

Robert Lewis
DABNEY
A Southern Presbyterian Life

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D. G. HART AND SEAN MICHAEL LUCAS
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Robert Lewis
DABNEY
A Southern Presbyterian Life

SEAN MICHAEL LUCAS

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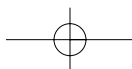
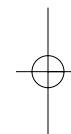
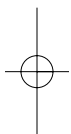
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For my parents,
Steve and Susan Lucas

“The glory of children is their fathers.”
—Proverbs 17:6

“Her children rise up and call her blessed.”
—Proverbs 31:28



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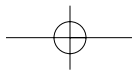
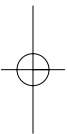
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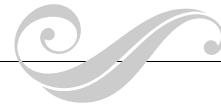
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Though my family is acknowledged last, their place in my heart is first. My wife, Sara, demonstrates her love in innumerable ways, but

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*We shall be wise, therefore,
if we harken to the striking instruction of these instances,
and make it our method to submit with modesty
to the sober teachings of the past in all our legislation for the future.*

—Robert Lewis Dabney

Introduction



A few months before Robert Lewis Dabney died, he made a final grand tour of the eastern seaboard from his exilic location in Victoria, Texas. One of his stops was the General Assembly of his beloved Presbyterian Church in the United States, meeting in Charlotte, North Carolina. There to represent the Synod of Texas as well as to present a paper for the 250th anniversary of the Westminster Confession of Faith, Dabney was received with great feeling and acclaim. One observer held that Dabney was “the Moses who had been the leader in ‘times that tried men’s souls.’ ” Throughout the Assembly, “his every utterance was heard with profoundest interest, and his counsels received with the utmost deference and respect. He took an active part in the deliberations of that great Assembly, and served with his accustomed diligence as chairman of one of the leading committees.” At the end of one session, Dabney, who had been blind since 1890, was led to the moderator’s table to close in prayer. His searching prayer “seemed almost gifted with the seer’s sagacity.” After serving as both a Southern Presbyterian Elijah and Moses one final time, Dabney retired to Asheville, North Carolina, to spend the summer away from the Texas heat.¹

Undoubtedly those who knew Robert Lewis Dabney, both as friends and as enemies, felt him to be larger than life, closer to a biblical prophet than a theological professor. Even as a young man, Dab-

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ney's gaze bored through others; his scowl suggested a thunderstorm; and his speech could be furious. As an older man, with the chin beard draping down like a vestment, he was most often viewed by observers as a prophet or an apostle. One student, upon hearing falsely of Dabney's death, claimed to be in the position of Elisha, who had lost his Elijah in Dabney's demise. Another former student claimed that "his students in his old age at Austin, were wont to speak of him as St. John." A ministerial colleague also viewed Dabney like the apostle John, "who denounced heresy and falsehood like a very Boanerges, as he was." Others accounted him to be like one of the Reformers. "Had he occupied Calvin's position he might have done Calvin's work," S. Taylor Martin claimed. "Had he been substituted for John Knox he could have performed the part of Knox." Like a mythic figure from a long-ago time, Dabney seemed to stand for principle and truth in an age gone mad.²

Not only was he akin to a character from Bible times or church history, his contemporaries held Dabney to be among the most important men of their generation. Moses D. Hoge, Dabney's lifelong friend, placed Dabney in a Southern Presbyterian triumvirate: "No church on this continent has been more favored of heaven in having at its very organization three such men as Thornwell, Palmer, and Dabney—each fitted by splendid genius, profound scholarship and consecration to the noblest ends, to give direction to its future life and to enrich it for all time by their published contributions to theological science." Another admirer placed Dabney in the pantheon of Southern heroes: "No bad cause ever had men like Lee and Jackson to fight its battles, nor intellects like Calhoun, Thornwell, Hammond, Bledsoe, Dabney, and Laws to settle its problems." His biographer, Thomas Cary Johnson, stated quite firmly, "Dr. Dabney was a great man. We cannot tell just how great yet. One cannot see how great Mt. Blanc is while standing at its foot. One hundred years from now men will be able to see him better."³

After Dabney died in 1898, however, his reputation suffered precipitous decline. While James Henley Thornwell's name bore great cultural weight in the Southern Presbyterian church, Dabney appeared to embarrass New South Presbyterians. Although his systematic the-

