James Petigru
BOYCE

American Reformed Biographies

D. G. Hart and Sean Michael Lucas
Series Editors

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James Petigru BOYCE

A Southern Baptist Statesman

Thomas J. Nettles

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To the late Ernest C. Reisinger,

through whose vision and generosity
a generation of Southern Baptist pastors
was introduced to the theology of
James Petigru Boyce

Contents

Series Preface

"All history is biography," Ralph Waldo Emerson once remarked. Emerson's aphorism still contains a good deal of truth. History is the memory and record of past human lives, thus making biography the most basic form of historical knowledge. To understand any event, period, or text from the past, some acquaintance with specific persons is crucial.

The popularity of biography among contemporary book buyers in America supports this insight. Recent biographies of John Adams and Ben Franklin have encouraged many—who fear for America's historical amnesia—to believe that a keen and formidable interest in history still exists among the nation's reading public. To be sure, the source of this interest could be the stature and influence of the subjects themselves—the founding fathers of the United States. Still, the accessibility of biography—its concrete subject matter, intimate scope, and obvious relevance—suggests that the reason for the recent success of these biographies is in the genre of writing itself.

American Reformed Biographies, coedited by D. G. Hart and Sean Michael Lucas, seeks to nurture this general interest in biography as a way of learning about and from the past. The titles in this series feature American Reformed leaders who were important representatives or interpreters of Reformed Christianity in the United States and who continue to be influential through writings and arguments still pertinent to the self-understanding of Presbyterian and Reformed theologians, pastors, and church members. The aim is to provide learned treatments of men and women that will be accessible to readers from a wide variety of backgrounds—biography that is both sufficiently scholarly to be of service to academics and those with proficiency in American church history and adequately accessible to engage the nonspecialist. Consequently, these books are more introductory than definitive, with the aim of giving an overview of a figure's thought and contribution, along with suggestions for further study.

The editors have sought authors who are sympathetic to Reformed Christianity and to their subjects, who regard biography not merely as a celebration of past accomplishments but also as a chance to ask difficult questions of both the past and the present in order to gain greater insight into Christian faith and practice. As such, American Reformed Biographies is designed to make available the best kind of historical writing—one that yields both knowledge and wisdom.

Acknowledgments

Bringing to culmination this project would have been impossible without the help of some people who are very good at what they do. I thank the editors, Darryl Hart and Sean Lucas, for including me in this publishing project. I thank Presbyterian and Reformed Publishers for willingness to include a Baptist theologian, J. P. Boyce, in the series.

Several people have helped me gain access to material. Foremost has been the staff of the archives at the J. P. Boyce Memorial Library at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Jason Fowler and Chris Dewease in particular have been immediately responsive to every request that I have had for archival material concerning Boyce or others with whom his life intertwined. One of the coeditors of this series, Sean Lucas, was archivist in this library for several years and, while there, helped put together a most valuable source for research on Boyce. Sean and Jason Fowler transcribed and printed most of the correspondence between Boyce and his intimate friend John A. Broadus from the years 1857–88. The reader will quickly learn that I have used that source in full and with increasing appreciation with every quote. The Southern Baptist Library and Archives in Nashville, Tennessee, where Bill Sumner is archivist also gave excellent help at one critical juncture of putting together some missing pieces of Boyce's financial responsibility. Also Carol Jones at the Charleston Library Society sent me a catalogue of

the books that were available to Boyce during his childhood as well as some other bits of information about the Boyces in Charleston. John Aloisi, my teaching assistant, provided editorial aid.

Greg Wills, colleague par excellence, worked on the 150th anniversary history of Southern Seminary at the same time I was laboring on Boyce. He provided encouragement, provocative questions, and hints about source material on some issues. R. Albert Mohler Jr. and Russell Moore, president and academic vice-president of the seminary that Boyce founded, have provided encouragement, scholarly example, and opportunity for academic labors through a generous sabbatical leave program.

The most courageous and selfless encourager I have had has been my soul mate, wife, and friend Margaret. She has urged me forward when I felt overwhelmed, read chapters and offered helpful advice, kept up with family and social items, and prayed earnestly. I would not have finished this without her.

Introduction

James Petigru Boyce fits well into Brooks Holifield's category of Gentlemen Theologians. In the list of Baptists that he included in this category we find Boyce along with two of the teachers that partnered with Boyce on the first faculty at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, John A. Broadus and Basil Manly Jr. William Williams, the fourth member of that first faculty, also could have fit the announced criteria of Holifield. In addition, Holifield lists the pastors under whom Boyce sat for his first eighteen years of life, Basil Manly Sr. and William T. Brantly Sr.[1]

Boyce certainly was a gentleman. Reared in a gentleman's home, he found the developing culture of the cities of the South much to his liking. Far from being in the middle class of most of the men Holifield discussed, Boyce fit into the category of the wealthy, having real estate in 1860 worth over $120,000 and a personal estate worth over $330,000. Raised as a South Carolinian in Little London, Charleston, he gladly embraced the taste for exquisite culture fostered carefully by his predecessors. His daughters bore testimony to his love of fashion, beautiful textiles, elegant book bindings, art, music, punctuality, and his delight in trees, glaciers, flowers, quaint houses, social grace, and impeccable manners. They were quite amused and amazed that "carpets, curtains, table linen, furniture, china and silver were purchased by him with no advice or assistance on the part of his family." These tasks gave him the "greatest pleasure."

