine of gradual sanctification. While there is no doubt that it is a life-long work, how gradual it shall be depends very much upon the nature and strength of a person’s desire for it.” James says little about what determines “the nature and strength” of this crucial desire, regarding it as a Divine gift bestowed quite obviously upon a chosen few.

Again and again he declares “the love of God a fountain for humanity, free in all its fullness to everyone who desires it . . .” and “salvation is attainable through Christ by all who desire it, however conscious at present of their destitution of every other qualification.” One wonders what has happened to the Calvinist doctrine of election which, by that name, is absent from James's letters. He does, however, on one page assure a friend that “God has chosen you for sanctification,” and speaks of another as “qualified by your personal experience and aspirations for the largest liberty.” (Italics his.)

62 Ibid., 17, 75, 116, 125, 127, 128.
It becomes apparent that the bulk of his correspondence was directed toward Christians in whom he perceived certain spiritual potentialities which he believed they possessed, and which removed them from the category of ordinary church-attendant. This classification of Christians in James's mind appears in a significant passage, thus:

“The difference in degree of sanctification is simply the difference in the intensity or strength of the ‘will’, of this sense of want. In Christians of a low degree, or under peculiar temptations, the ‘will’ or ‘want’ to be holy may be too feeble even to identify its subject as a Christian, though it may have an obscure existence. In another, it may be so strenuous as to sweep all before it, to an outside view, and yet it is certain that what distinguishes the latter from the former quite as much as anything else, is his far quicker sense of the strength and subtlety of indwelling sin, while his ‘want to be’ holy is hardly less than perfect, his sense of another counteracting will or want is just as strong.”

Such sentiments leave little room for doubt that James believed that he was corresponding, not with “Christians of a low degree” but with a “chosen band” of the spiritually élite, many of whom needed only his encouragement and example to join him among the holy. Not that he regarded his own sanctification as complete: “I never expect to be able to say, I am now perfectly sanctified.” But as time went on, the shadow of approaching death brought about a keen anticipation of completed sanctity in heaven. “Of late,” he writes, “I have come very near an experience, if I have not quite reached it, which I am sure is the goal of all my struggles — the absorption of self in God.”

For the Reverend William James “There could be no middle ground between works and faith.” In his theology, faith was everything, works were a mere by-product. “Seek only inward spiritual purity,” was his advice, “taking it for granted that this will bring in its train whatever else is really good.” With his half-brother Henry James the Elder, who also entered the Princeton Theological Seminary about twenty years after William, it was a very different story. Paternal pressure also figured in Henry’s decision, after he had tried “brief ventures in law and business” upon his graduation from Union College in 1830.

At the end of his second year of theological study, Henry found that his serious doubts about justification by faith were involving him in arguments with his professors tending to exactly that contamination of his fellow-students against which the seminary was on its guard. He was not dismissed, but left the institution, taking good care not to forget the sister of one of his classmates (who also abandoned the ministry) Mary Walsh, whom he married in 1840. Matthiessen says of the Reverend William James that he “gradually drifted away from orthodoxy

63 Ibid., 20, 45, 95, 111, 185.
64 Ibid., 291, 288.
and devoted his later years to philosophical research. Henry did not drift, but fled precipitously from his father's "obscene and skulking God," who had "poisoned his youth." In full flight from all orthodoxies and ecclesiasticisms, Henry was nevertheless a "God-intoxicated man," who spent the rest of his life in heroic and heretical wrestlings with theological problems. His son William the philosopher marvelled at his father's religious spirit "deeply one with life" yet "unaccompanied with a single one of the outward or formal, the theological, devotional, ritual or even implicitly ritualistic signs by which we usually know it."

Both the Reverend William and Henry the Elder proclaimed themselves as "anti-legal" in theology but differed in regard to what should be done about "the legalism prevailing in the churches." The clergyman said, in a letter to Henry: "There is enough of it to justify any amount of denunciation if denunciation could unravel it. But I regard the church as a great hospital where the sick are cured and I see so much convalescence that I cannot but have a good opinion of the institution, though if it pretended to be an assemblage of healthy people I should feel about it very much as you do." He went on to express "the earnest wish" that Henry would not "separate himself still further from the church, from the only body of men to which your views as far as they are true can be of use." Yet he had earlier expressed his "hopelessness of making any impress upon you by my counter-statements, were they ever so well elaborated."

