

# The minister, the martyr, and the maxim: Robert Lewis Dabney and Stonewall Jackson biography.

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## **The Minister, the Martyr, and the Maxim: Robert Lewis Dabney and Stonewall Jackson Biography**

Wallace Hettle

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# The Minister, the Martyr, and the Maxim:

## Robert Lewis Dabney and Stonewall Jackson Biography

### Wallace Hettle

[Figures]

When he died in 1898, Presbyterian theologian Robert Lewis Dabney seemed to have been left behind by a New South that increasingly embraced economic progress, theological liberalism, and sectional conciliation. His authorized biographer, Thomas C. Johnson, presented Dabney as "a man who was at war with much of his age" in describing his battles with "evolution . . . jacobinism . . . [and] mobocracy." The Rev. Benjamin Palmer declared that Dabney held to his belief that scripture sanctioned slavery "to the day of his death."<sup>1</sup> Some contemporaries were proud of the intellectual legacy of a man whom eminent Presbyterian thinker Charles Hodge once called the "greatest living teacher of theology." According to one eulogist, Dabney had created not only a "splendid literature," but would live through the large company of ministers he had trained in almost four decades teaching theology at Hampden-Sydney College.<sup>2</sup> To Palmer, Dabney's death marked the end of the Old South, as "those who stood by his side, fighting for the truth of God in his generation are standing at the edge of their own graves opening at their feet."<sup>3</sup> The image of Dabney as an arch-conservative warrior for the Lost Cause has been described by many historians, and was perhaps best captured by Gaines Foster, who has argued that Dabney retained an "almost feudal faith in a hierarchical society" long after the Civil War.<sup>4</sup> **[End Page 353]**

Dabney's prominence as a spokesman of the Lost Cause movement derived from two sources: his undisputed intellectual prowess and his place as an associate of Stonewall Jackson. The two men's wives were first cousins, and Dabney briefly served as Jackson's chief-of-staff in the Shenandoah Valley campaign and Seven Days Battles outside Richmond. After Jackson's death, the general's widow commissioned the theologian to write Jackson's authorized biography.<sup>5</sup> Written as the Confederacy collapsed, Dabney's *Life and Campaigns of Lt. General T. J. (Stonewall) Jackson* quickly took its place as a preeminent book on the subject after its publication in 1866. For a generation, Americans viewed it as the authoritative work on the general.

Dabney's work shaped the agendas of pioneering military historians, and continues to influence professional scholarship on the enigmatic Jackson. William Allan, a veteran of Jackson's Shenandoah Valley campaign and author of a thoroughly researched history of Jackson's operations there, which remains in print, described himself as "indebted . . . especially to the earliest and very valuable biography by his former chief of staff, Dr. Dabney."<sup>6</sup> Sarah N. Randolph, a Lost Cause activist and granddaughter of Thomas Jefferson, acknowledged in her widely read 1874 Jackson biography the "great assistance" she received from Dabney's book. In some instances, she followed it so closely that "but for the frank acknowledgement" she would be "almost . . . liable to the charge of plagiarism." When the general's widow published her 1895 *Memoirs of Stonewall Jackson*, at times she did little more than "paraphrase" Dabney's earlier book. British staff officer G. F. R. Henderson, whose classic 1898 book was the first Jackson biography written with access to the *Official Records* of the war, praised Dabney, who cooperated in the preparation of Henderson's book, for his "conspicuous ability." More than thirty years after the publication of Dabney's life of Jackson, Henderson noted that the book "is so complete and powerful that the need for a successor is not at once apparent."<sup>7</sup> In the twentieth century, renowned Confederate historian Douglass Southall Freeman criticized Dabney for taking a "moralizing" approach to his subject. Yet Freeman too offered **[End Page 354]** high praise for the "essential accuracy of the book," and described Dabney as "the first distinguished Confederate biographer." Subsequent historians have treated Dabney as a sometimes unreliable but still

Too often, however, historians have misunderstood Dabney. The conventional portrait of this theologian depicts him as an...

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1. Thomas C. Johnson, quoted by C.W. Dabney in *Robert Lewis Dabney—In Memoriam* (Knoxville, 1899), 14; J. H. Rice in *Robert Lewis Dabney—In Memoriam*, 34–35; Benjamin Palmer, *Southern Presbyterian*, Jan. 20, 1898.

2. *Central Presbyterian*, Jan. 6, 1896, clipping in Josiah Hatchkins Papers, Library of Congress (hereafter cited as LC).

3. Palmer, *Southern Presbyterian*, Jan. 20, 1898.

4. Charles Reagan Wilson, *Baptized in Blood: The Religion of the Lost Cause, 1863–1920* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1980), 82; Charles Reagan Wilson, "Robert Lewis Dabney: Religion and the Southern Holocaust," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 89 (Jan. 1981): 79–89; Gaines M. Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy: Defeat, The Lost Cause, and the Emergence of the New South, 1863 to 1921* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1988), 75; Jack P. Mackey Jr., "Proslavery Millennialism: Social Eschatology in Antebellum



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