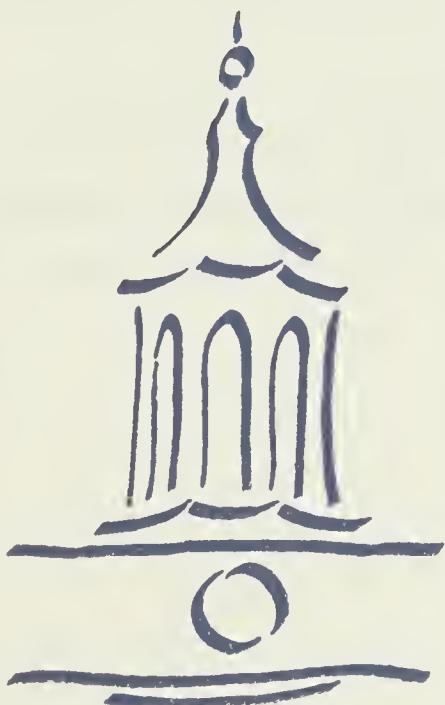


Princeton University Library
2016
SONS
OF THE PROPHETS

*Leaders in Protestantism from
Princeton Seminary*

EDITED BY HUGH T. KERR



PRINCETON, NEW JERSEY
PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS

1963

Copyright © 1963
by Princeton University Press
All Rights Reserved
L. C. card no.: 63-12665



Printed in the United States
of America by Princeton University Press
Princeton, New Jersey

copy 2

VIII. HENRY VAN DYKE (1852-1933)

*Many-sided Litterateur**

BY ROLAND MUSHAT FRYE

IN 1906, *The Illustrated Outdoor News* listed the ten greatest living sportsmen in America, and there, along with Theodore Roosevelt, was the Rev. Henry van Dyke. That fact indicates something of the diversity of van Dyke's career. He had already acquired national stature in several fields. Between 1884 and 1906, thirty-three books appeared over his name, some of them best-sellers; from 1883 to 1899 he served as minister of the Brick Presbyterian Church in New York City, and was regarded as one of the great preachers of his time; in 1902 he was elected Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, and led both in the revision of doctrinal standards and in the provision of a book of common worship for Presbyterian use; since the fall of 1899 he had been Murray Professor of English Literature at Princeton. After Woodrow Wilson's election to the presidency of the United States, van Dyke was appointed chief of the diplomatic mission to the Netherlands, thus adding another dimension to his career; after the American entrance into the first World War he was commissioned a chaplain in the Navy at the age of sixty-five. Throughout his life he was an active outdoorsman, hunting and fishing all over North America and into much of the rest of the world.

* The major study of van Dyke's life and work is *Henry van Dyke: A Biography* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1935), by his son Tertius van Dyke. This volume includes an extensive bibliography. Henry van Dyke's writings are available in the Avalon Edition of the *Works* (18 volumes; New York: Scribner's, 1920-1927). *The van Dyke Book* (New York: Scribner's, 1905, 1920) is an anthology prepared by Edwin Mims and revised by M. Struthers Burt. Henry van Dyke's most sustained effort in literary criticism was his *Studies in Tennyson* (New York: Scribner's, 1920); his *Essays in Application* (New York: Scribner's, 1905) contains typical pieces on both literary and cultural subjects.

HENRY VAN DYKE

A man of such varied talents is not easy to appraise, and his very versatility may make it more difficult to give him his due in any one of the fields of his interest, for we are after all a culture of specialists, devoted to specialism, and tend to be either uncomfortable or suspicious about the generalist. We are thus tempted to dismiss van Dyke as a gadfly, but we are prevented from doing so by the level of his achievements, which were quite substantial in each of these areas, though they were not preeminent in any.

Other problems arise, and these may be summarized in the famous remark attributed to Woodrow Wilson that Henry van Dyke was the only man he had ever known who could strut sitting down. Whether Wilson originated the remark I do not know, but it has been applied to van Dyke so frequently as to show that there was at least widespread suspicion of pride and pomposity in the man. But again, as with the suspicion of his versatility, we are drawn up short of an unequivocally adverse judgment by the presence of other evidence: frequent references by those who knew him to his lack of stuffiness; his wit; and the wide range of his friendships. Perhaps the "strutting" was only the physical posture of a small man—we remember that when a newsreel photographer said that he wanted to get a hundred feet of van Dyke, the latter replied that there were only five feet six inches to get—and we must be careful not to regard what may have been merely a physical compensation as though it were a basic psychological trait.

