

THE
LIFE AND LETTERS
OF
Robert Lewis Dabney.

BY
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*Fraternally Yours,
R. D. Dabney.*



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THE LIFE AND LETTERS

OF

Robert Lewis Dabney, D. D., LL. D.

CHAPTER I.

PARENTAGE AND BIRTH.

INTRODUCTION.—THE DABNEYS.—IMMEDIATE ANCESTRAL LINES.—HIS FATHER'S OCCUPATION, TRAITS, CHARACTER, STANDING IN SOCIAL, CIVIL AND ECCLESIASTICAL RELATIONS, AND HIS EARLY DEATH.—HIS MOTHER'S LINEAGE, CHARACTERISTICS AND INFLUENCE ON HER SON, ROBERT LEWIS.—BROTHERS AND SISTERS.—PRODUCT OF ANTE-BELLUM VIRGINIA CIVILIZATION.—BOYHOOD HOME.

UNDER the forms of a republican government, and in an age of advanced civilization, every man ought to be tested by his own personal merits, and with little reference to the character and the reputation of his ancestors. The readers of this biography are, accordingly, invited to test its subject by what he was and did, and not by the lines of which he sprang. Nevertheless, being mindful of the facts of heredity, and that the beginning of what he was and did was made far back of the time when his individual existence began, we must give a brief account of his parentage.

Without offending against a just theory of republican equality, Robert Lewis Dabney could cherish an honest pride in the character of his ancestry. That ancestry had not been marked by great riches, nor by preferment, which, because they are so often acquired by crooked and indirect means, are equivocal evidences of merit at best, but it had been marked by very much the same moral and religious traits that appeared in him. The Rev. John Blair Dabney, a second cousin to our subject, said to his sons, "Among your numerous connections you can count but few, if any, of the great ones of earth, but you may boast of many who were exemplary in all the relations of private life—honored and respected in their generations, beloved by their friends and kindred, useful to their fellow-men,

Moses Drury Hoge. In August, 1839, Mr. Hoge writes, expressing the hope that they may be college-mates again and class-mates. In September, 1839, he wrote again, urging various reasons for his friend Dabney's return, one, at least, of which is worthy of repeating. It is put by Mr. Hoge as follows:

"The other day, Mr. Maxwell" (who was made president in 1838) "was talking to me of the prospects of the College, and said that it was his intention to get two tutors as soon as possible; and asked me if I knew of a young man who would answer his purpose. I immediately gave him an account of you, and he requested me to sound you on the subject. He told me that if I would teach two or three years, he would send me to Europe, and give me an opportunity to fit myself for any chair I pleased. A part of his offers I declined, for I am not willing to make any engagement that would preclude the possibility of studying divinity. I may possibly teach in the College and carry on my studies in the Seminary at the same time. But of this hereafter. It is Mr. Maxwell's plan to train young men for professorships, by first making them tutors; and although a tutorship must be no temptation to you, if you intend to teach, you might not object to being a professor. I hope you will reflect on this seriously. I regret that you cannot come in the fall and have a conversation with Mr. Maxwell yourself."

The venerable widow of the Rev. Dr. John Holt Rice also urged and entreated her "young friend Mr. Dabney" to return to Hampden-Sidney. This noble woman was one of his most regular, and, we must believe, one of his most helpful correspondents in this period. He entertained a most respectful and profound regard for her character then, and continued to cherish her memory throughout his long and full life. Certainly she wrote affectionately, tenderly, and wisely to him of his Christian life. Here are some of her words, on the 13th of February, 1838:

"I trust you will make your religion serviceable to you in every thought and action. It is of little avail if our religion is not in continual practice, if it is not interwoven in our very system. Oh! how much Christians lose by not being more entirely Christian, and how much good they lose the privilege of doing, and how much reproach they bring on the cause of the blessed Redeemer, who gave his life a ransom for all who believe and trust and obey him! I wish you to take a higher stand than the common Christians. How little use is it to pretend to be a Christian at all, when the case is so doubtful to all and even to ourselves. I wish you to enjoy all the blessed and gracious

promises and truths of God's Word; to have that faith which will purify your heart and work by love; that will ever lead you to do good, and in every way be useful. Oh! it is worth all labor, self-denial and exertion to be found so engaged as at last to have it pronounced, 'Well done, good and faithful servant.' I trust you will make the Bible, and not other professors, your rule and guide. Shrink not from any duty, however difficult and painful; and diligently seek for duties."

Her letters to him abound in homilies similarly helpful. This venerated lady to whom he wrote, often two letters to her one, makes it her business to urge him to return to Hampden-Sidney. She began this as early as November, 1838. She says, in a letter of the 22nd of that month:

"Though I now have a good many letters pressing on my hands, yet I cannot delay yours, if anything I can say will aid in deciding so important a point as your next year's college course. I must say that Mr. Maxwell . . . seems to take hold of the poor old College with the right spirit; and that every son of Virginia, and especially Presbyterians, ought to hold up his hands, and aid him in every way in their power. This I would by no means wish you to do to the least injury of yourself or your dear young brother. Every man must, in a great measure, form himself, or he will not be a good scholar or anything else; and I should think recitations preferable to lectures for undergraduates. The College, as far as I can learn, is now going on admirably. Mr. Maxwell says his duties thus far are pleasures; and we are apt to attend well to what is a pleasure. He says he has to study hard, but he seems to enjoy it. He talks much of putting the place in thorough repair, and making it attractive by having fine fruits, trees, pleasure walks, and so forth, and of doing everything to improve and please, to benefit and render the students comfortable and happy. Professor Smith [this gentleman was soon to become the head of the Virginia Military Institute] is said to be a fine officer. He wishes to put the College under complete martial law, and make it a sort of West Point. Mr. Maxwell is very anxious to make a truly Christian college, and for this, I believe, ardently prays. Now, although the College has not been patronized by the State, it has been a patron of the State, and I do not think the old mother should be neglected for the pampered daughter, who has sucked all the literary resources, and yet has higher expenses. The cost there is considerably greater, and there are many more temptations to indulgence and extravagances. And as to friends, I do not expect you have one near there more interested in you than I am."

In a letter of January 15, 1839, she again speaks in praise of Mr. Maxwell's administration, and of the college generally;