In spite of such differences, there is another of Henry's cardinal doctrines which has a familiar Jamesian ring. "The curse of mankind," he wrote, "is the sense of selfhood, and the absurd abominable opinionativeness it engenders." Man's fall was "the gradual access of self-love ... the pride of moralism, or the conceit of one's moral endowments ... this is original sin." Then begins a struggle between self-love and brotherly love. "By social reform and the resolute destruction of selfhood," explains Grattan, "the way is made open for such a consummation, and when it is achieved God will once more reign in glorious sovereignty upon the earth — in a society which will be the redeemed form of man."

To the Reverend William James this seemed to make sin "an imperfection which we are yet to outgrow," and thus makes the atonement unnecessary. He chided Henry for trusting in a theory which he himself had invented, preferring instead to rely upon the Bible and divine revelation. There is a parting hint that his daughter Kitty appreciated "most thoroughly the ability displayed" in her uncle Henry's letters although she well knew her father's very different views.

One result of the unobtrusive presence of religion in the elder Henry's household was that his son William the philosopher found that "Religion

65 Matthiessen, op. cit., 5.
66 Letter of Reverend William James, D.D. to Henry James the Elder, dated Albany, New York, November 30, 1860; by permission of the Amherst College Library.
67 Grattan, op. cit., 73, 75, 77.
is the great interest of my life . . . ” since “the life of it as a whole is mankind's most important function.” Not that the philosopher was himself an ardent believer, but as is well-known, he was a zealous defender of the right to believe that you might be right if you believed. While his father had his troubles with justification, it might be said that son William was far from agreeing with his half-uncle on the subject of sanctification. In his The Varieties of Religious Experience are two chapters of “Saintliness” and “The Value of Saintliness” in which some light is thrown upon the nature of the sources of the “desire to be holy.” William James declares that “the causes of human diversity of character (as distinct from the intellect) lie chiefly in our differing susceptibility to emotional excitement and in the different impulses and inhibitions which these bring in their train.” He defines “the saintly character” as that for which “spiritual emotions are the habitual center of the personal energy,” and lists four of its characteristics:

1. A feeling of being in a wider life than that of the world's selfish little interests.
2. A sense of the friendly continuity of the ideal power with our own life, and a willing self-surrender to its control.
3. An immense elation and freedom, as the outlines of the confining selfhood melt down.
4. A shifting of the emotional center toward loving and harmonious affection, toward 'yes, yes' and away from 'no, no' where the claims of the non-ego are concerned.

All of these characteristics appear in the letters which constitute Grace for Grace. The younger William also notes the tendency of saintliness to “live itself out within the private heart” rather than expressing itself in a corporate or tribal manner. He cannot refrain from the suggestion that there is something extravagant about saintliness. In an impish vein he inquires: “Is it necessary to be quite so fantastically good as that? We who have no vocation for the extreme ranges of sanctity will surely be let off at the last day if our humility, asceticism and devoutness prove of a less convulsive sort.”

President Bixler points out that The Varieties is primarily concerned with particular things that follow from religious beliefs and practices. As James said in a letter to Kitty Prince, he recommended a book which “traced out the practical consequences of giving one's will to God;” whereas for the Reverend William James the giving was the end to be sought, and the practical consequences could be left in God's hands.

The Onset of Illness

The Reverend William James lived beyond the Biblical allotment of years, but he did not entirely escape the "obscure blight" which seemed

69 J. Seelye Bixler, Religion in the Philosophy of William James (Boston, 1926), 192-193.
to rest upon the children of William of Albany. Dr. Grattan calls the roll in his *The Three Jameses*: “Two died in infancy, four failed to attain thirty, three more died short of forty, two achieved the age of fifty-nine and two seventy-one, one of whom was Henry James, Sr.”

Complaints about ill-health began with William James’s seminary days, and *Grace for Grace* abounds in references to such distresses and premonitions of approaching death. But since they are not dated, and come from letters to various correspondents, it is impossible to place them in any chronological order. He dwells repeatedly upon interruptions in his work, of a “long intellectual captivity . . . a state of exhaustion greater, I think, than I ever knew before . . . ;” and of “recovering my writing faculty” after the loss of it.