Again, there is the evidence of the man's style: his prose is highly mannered, moving through neat and geometrically arranged parallels and antitheses to conclusions that seem so inevitable within the context of the author's rhetoric that we are inclined at points to wonder whether the conclusions were not dictated more by the requirements of style than by the inner logic of the problem. We do not condemn him for writing clearly, which he always did, or for writing well, which he often did, but one begins to suspect that the highly mannered prose is almost an end in itself, and one even wonders whether van Dyke is not too often imitating his own best moments.

SONS OF THE PROPHETS

His prose style is like a uniform into which virtually every idea is fitted, regardless of size or shape. But again we cannot dismiss van Dyke as an empty rhetorician, for he had much of value to say, and he often said it quite well. Had the Church and the world paid more attention to him, both would have been spared much grief.

I think we may find the heart of this man's paradox in the remark of his son that "he had the soul of a poet and many qualities of the colonel of a cavalry regiment." That combination is not a common one, especially if we fill in the spectrum with a range of talents appropriate to the popular preacher, the Church statesman, the literary critic, the college professor, and the wartime diplomat—and when we have completed that list, we are back where we started, wondering how to appraise a man who was all these things as well as one of the ten great American sportsmen of his time! The combination was unique, and the man virtually so. The best I can hope to offer is a brief account of his life, and an evaluation of his place as a man of letters.

I

Henry van Dyke's long life began in 1852, in a Presbyterian manse in Germantown, Pennsylvania, and ended eighty years later in his handsome Princeton mansion, "Avalon." His connection with Princeton Seminary in any official way was restricted to his three-year B.D. work there, culminating in his graduation with the class of 1877, but as an undergraduate at Princeton College he had early established a kind of relationship with the Seminary, evidenced by the presence among his papers of a poster offering \$50.00 reward for the persons who, as a prank, absconded with the Seminary gate in 1871, and in the margin of the reward poster is van Dyke's note: "They didn't catch us."

After his graduation from the Seminary, he spent several years abroad, studying and traveling in Europe. His first pastorate was in the Congregational Church of Newport, from which he was called to the pulpit of the Brick Presbyterian

HENRY VAN DYKE

Church, New York, in 1883. It was a remarkable testimony to his courage (and perhaps also to his cocksureness) that he at once established the principle that no important action be taken in the Church without the unanimous agreement of the elders in session, and in view of the fact that he accomplished much even under that rule, van Dyke must have been an exceptionally effective diplomat and strategist. His sermons at first appear to have been largely serious, but in 1886, he discovered almost as if by accident that he had a remarkable facility for using humor to serious effect, and from this time forward he made effective use of humor in his speaking.

His preaching interests and his concerns as a clergyman were consistently focused upon modern problems and the Church's relation to them. Being himself a convinced evolutionist, he tried to lead the Church into a confident cooperation with the expanding sciences. Churchmen, he said, should not regard science as a rival and a threat, so that they "tremble at every new theory and watch the progress of science with jealousy and mistrust." In one of his early sermons he sought to instill a proper understanding: "But why so restless, so fearful, so petulant, O Church of Christ bought with his blood? Stand firm and confident in thy faith. Enjoy the peace that Jesus has given thee. Say to every earnest seeker in every sphere of human thought, God speed, for all truth is God's truth and must be one. His revelation in Nature cannot contradict his revelation in Christ."

Like his father, he felt that doctrinal formulas should be subjected to fact, and not vice versa. "Let all ascertained and accepted facts," his father had preached at Princeton Seminary in 1882, "all demonstrated truth, be cast into the furnace: if our creed cannot walk into it without the smell of fire on its clothes, *let it be burned.*" If more clergymen had held to the position of the van Dykes, the Church today would have the reputation for honesty that it is still struggling to regain and that was denied to it by the bigotry of a vociferous minority of clergy and laity and the mute acquiescence of many others. As in the early years of his ministry, so too in the last decade of his life Henry van Dyke denounced "the

SONS OF THE PROPHETS

declaration of war between science and religion," along with the fundamentalist efforts to enforce obscurantism upon the Church at large. In one of his original stories, he wrote that when it was known that a sinner had been accepted into heaven because he had clean hands and a pure heart, there began at once a contest between soap-makers as to which brand was "the only infallible soap" without which one could never hope to enter the Kingdom of God.