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ology textbook was used at Union Theological Seminary in Virginia until 1940, and the seminary had endowed the Robert Lewis Dabney chair of systematic theology, the New South Presbyterians who used the seminary as a base for their progressive program did not know what to make of Dabney. For example, Union Seminary church historians Ernest Trice Thompson and Frank Bell Lewis were fascinated by Dabney's intellectual power and foresight, but they were repulsed by his rigid adherence to the Westminster Standards, his criticism of higher-critical scholarship, and his virulent racial prejudice. Further, Dabney's bitterness toward the North in general and Northern Presbyterians in particular made him less than useful for Southern progressives who sought organic union with the Northern church, and economic and social integration with Northern society.⁴

Most recent historians have not been friendly toward Dabney either. For example, historian Charles Reagan Wilson observed that Dabney was "a racist, a strident reactionary, and an embittered man," an essentially unattractive historical figure. Likewise, Donald Mathews excoriated Dabney as "a Presbyterian theologian who mistook his own punitive Calvinism as gospel, railed against the barbarian hordes of Northern abolitionists for despoiling his homeland, and screamed at his Presbyterian colleagues for daring to consider the training and ordination of African-American presbyters." In addition, Mathews faulted Dabney's formulation of the penal substitutionary theory of the atonement for providing the cultural justification for lynching. Even Dabney's contemporary friends often view him in a limiting way. Those who show an interest in him do so for his staunch Southern nationalism, social conservatism, or unapologetic Calvinistic theology; typical is the praise of one Dabney admirer: "How many of you have heard of Generals Lee and Jackson? Of course, all of you. Well this man [Dabney] ranks with those generals as one of the greatest Americans that ever lived." Others uphold Dabney for his prophetic insight and patriarchal sensibilities. One contemporary writer praised Dabney's writings for their "virility," claiming that "one must not forget that Dabney wrote in the last great period of American history in which men were proud to be men, and to call someone a 'patriarch' was to pay him a compliment." This same writer claimed that Dab-

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ney was “the quintessential prophet” who accurately pointed out the evil potentialities of the modern worldview.⁵

But Dabney was far more complex than either historians or admirers concede. More than a “Lost Cause” defender and a spokesman for “racial orthodoxy” and rigid Calvinism, Dabney was in many ways a representative man, one who embodied the passions and contradictions of nineteenth-century Southerners. In fact, his contemporaries understood these contradictions better than modern-day commentators. Johnson admitted that Dabney “was not a sinless man. His massive nature was qualified all through his long and vexed life with sin; but grace dominated.” Others sought to distance Dabney from his caustic reputation, emphasizing his compassion toward students, his undying devotion toward his friends, and even the respect he demonstrated to his enemies. S. F. Tenney claimed that Dabney was “misunderstood because of the vehemence of many of his expressions.” This misunderstanding was due to the fact that “readers could not see the kindly expression of his face which ever accompanied this vehemence of utterance.” While admitting Dabney’s notoriety as a “Christian Warrior,” B. M. Palmer pointed to Dabney’s “gentler traits” and “amiable virtues which endeared him to his pupils and to his friends of every degree.” Thornton Sampson also distanced Dabney from his intransigent partisanship by accentuating the fact that Dabney “was a kind neighbor, a tender and most affectionate husband, an over-indulgent parent, and a most faithful friend.” The chief evidence of Dabney’s tenderness was his life-long devotion to the memory of Sampson’s father, Francis Sampson, who had been Dabney’s teacher and later colleague at Union Seminary. “Nothing could have been more beautiful than this love of a strong man, for one whose gifts, whatever they were, excited no sentiment but admiration in him,” Sampson testified.⁶

These reminiscences of Dabney’s contemporaries complicate the conventional wisdom that he was merely an implacable warhorse of the Old South. Doubtless Dabney was a defender of the South, but he was particularly worried that the New South after the war was forsaking the classical republicanism of the American founders. Dabney was a public intellectual, respected throughout the country for his theological moderation and his political conservatism, but he was also a

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devoted husband and father who knew the bitterness of losing his own father when he was thirteen and three of his six sons in their childhood. Dabney was a staunch defender of slavery, demonstrating an intense racial pride that led to fears of “blood-mixing” with African Americans, but he gave a house and ten acres of land to an African-American woman who had served his mother well, and took care of “Uncle Warner” Lipscomb, a free black who became his trusted valet after the Civil War. While Dabney ardently opposed reunion with Northern Presbyterians because he feared their “broad churchism,” he orchestrated the reunion of the Southern Old and New Schools in 1864 on the basis of subscription to the Westminster Standards “pure and simple.” Finally, while Dabney stridently opposed public education in Virginia, he was a founding faculty member of the state-sponsored University of Texas.⁷