He speaks more specifically of the “months before I had any apprehension of serious disease,” and then of the time “when the trouble in my head began, and soon increased with such violence that my agony, for many days, was extreme.” It is possible that this “trouble” can be dated by a reference in his letter of November 30, 1860, to the elder Henry. He wrote: “I suffered a sensible injury in my head last summer from over tension having kept on writing very strenuously for some two months from eight to ten hours a day. From this there are good signs that I shall recover, but I have at present to be careful.” Possibly in regard to the same illness, he says in *Grace for Grace*: “The trouble in my head, which when I saw you was passing away, is now pronounced by all physicians to be a nervous derangement, which, to say the least, is alarming enough to make one serious. There is certainly no natural prospect, as far as I can see or learn, or a speedy change for the better.”

In the later stages of his illness he reports: “There is hardly a square inch of my body below the small of my back which is not the seat of pain. I cannot sit up for an hour without great pain . . . ” Yet in his extremity, we are told, “He would try to write a few lines in pencil at a time, and these more faintly and tremulously traced.” All “this physical suffering,” he believed, “to bring me more thoroughly into the state of union with God.”

There were, however, periods of remission from his distress. Of one of them he records “a most unexpected and unintelligible improvement has been going on within a few days . . . I have been wafted upon smooth seas and with propitious gales toward the shining shore.” After an absence of nearly four months, he was able to go downstairs, staff in hand, startling “the denizens of the basement and reascending two flights of stairs without difficulty or fatigue.” Yet he feels that he has “been brought very near to death,” and “has had the port of Heaven in sight.”

70 Grattan, *op. cit.*, 17. The other was the Reverend William.
71 Letter of Reverend William James, D.D. to Henry James the Elder, dated Albany, New York, November 30, 1860; by permission of the Amherst College Library.
72 William James, *op. cit.*, 112, 169, 301, 307, 310, 313-315, 328.
There is little evidence of any “drifting away from orthodoxy” in his fellow-clergymen’s words about his saintly departure from life. The Reverend Henry Neill reports that his last conscious words were: “It is all joy, joy, joy!” Shortly before, James had declared: “The other side is sunny. I call it sunny, for I see only God in the unclouded heavens.”

His colleague of many years, Dr. Sprague, summed up the closing years of his life in these words: “It was sublime to know him... after nature had yielded to the spirit, when every material symbol and every human relationship constantly reminded him of its counterpart in spiritual bonds or Christian joys, when he began to view the things of time from very much the same standpoint that it is supposed redeemed men look at them after they have left the body, when his union with, or absorption in God, seemed to gain rapid increase from month to month, and when without losing a particle of his manly charity and prodigal generosity and intellectual intrepidity, he seemed ready at any moment to enter upon the employments and enjoyments of immortality.”

74 Neill, 340; Dr. Sprague quoted in Dunning, 27-29. The Reverend William James seems to have lived on in the memory of no less a personage than the twenty-first President of the United States, Chester A. Arthur. For when Henry James the novelist was invited to a grand formal dinner by James G. Blaine in 1882, he “enjoyed an intimate chat with President Arthur after dinner.” Henry wrote to his mother that Arthur, who had known various Jameses in Albany “evidently believed me the son of Uncle William and couldn’t be disillusioned. The illusion was indeed so dear to him, that I felt that if I had any smartness I ought, striking while the iron was hot, to apply for a foreign mission, which I should doubtless promptly get.” Leon Edel, Henry James, 1882-1895, The Middle Years (Philadelphia, 1962), 32.

The writer records his grateful thanks to his subject’s great-grandson Dr. J. Seelye Bixler, former President of Colby College, for family letters, books, and advice; to Dr. C. Hartley Grattan, author of The Three Jameses and now of the faculty of the University of Texas, for valuable suggestions; to Mr. Wayne Somers, Acquisitions Librarian of Schaeffer Library, Union College, for many services; and to Mr. J. Richard Phillips, Special Collections Librarian, Amherst College Library.