II

One of van Dyke's major aversions was the doctrine of infant damnation, to which, of course, there was linked the doctrine of reprobation in general, and it was in no small measure due to his efforts that these matters were reconsidered in the creedal revisions at the turn of the century. In the famous heresy trial involving Charles A. Briggs of Union Seminary in New York, van Dyke was one of Briggs' staunch defenders, though he did not claim to agree with his theology. In general he felt that the heresy-hunting of the literalists was doing the Church far more harm than good, and he viewed the literalists' crusades as offering men "the stone of controversy" instead of the bread of life. He was unwilling to make any such affirmations about the original Biblical manuscripts as the fundamentalists wished all to make, and he wrote that for the Church to accept the fundamentalist position would "result in the condemnation of a very large number of our ministers, including myself and others, who accept the Bible as it is as the word of God and our only infallible rule of faith and practice, but know nothing about the 'original autographs' and are not willing to make any affirmation concerning them." As for the labels "fundamentalist" and "modernist," he wrote that "they only becloud the issue and confuse the minds of plain folks. The real difference (which I pray may not become a division) is between the *Literalists*, who interpret the Scripture according to the letter, and the *Liberals*, who interpret according to the spirit."

In all events, van Dyke opposed the imposition of an abso-

lute uniformity which, he said, "in any association of men means the absence of thought or the presence of hypocrisy." In that phrase he demonstrated his ability to pose issues in words so clear that few could escape the significance involved. He clearly saw that the heresy-hunters would drive many of the best minds and most honest spirits out of the Church and would in the long run damage traditional Christianity rather than reinforce it. "Heresy trials," he wrote, "are the delight of the ungodly and the despair of religion."

In his attitude toward the literalists van Dyke has been amply supported by history, but there must be some suspicion as to the depth of theological acumen in a man who could say of President Eliot of Harvard, who was at most a Unitarian, that "'faith in the eternal' on Eliot's lips signifies just what 'come to Jesus' does," and there must also be some suspicion of the kind of preaching van Dyke did at Harvard when we learn that President Eliot remarked after hearing him that "that sermon could do no harm." The point is that van Dyke was at times theologically naïve, not that he was a Unitarian, for his essential adherence to the central Christian doctrines seems to have been above suspicion.

Van Dyke regarded himself as an "adventurous conservative," and though he did not hold what our generation regards as a sophisticated social gospel, he was active in so many social and political causes while in his Brick Church pulpit that the *New York Sun* proposed that he run for mayor of the city and so settle once and for all whether he would be in or out of politics. He preached against the existence of slums on top of which "we build our houses of comfort as it were on the thin crust of hell," he fought for the institution of Civil Service as a corrective of the spoils system, sought an international copyright law to prohibit unscrupulous though respectable American publishers from pirating the works of foreign authors, actively campaigned for conservation of natural resources, courageously opposed United States imperialism in the Philippines in the face of charges of un-Americanism, and in later years opposed Prohibition. As United States minister to Holland, he displayed a willingness for political and social

SONS OF THE PROPHETS

involvement, which he thought of as but another aspect of his ministry, as he actively sought international arbitration of disputes, while after war came to Europe he tirelessly cared for refugees from all nations. When the United States entered the war, van Dyke, though thirty years over the age limit, obtained a naval chaplain's commission and even sought, though without success, to be given combat duty. Then, during the presidential campaign of 1928, van Dyke vigorously attacked the position of those who would deny the presidency to a Roman Catholic. Such a man can scarcely be dismissed as socially neutral and politically unconcerned, but when asked whether he belonged to any reform societies he replied that the only such societies to which he belonged were the Christian Church and the United States of America.

III

His major influence throughout his career was exerted through his mastery of words, whether the words were spoken or written, and he addressed himself to virtually every issue upon which his interests touched. In a very real sense, he squandered his talents, for by writing too much he failed to realize the promise held out by his abilities. Though he undoubtedly had literary gifts, he seems to have found methods for mass-producing his own talents, so as to pour out books and articles for a wide audience that found him both easy and pleasant to read. Literarily, he simply spread himself too thin, and as a result we find it difficult to take him very seriously today. *The Other Wise Man* is skillfully executed, but of no more lasting literary worth than most best sellers. Many of the outdoor tales have signal vitality—and Brander Mathews, the critic, said that van Dyke interested him in nature for the first time—but they are again only very commendable works of the second or third rank. Some of the poetry is good, and though it is radically different from most twentieth-century verse, it is a delight to read such poems as "The Maryland Yellow-Throat" and "The Whip-Poor-Will," to name only two.