While it might be convenient simply to write off Dabney and other late-nineteenth-century Southerners for their racism or their Calvinism, it might be more useful to view Dabney and others like him as representatives of the postbellum Southern conservative mind. In particular, this biography argues that Dabney was a representative Southern conservative and provides a window into the postbellum Southern Presbyterian mind. To be sure, Dabney stood as a conservative version of that mind, one that had more in common with Presbyterian hardliners John L. Girardeau and B. M. Palmer than with denominational moderates Walter W. Moore or even Moses D. Hoge. Still, Dabney saw himself as representing a significant portion of the opinion of both the South and the Presbyterian church, especially for the two decades following Appomattox. It was not until around 1882, when New South Presbyterians were able to overcome conservative opposition to fraternal relations with the Northern Presbyterians, that Dabney began to feel marginalized within his own Southern Zion.

Of the generation of Southern intellectuals who lived through the Civil War, Dabney was actually quite typical. Compared, for example, to the views of A. T. Bledsoe and D. H. Hill, Dabney’s fears of a “Southern holocaust” were mainstream; he had an open invitation to write for Hill’s *The Land We Love* and Bledsoe’s *Southern Review* and wrote until the press of other responsibilities, as well as an antago-

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nistic relationship with Bledsoe, diverted his energies. Similarly, Dabney's short-term desire to immigrate was fairly normal. More than 20,000 "Confederados" immigrated to Brazil in the years after Appomattox; that Dabney thought seriously about joining these Southern immigrants in an effort to maintain Southern culture and honor is hardly surprising. Moreover, Dabney was a representative intellectual voice in the development of Southern antimodernism. Like their Northern counterparts, Southern antimodernists feared the effects of modernization in American life brought about by "progress"—industrialization; the rise of a new elite class based on corporate capitalism; professionalization, specialization, and expert knowledge in the academy; and the effects of philosophical materialism on ethics, ethos, and worldview. Dabney especially exemplified an antimodernist response to modernity, emphasizing republican moralism, human depravity and divine transcendence, and a stringent critique of corporate capitalism. Above all, Dabney warned that modern American life failed to reckon seriously with God's sovereign control over the world and God's laws that governed every sphere of life. In place of God's laws, Americans were embracing a "sensualistic philosophy" that exerted a deleterious effect on American character and life by way of ethical utilitarianism, unhealthy pluralism, and antibiblical egalitarianism. In each of these ways, Dabney was representative.

Not only was Dabney a representative postbellum Southern conservative, he was also the Southern Presbyterian theologian *par excellence*. Dabney authored the only complete nineteenth-century Southern Presbyterian systematic theology; he also co-edited the *Southern Presbyterian Review* during the 1870s. As a professional theologian, Dabney consistently upheld the "comprehensive ideal" for theology's task—theologians were charged with applying theology to every sphere of life. In addition, Dabney's main task for over forty years was training ministers for the Southern Presbyterian church, first as professor of ecclesiastical history and polity and then as professor of systematic and polemic theology at Union Theological Seminary in Virginia and the Austin School of Theology. As a dogmatic theologian, Dabney was surprisingly moderate. He believed the debates over supralapsarianism and infralapsarianism and immediate and mediate imputation to

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be inconsequential. Similarly, Dabney affirmed the “five points of Calvinism” in a winsome fashion—for example, admitting that Christ’s death had great benefit for all humankind even though its intent was to secure the salvation of the elect, and attempting to hold together boundless divine love with vindictory divine wrath. The basis for Dabney’s theological moderation was his close adherence to the Westminster Standards. Because the Westminster Confession did not employ “extra-scriptural distinctions,” Dabney held that religious teachers should conserve the truths summarized in the confession rather than seek to innovate by adapting to contemporary intellectual trends.⁸

The “comprehensive ideal” for nineteenth-century theologians also meant that Dabney’s intellectual reach extended to moral, mental, and natural philosophy. Dabney demonstrated a lifelong interest in “natural philosophy,” as physical science was called in his day. He left Hampden-Sydney College to go to the University of Virginia so that he might master “the principles of science.” He had felt that the natural science course at Hampden-Sydney was poorly done. The entire subject was covered in one year, three lectures a week, a scant amount of time when compared to how diligently the study of languages was pursued. In Dabney’s view, however, “the natural sciences are worth all the others put together, and yet not a sixth of the whole time is devoted to them.” Dabney apparently excelled at chemistry and physics, sustaining examinations on the subjects at the University of Virginia on short notice. He later claimed that he spent much of his adult life reading the leading scientific writings and pondering them. Toward the end of his life, Dabney had a paper read at the Victoria Institute in London, on the teleological argument as proved by the “final cause” of creation, demonstrating his continuing interest in scientific issues. His grasp of “natural philosophy” led him to assail Edward Hitchcock’s attempt to reconcile science and religion, and produced a lengthy debate with Columbia Seminary professor and professional scientist James Woodrow.⁹

