

John Miley

A.B., A.M., D.D., LL.D.
Professor, Systematic Theology, 1873-95.

Summary

John Miley joined the Drew faculty as chair of systematic theology in 1873, after his brother-in-law, [President Foster](#), left the seat vacant. Miley had graduated from Augusta College and, as a pastor, had held nineteen different appointments. Miley was one of "[the Great Five](#)" revered professors who led Drew for decades. He was the author of *Systematic Theology*. Miley died in 1895.

Article

Of the men who taught theology at Drew for the first fifty years of its history, none was more distinctively the systematic theologian. Miley did not have the range of scholarship of [McClintock](#), nor yet the verbal felicity of [Foster](#), and he was certainly far from the sheer vitality, brilliance, and originality which were to come with his immediate successor, Olin A. Curtis. But he brought to the teaching of theology at Drew a strength and solidity of mind which expressed themselves in his "system" and still remain its characteristic marks.

Miley's writings are severe in style, legalistic in temper: everywhere they bespeak the logician, interested much more in the coherence of the argument than in literary grace and finish. There are pages in both his *Systematic Theology* and his *Atonement* which are drier than dry: they are nothing less than arid. Yet by every testimony, the man must have had qualities which the books fail to reveal. The mind of Miley may be in the books, but his heart and soul are in his portrait. The face is a benign face. This is no befuddled Savonarola; no dour John Knox; no dictatorial Calvin. One can well believe that these eyes often twinkled with a quiet humor, and that the classroom sessions where this man presided were not always overweighted with solemnity.

He lived with his two daughters in what was known as "The Rogers' Dormitory" (how are the mighty fallen!). One can almost see for oneself the sturdy figure, clad in stormy weather in a greatcoat still further supplemented by an Inverness cape, emerging from the front door and walking with measured step to the classroom in Mead Hall. He served as the campus clock, a Drew Kant in respect of punctuality. "When we saw him crossing the campus, we knew the hour for class had arrived. No watch was necessary. He was practically never absent from class, and he was never late."

The story lingers of the huge enjoyment with which he watched from behind a convenient tree a bashful new student from a Maryland farm, uncouth, bewhiskered, and of unsuspected strength, turn in wrath upon a group of three tormentors, throw one of them to the ground, deposit the other two on the prostrate form, seat himself atop of the squirming pile, and roar out his determination to make jelly of the lot if they did not "leave him be." One likes that story-and suspects that the amused professor perceived a somewhat concrete illustration of his favorite theme of "distributive" justice!

Miley was true to a theological tradition in his love of walking. *Solvitur ambulando*. He was observant of Nature's changing moods, with somewhat of a Wordsworthian eye, and those who knew him testify that he as he walked he gathered richly "the harvest of a quiet eye." But his chief relaxation was quoits. It is a persistent legend that he was the best quoits-player on the campus. He had an uncanny skill in scoring "ringers," and this in spite of the fact that he invariably played in his long "Prince Albert" coat-his one sad violation of quoits history! One confesses with much less pride that he always played croquet, although it is a satisfaction to know that he played it less expertly than his colleague, Samuel F. Upham. Skill in croquet is no masculine virtue: its implications are lawns, ladies, and leisure. But skill in quoits is another matter: the game is redolent of the lusty virility of pioneer days. For the understanding mind, the clang of the horse-shoe against the stake echoes "embattled farmers." It brings up visions of horny-handed men who loved the feel of iron, visions of the shod hooves of great horses, of the ringing blows of the blacksmith's forge. From such stock came John Miley, and with such men he played as a boy in Ohio.

Report declares him a sympathetic teacher, almost maternally patient with the student who went haltingly in his way. He frequently called for verbal recitations on dictated notes. He refused to accept as final a student's "Not prepared, sir." Instead, he began to ask questions, says Henry C. Whitney, in a way that suggested the answer to even the least discerning. "When the *dual* recitation was finished, the Doctor would smilingly observe, 'There, I thought that you and I together could manage this-for one of us, you see, was prepared.'"

One would never suspect from Miley's books that he was either a very interesting or a very inspiring preacher. But here again the tradition belies the interference. No less a critic than James M. Buckley used to put him in the same class with Bishop Simpson as a "great occasion" preacher. He served a number of conspicuous churches before coming to Drew. His increasing absorption in abstract thinking tended to weaken his pulpit power, but S. G. Ayres recalls a baccalaureate sermon by Miley on the subject, "The Supreme Excellence of Jesus Christ," and he says of it: "It was one of the greatest sermons I ever heard. He took us from height to height, and finally brought us to the very throne of God."

Dr. Curtis regarded Miley's two volumes as one of the most substantial and well-knit statements of the Arminian theology produced in the nineteenth century, and required his own students to master them. For years they were in the Conference Course of Study. Their choice for this purpose was a deep satisfaction to Miley. "It is a great honor," he said, "to be selected as the theologian of the Church." In his treatment of the Atonement, he departed somewhat from the usual Methodist view. He made a classic statement of the so-called Governmental or Rectoral theory. The theory was first broached by Hugo Grotius, and had been taken over by Arminius. It had a place in both Anglican and Wesleyan theology in the eighteenth century, but it can hardly be said to loom largely in the teaching of Wesley himself. The Arminianism of early Methodist theology is seen rather in the emphasis on free grace and on the universality of the Atonement than in any Rectoralism. Undoubtedly the legalistic cast of Miley's own mind is one chief explanation of his attraction to the emphasis on Moral Government and its necessities characteristic of the thinking of Grotius, himself a great international jurist.

None will question that John Miley has a secure place among the stalwarts of American theology of whatsoever school. He stands with Hodge and Strong and Warfield, with Little and Raymond and Sheldon, with Dwight and Channing and Bushnell, and they have no occasion to be ashamed of his company. In respect of loyalty to Scripture, evangelical insight, and structural coherence, he worthily perpetuates the tradition established by the early English Methodist theologians, Benson, Watson, and Pope, with whom, indeed, he is strangely one in spirit and in mental style.

written by Edwin Lewis.

Reproduced from *The Teachers of Drew, 1867-1942, A Commemorative Volume issued on the occasion of the 75th Anniversary of the Founding of Drew Theological Seminary, October 15, 1942*. Edited by James Richard Joy. (Drew University, Madison, N.J., 1942)

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