Van Dyke himself regarded *The Book of Common Worship of the Presbyterian Church* as his most important contribution, and in this judgment he was, I think, quite correct. He served as chairman of the committee of 1903, which produced the work, and of the committee of 1928, which revised it. In both committees, his influence was the decisive factor in the production of a volume of varied forms for public worship that has proved of great benefit throughout the major forms of American Presbyterianism. *The Book of Common Worship* is a masterly achievement, blending traditional and modern prayers into a rich texture whose value to the Church can scarcely be overestimated. The marriage service, the five litanies, and many of the prayers are van Dyke's own contribution, but his fine literary discrimination marks the entire volume just as Thomas Cranmer's marks the Episcopal *Book of Common Prayer*. Both volumes are literary masterpieces.

It was here, rather than in his own original and critical writings, that van Dyke's lasting influence may be found. In his own writing he was too often mannered and even affected, but in the editing of the Presbyterian service book his wide reading of the great English writers and his undeniable literary taste made him the ideal editor and arbiter. On this subject there is surely need for study, and an excellent book could be produced as a result. "Truth and goodness," van Dyke declared, "are not complete until beauty is added to the trinity of excellence," and it is principally due to his efforts that American Presbyterianism has available a service book containing varied and beautiful orders of worship for all occasions in the life of the Church.

IV

For twenty-three years, counting his leave-of-absence as diplomat and naval chaplain, van Dyke occupied the Murray Professorship of English Literature at Princeton University, and it was his persistent contention that the task of an English professor was the teaching of reading. He had no developed philosophy of aesthetics, and he wrote no scholarly magnum