More important, perhaps, was Dabney’s long-standing interest in moral and mental philosophy. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, moral philosophy was the capstone of the college educational course, encompassing modern-day psychology, sociology, political sci-

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ence, and economics. Generally, the focus of moral philosophy was what could be called natural theology—those areas of thought revealed by God to all humankind through nature and conscience. Yet it was also considered a science—the offspring of Enlightenment rationalism that focused on the duties of humankind in their social relations. Moral philosophy in America was particularly associated with the Scottish schools of philosophy, hailing from Thomas Reid, Dugald Stewart, and Adam Smith. The Scottish moral philosophers held that truth was one, whether the truth was gained from the observation of physical phenomena or the investigation of human consciousness. The way to discover the truth was to apply the laws of logical “induction” as taught by Francis Bacon. Such Baconianism, when applied to human consciousness, taught certain intuitive or primary truths that served as the basis of all other thought and activity. Hence, moral philosophy was both philosophical—dealing with metaphysical moral issues—and scientific—using “scientific” methods of induction to discover truth. Dabney was intimately familiar with moral and mental philosophy as taught by the Scottish school, and it was part of the furniture for his theological understanding and development. His familiarity came through regular teaching of Scottish philosophy in moral philosophy courses. In 1857, Dabney taught moral philosophy at Hampden-Sydney College as part of his duties as interim president; and in 1883, he accepted the position of professor of moral and mental philosophy at the brand-new University of Texas at Austin. In addition, one of his final books was a compilation of his notes from his moral philosophy classes, revised thoroughly upon delivery of a condensed version of the course at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary in 1894.

The importance of the Scottish version of moral philosophy was demonstrated by the way it informed every part of Dabney’s work. In his lectures on systematic theology, Dabney included a lengthy section on the “sources of our thinking” that spelled out the basics of his Scottish philosophy. He also offered a defense of the Scottish philosophy in his *Sensualistic Philosophy of the Nineteenth Century*, in which he took positivist and radical empiricist thought to task for its materialism. The commonsense assumptions of this school played into his

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defenses of the inspiration of Scripture and the penal substitutionary theory of the atonement. In addition, Dabney penned a lengthy defense of induction and the laws of causation for the *Southern Presbyterian Review* and defended the teleological argument, based on the inductive method, in his 1881 Victoria Institute paper. He even worked Scottish philosophy into his biography of Stonewall Jackson, in which he claimed that Jackson believed that the “mind has its natural laws as well as matter, to be learned in the same way, by correct induction from our observations; and they are just as regular in their operation as those of the stars, the waters, or the vegetable world.” Clearly, not only did Dabney imbibe the Scottish philosophy; it was the glue that held much of his thought together.¹⁰

Not only then as a Southerner, but also as a Presbyterian theologian, Dabney was representative of postbellum Southern conservatism. Committed to preserving modes of thought and action associated with the antebellum intellectual world, Dabney frequently appeared to be an “apostle of the Old South.” But even in this appearance, Dabney confounds and complicates historical pigeonholes. For while he defended the old paths, he often admitted that the new generation would have to make its own intellectual choices. What Dabney desired above all else was that the past be remembered and given its due weight in contemporary discussions. “Prove all things; hold fast that which is good” not only was the biblical motto placed on Dabney’s tombstone in the Union Seminary cemetery in Farmville, Virginia, but also was Dabney’s policy for New South Presbyterians. What was necessary, Dabney claimed, was for the rising generation to “learn the history of the past truly.” The organic connection of new institutions to those that had gone before was undeniable; hence, if Southerners properly learned the “principles of 1861,” the immutable nature of “honor, justice, and right,” and the abiding truths of the Westminster Standards, then the New South would “be safe from any base decadence.” In short, in order for one to act rightly in the present day, attention must be paid to the concrete past, not to the unseen future.¹¹

And that is what is most compelling about Dabney. While many of his positions and pronouncements may produce intense disagreement or even disgust, Dabney’s historical significance as a voice for

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postbellum Southern religious and political conservatism stems from his understanding that, as John C. Calhoun also held, “the past is the parent of the present.” As a representative figure, Dabney and his life and work can help illuminate not only the vagaries of the Southern Presbyterian mind, but also the importance of nineteenth-century theology and witness for contemporary issues and debates. After all, the distance between this present day and the past is not nearly as vast as moderns like to believe.¹²