Joseph Capen Biography

Joseph Capen

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Biography

Joseph Capen was born in Dorchester, Massachusetts, the son of John Capen. Little is known of his childhood. He graduated from Harvard College in the class of 1677 with an M.A. degree and served as minister in Dorchester for a short time. In 1684 he became the pastor of the church in Topsfield, Massachusetts, where he remained until his death in 1725. His broadside, a funeral elegy on the death of John Foster, who established the first printing press in Boston, was published in 1681. This elegy, *A Funeral Elegy Upon the much to be Lamented Death and most Deplorable Expiration of the Pious, Learned, Ingenious, and Eminently Usefull Servant of God Mr. John Foster*, is believed to be one source of the famous epitaph that Benjamin Franklin composed when he was twenty-three:

The Body
Of
Benjamin Franklin
Printer
(Like the cover of an old book,
Its contents torn out,
And stript of its lettering and guilding,)
Lies here, food for worms.
Yet the work itself shall not be lost,
For it will, as he believed, appear once more,
In a new
And more beautiful edition,
Corrected and amended
By
The Author.

Capen's elegy uses strikingly similar imagery and the same conceit:

Thy body, which no activeness did lack,
Now's laid aside like an old almanac;
But for the present only's out of date,
'Twill have at length a far more active state.
Yea, though with dust thy body soiled be,
Yet at the resurrection we shall see
A fair edition, and of matchless worth.
Free from *Errata*, new in Heaven set forth;
'Tis but a word from God, the great Creator,

It shall be done when he saith *Imprimatur*.

All copies of the original broadside of Capen's elegy have been lost, but Thomas C. Simonds reprinted the poem from a copy of the manuscript in his *History of South Boston* (1857).

Capen's only other publication was a funeral sermon on the death of Joseph Green, *A Funeral Sermon Occasioned by the Death of Mr. Joseph Green, Late Pastor of the Church in Salem Village* (1717). Included with the sermon was a prefatory epistle by Increase Mather and an elegy by Capen. All indications are that Capen lived his life free from controversy in the faithful performance of his pastoral duties.