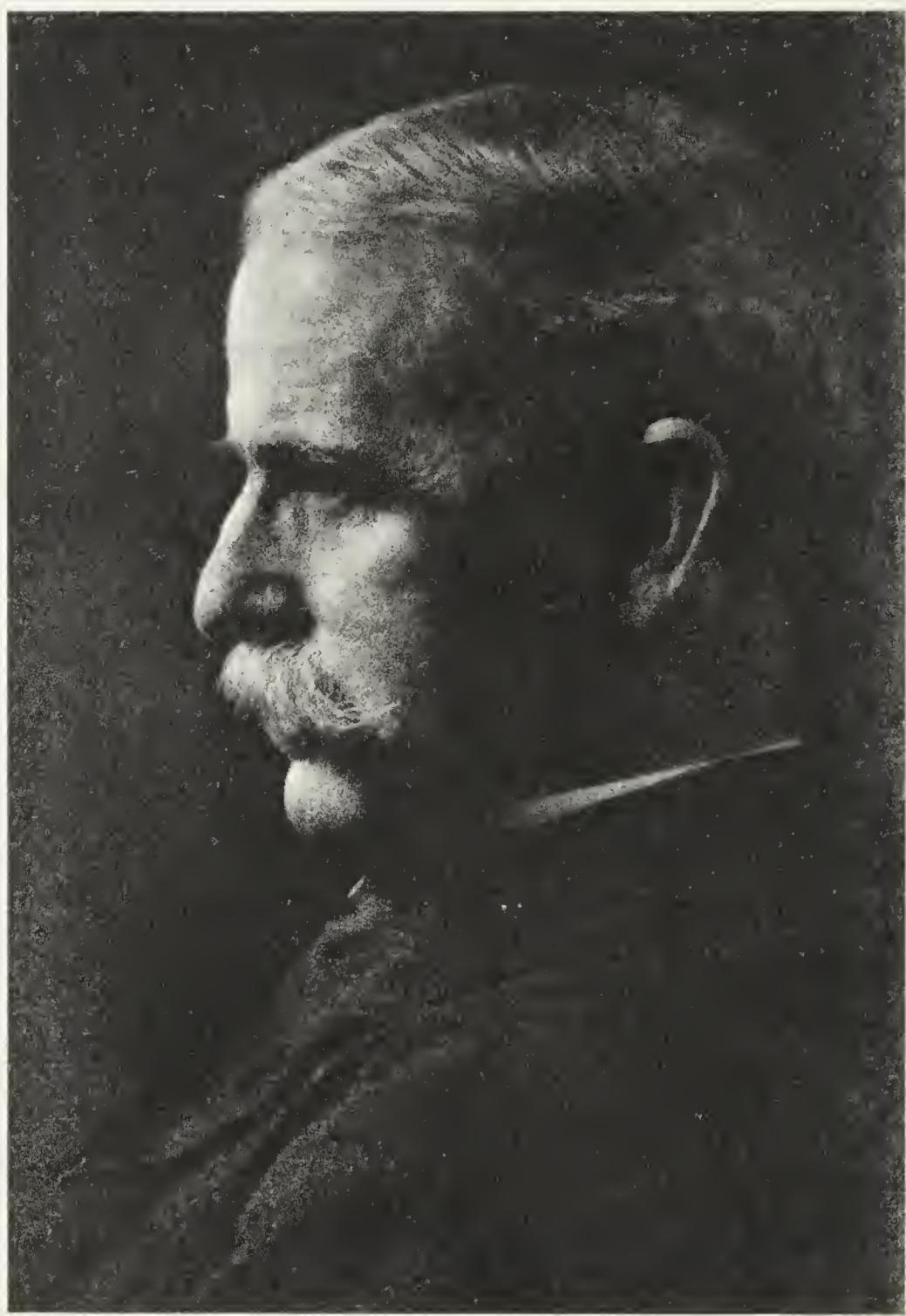
SONS OF THE PROPHETS

opus in his field: he concentrated upon teaching his students to read and appreciate great literature, and in that effort he would appear to have been considerably more successful than most. It is doubtful that van Dyke could, in 1963, attain the status of a major chair at Princeton or any other university of comparable stature, for the new standards of academic advancement put a premium on scholarly and critical production in a way that would exclude van Dyke. It is true that he produced a great deal: the bibliography of his books numbers over seventy items, not counting articles and reviews. Indeed, he produced too much, for no man can write that much and write it well, and with the exception of certain isolated pieces he may best be seen as a popularizer.

To say this is not to damn the man. The ideas he sought to popularize were generally sound. In his moral teaching, he was consistently virile in his Christianity, shunning both sentimental tripe and Pharasaic prudishness. When a dear old lady wrote to rebuke him because she heard that he sometimes smoked, he replied: "Dear Madam: It is not true that I sometimes smoke: I *always* smoke."

Though he was scarcely a profound critic, van Dyke's view of literature was essentially sound. In the haste of composition he sometimes blurred the distinction, but he knew well enough the difference between telling a story and preaching a sermon. "After all, what profit is there in a sermon after a great story," he asked. Quite correctly, he criticized the proletarian fiction of the first third of the twentieth century because it unduly imposed a kind of preachiness in its writing: "I do not believe in 'proletarian literature' any more than I believe in 'capitalistic literature.'" His criticism at this point was based in literary criteria, not in political prejudice, though he has sometimes been misinterpreted on this issue.

Misinterpreted, too, was his criticism of Sinclair Lewis, and Lewis himself seems to have been willing to capitalize on a somewhat warped version of the remarks by this "most amiable old gentleman." Actually, van Dyke's criticism of Lewis concerned his literary narrowness, not his literary morality, for he clearly stated that his objections to Lewis' work "were not



Henry van Dyke

HENRY VAN DYKE

based on moral grounds, but on literary and philosophic grounds. An out and out pessimist cannot be a really great writer any more than an out and out optimist can be." To criticize Lewis on these grounds showed courage, at a time when the entire literary climate was becoming increasingly pessimistic and proletarian. Similarly in poetry, van Dyke attacked the growing reliance upon free verse and the abandonment of metrical discipline, though he defended metrical innovations, for "metre and rhyme have a deep relation to the rhythm of human emotion, of which I grow more sure the less I can explain it. Some call them a bondage, but the natural harmony of such laws makes for true freedom." Again, his judgment was sound.

In all his writing, van Dyke represented the genteel tradition, but he was far more democratic than many of those who represented the new creative and critical movements in literature by which the genteel tradition was overwhelmed. In van Dyke's view, the common reader was to be elevated to the level of appreciating good writing, and the good writer was to make himself intelligible to the common reader. The elevation of taste as well as conduct was the aim of the genteel tradition, but since the turn of the century other forces have been at work. These forces have come to dominate literature, though their influence seems now to be at least beginning to wane. Van Dyke opposed the new tendency to make culture a coterie province, and he described certain emerging twentieth-century characteristics in a lively and polemic fashion:

"Their mark is eccentricity. Their aim is the visible separation of the cultured person from the common herd. His favorite poet must be one who is caviar to the vulgar. His chosen philosopher must be able to express himself with such obscurity that few, if any, can comprehend him. He must know more than anyone else about the things that are not worth knowing, and care very passionately for the things that are not usually considered worth caring about. He must believe that Homer and Dante and Milton and the Bible have been very much overrated, and carefully guard himself, as Oscar Wilde did in

SONS OF THE PROPHETS

the presence of the ocean, from giving away to sentiments of vulgar admiration. His views of history must be based upon the principle of depreciating familiar heroes and whitewashing extraordinary villains. He must measure the worth of literature by its unpopularity, and find his chief joy in the consciousness that his tastes, his opinions, and his aspirations are unlike those of common people."

