Murdoch, Francis Johnstone [1]

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Murdoch, Francis Johnstone

by Lawrence F. London, 1991

17 Mar. 1846–21 June 1909

Francis Johnstone Murdoch, Episcopal [2]clergyman, teacher, and manufacturer, was born in Buncombe County [3], the son of William and Margaret Nixon Murdoch. His parents immigrated to America from Ireland in 1842, settling first in Pennsylvania and later moving to North Carolina, where they purchased a farm in Buncombe County. Young Murdoch received his preparatory education at Colonel Stephen Lee's school in Asheville and in 1860 entered the South Carolina Military Academy (later The Citadel). [4]At the beginning of the Civil War [5], he enlisted for a six-month period in Company E, First North Carolina Volunteers, known as the Bethel Regiment. Afterwards he returned to the Military Academy, where he remained until the end of the war. As a cadet he took an active part in the defense of Charleston, rising to the rank of lieutenant.

After the war Murdoch taught for several years in a school run by the Reverend Jarvis Buxton [6], rector of Trinity Church, Asheville. While teaching, he studied for Holy Orders under Dr. Buxton's direction and served as a lay reader at Trinity Church. On 17 Sept. 1868 Bishop Thomas Atkinson [7] ordained Murdoch a deacon in St. Luke's Church, Salisbury. In October he became deacon-in-charge of St. John's, High Shoals, Gaston County [8], and in that capacity conducted occasional services in several other missions in the county. He was ordained to the priesthood by Bishop Atkinson on 8 May 1870 in St. Paul's Church, Edenton, where the diocesan convention was being held that year. Following ordination, Murdoch took charge of the missions in Buncombe, Haywood, and Rutherford counties. On 29 June 1872 he became rector of St. Luke's Church, Salisbury, where he remained until his death.

At St. Luke's, Murdoch began a long and fruitful career in the Episcopal church, not only in the parochial field but also at the diocesan and national levels. In a few years the number of communicants at St. Luke's more than doubled, a parochial school was established, and an active Sunday school program was inaugurated. Murdoch was noted for his zeal in promoting missions. In 1876 he was instrumental in organizing an association of clergymen, called the Evangelist Brotherhood, "for the purpose of carrying on Parochial missions" and became its warden. Over the next three decades he was tireless in his efforts to establish new missions not only in his home county, Rowan [9], but in the neighboring counties as well. His first mission church was St. Matthew's, a small wooden building erected about 1880, located six miles west of Salisbury; in 1912 this simple structure was replaced by a larger brick church, given in memory of Murdoch by his widow and his sister Margaret. He was directly responsible for establishing seven other missions in Rowan County [9] and assisted in the formation of missions in Concord, Cooleemee, and Proximity.

Murdoch also had a strong interest in Christian education. He promoted the establishment of the Church School for Boys in Salisbury, sponsored by the Convocation of Charlotte, and served as its treasurer. His primary concern, however, was to educate young men for the ministry. Realizing that many able men in the Diocese of North Carolina were financially unable to attend a regular seminary, he invited them into his home to study theology under his direction. By the time of his death, he had prepared eleven men for the ministry. Two of them, the Reverend Robert Bruce Owens and the Reverend Sidney S. Bost, became prominent clergymen in the Diocese of North Carolina.

Murdoch was recognized by his contemporaries as an outstanding scholar and a profound thinker and preacher. One of his fellow priests remarked that he was "a theological college in himself." Over the years he collected a library of several thousand volumes in the fields of biblical studies, theology, and church history.

Active in the work of the Diocese of North Carolina, Murdoch served on many committees of the diocesan convention and was a clerical trustee of the University of the South, Sewanee, (1884–1909) and of St. Mary's School, [10] Raleigh (1898–1909). He represented his diocese as a clerical deputy to every General Convention from 1889 to 1907 and was a member of the convention's Committee on Christian Unity for fifteen years. At a special diocesan convention in 1893, he was nominated assistant bishop of the Diocese of North Carolina by the Reverend Joseph Blount Cheshire [11], Jr. After thirty-nine ballots, Murdoch was defeated by the man who had nominated him. Murdoch's contributions to his church and his intellectual attainments were recognized by the University of the South in 1890, when it awarded him the degree of S.T.D.

Among the talents of this many-sided man was his ability as a business organizer and executive. In 1887 Murdoch was

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one of a group of citizens who organized the Salisbury Cotton Mills for the purpose of giving employment to the needy people of the county. He was elected secretary and treasurer of the company. Murdoch was also a moving spirit in the formation of the Rowan Knitting Company and the Vance Cotton Mill, serving as president of the latter until his death. Seeing the need for more homes in his community, he organized the Salisbury Perpetual Building and Loan Association and was made its first secretary and treasurer. His success in these ventures enabled him to provide financial assistance to many young people, particularly those who sought a higher education.

Murdoch married Eliza J. Marsh of Salisbury on 14 May 1884. They had two children: Francis Johnston and Margaret Nixon (m. Charles Bell). Murdoch was buried in Chestnut Hill cemetery, Salisbury.

Three years after his death, Margaret Murdoch, of Charleston, S.C., established a trust fund of $20,000 in memory of her brother. The income from the trust was to be used for "the education and training of young men for the ministry" of the Episcopal church. It was to be administered by trustees under the name of the Francis J. Murdoch Memorial Society for the Increase of the Ministry. The trustees of the society, appointed by the bishop of the diocese, continue to carry out the provisions of the trust.

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