No polemic statement is ever altogether fair, but in this passage van Dyke has struck home on many targets. The genteel tradition was essentially democratic, but what followed it was often the height of snobbism, even when it was the snobbery that regards vulgarity as sophistication.

V

It is here, perhaps, that we today stand at the farthest remove from van Dyke. The literature of our age avidly exploits the new, the different, the sensational, the exotic, even the aberrant and the perverse, and even where it does not follow the well-beaten path of novelty, it still hesitates to say the obvious. Not so van Dyke, who was not afraid of saying something obvious if he could put it in a finely wrought phrase. "It is by forgetting platitudes," he wrote, "that men and nations are ruined"; and he was doubtless correct, but he makes himself look rather silly when he blares his verbal trumpets and parades his platitudes as though they were great and original ideas.

We can only regard as pompous such expressions as these: "Individualism is a fatal poison. But individuality is the salt of common life," and "What we call society is very narrow. But life is very broad." There is value in both expressions, but van Dyke's mannerisms as a writer often call attention away from the validity of what he is trying to say. Recalling Wilson's remark, we may say that van Dyke's prose also struts, and that, when that prose would introduce us to the common wisdom of the race, it often does so in a manner so pretentious as to seem a parody of itself.

In the following passage we see a perfect example of the

HENRY VAN DYKE

manner in which rhetorical style and structure become ends in themselves, with the result that the first three sentences are false, and while the climactic fourth sentence contains some basic truth, the very style focuses attention upon its pretentiousness rather than its truth:

“A great general like Napoleon may be produced in a military school. A great diplomatist like Metternich may be developed in a court. A great philosopher like Hegel may be evolved in a university. But a great man like Washington can come only from a pure and noble home.”

Time after time van Dyke undercuts himself as he does in this passage, but, at his best, his high moral seriousness and wide learning combine in fluent expression to say things to which we can still listen with profit and pleasure. But if we listen very long, we become tired.

But perhaps we are too harsh on van Dyke. Few writers can stand the scrutiny of later generations, and if a man has served his own time well, that in itself is a great deal. There can be no doubt of van Dyke’s contributions to his contemporaries in the course of a long and useful life, and many of those contributions (most notably the assaults upon literalism and the production of *The Book of Common Worship*) still benefit us in a direct way. His basic ideas were sound, if not original, and he managed to present these ideas in a form that was not only palatable but even attractive to large numbers of people. He served his Church, his nation, and his University with integrity and distinction in the most varied capacities over the course of eighty years, during which time he played an honorable part in almost every major event.

What is the present significance of Henry van Dyke? It is, I think, in his vision, and in his attempt to hold together the triad of truth, goodness, and beauty, though we must be careful to note that truth for him contained both scientific and religious aspects. He sought a viable openness to new scientific understanding on the part of traditional Christianity, a flexibility of relationship, a means of riding the waves of new

SONS OF THE PROPHETS

knowledge. He openly faced these problems, and though the solutions he proposed were generally accepted, they did not gain sufficient support to save the Church from much controversy and bitterness. In regard to beauty, he insisted (and would to God that more clergymen would follow him here) that beauty in art and worship should be merged—indeed, must be merged—in the modern Church, and here he contributed much in a liturgical way. His own writings are less successful, and though some of his verse and of his prose on nature may well be regarded as minor classics, he was neither a great creative writer nor a great critic.

Van Dyke's largest significance for us is not to be found in what he wrote or accomplished, but rather in the fact that he saw so clearly that the modern world challenges the modern Church with the necessity of achieving a viable and Christian sophistication. The frontier was dead, and a new urban society was emerging with which the Christian could deal only in terms of a Christian urbanity, which van Dyke attempted to achieve, not always with success. He attempted, like Robert Louis Stevenson, to be an “adventurer in a velvet jacket,” and words which he wrote of Stevenson may well serve as the fittest summary of his own aims in life:

“On one side are the puritans who frown at a preacher in a velvet jacket; on the other side the pagans who scoff at an artist who cares for morals. Yet surely there is a way between the two extremes where an artist-man may follow his conscience with joy to deal justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with his God. And having caught sight of that path, though he may trace it but dimly and follow it stumblingly, surely such a man may say to his fellows, ‘This is the good way; let us walk in it.’ ”