In considering how to please others, Boyce "always showed a remarkable faculty in the choice of beautiful and unique presents." Giving culture to his children was a personal project, joining them in lessons in French and German, buying them "quantities of beautiful and expensive books and magazines to enhance the pleasure of the studies and give [them] every opportunity possible to the acquisition of the language." He built a large library prior to the Civil War but had to diminish his indulgence in book buying under the more straitened conditions after the war. "I have heard him say," one of his daughters related, "that it caused him positive pain to see beautifully bound or illustrated books and not possess them." A trip to California and a horse ride into Yosemite Valley produced exactly the effect on his daughters and wife that Boyce reveled in: "It seemed to us impossible how that anything could be more beautiful—the snowy cliffs bathed in the last gleams of the sun, the atmosphere of shimmering blue, the magnificent trees, the cascades, the ever-changing vistas all combined to make a scene that brought to our minds the description of the mountains from which Bunyan's Pilgrim was said to look on the beautiful land of Beulah."

Though he had no personal talent for painting or drawing, he developed "excellent judgment, and great critical ability fully appreciating good drawing" along with "an excellent eye for color. He cultivated his taste in this direction by constant visits to art exhibitions." Boyce ordered flowers for the garden in Greenville and taught the Latin names to his eldest daughter. She recalled, "These flowers were called by their botanical terms and very learned it sounded to my childish ears and much it astonished me to hear the tremendous Latin names with which even the tiniest flowers were named. I learned many of them and it was a source of amusement to Father and Mother to hear me use them."

Music was a part of every well-rounded gentleman's life, and Boyce made it a point to be learned on the subject. When on trips to New York, Boyce attended symphony concerts and oratorios, and made sure to hear every great singer. He went from Greenville to Charleston to hear Carlotta Patti and told his daughters many times "of the exquisite pleasure he had in hearing Jenny Lind sing 'I Know That My Redeemer Liveth' at Covent Garden." His daughters also were sure that if any young man or young lady wanted to know how to conduct oneself in public, one should take their father's lessons in etiquette.[2]

Boyce shared the intellectual outlook of his Gentlemen Theologian peers. He affirmed, contrary to Thomas Paine and Thomas Jefferson, the authenticity of Scripture, its defensibility as revelation using rational arguments, the competence of the mind in engaging evidence, and the integrity of subject/object relationships as defined in Thomas Reid's commonsense philosophy. Reid's understanding of corporate experience and rational discourse built on such experience was important in Boyce's argument for the Bible as a deposit of revelation. Boyce joined the conservatives, and resisted the liberals, in affirming that each individual doctrine of Scripture, such as the Trinity, does not have to pass muster before the sentinel of reason as an autonomous authority, once the authority that affirms the doctrine, that is, the Bible, has been authenticated as revelation.

Boyce believed in the unity of truth since the creator also was the upholder and redeemer. He accepted the traditional arguments for the existence of God as compelling, eschewing David Hume's skepticism. Unlike some of his peers he found the ontological argument the most intrinsically powerful but admitted that the a posteriori argument seemed more plausible to most people. He believed in the convincing power of Christian evidences and studied *Elements of Moral Science* under the quintessential ethicist in mid–nineteenth-century America, Francis Wayland. Boyce, however, went beyond the normal categories of moral science in his discussion of ethics and saw the Christian standard as embodied in the voluntary character of God manifest in the incarnation and sacrifice of Christ.

Boyce also shared the Southern political commitment to the sovereignty of the states and the potential greatness of the South through the wise execution of the institution of slavery. Boyce, nevertheless, believed that the Union of the states had great advantages for all, and he was pleased that his father had opposed nullification in 1832 when Boyce was five, and Boyce himself opposed secession in 1860.

He wanted to see the South make a proposal of conditions for operation together on the basis of perfect equality, a proposal surely to be rejected by the North, but putting the North entirely in the wrong through their rejection of these Southern overtures for compromise. Then the North, and not the South, would be responsible for separation. His views on nullification and secession, however, did not diminish his strong sense of states' rights or his commitment to the Confederacy once secession had occurred. He worked for the financial stability of the Confederate government in the South Carolina legislature and served as a chaplain in the Confederate Army and as aide-de-camp to Governor Magrath, holding the rank of lieutenant colonel. Subsequent to the war he explained the situation to a young nephew:

> While you are in Virginia you will hear a great deal about the war, and see many men who have been in battle. Suppose you keep a little book, and whenever you hear any matter of interest write it down in your book, being particular to keep the dates and names of persons perfectly correct, and to state the events as fully as you can recollect them. Always be accurate, only putting down what you know was said, and also the name of the narrator. . . . Whatever else may be the verdict of history,—let its writers be so befogged as to believe that the North fought to free the slaves, and not for its own selfish interests of gain, and that the South fought to defend slavery, and not the constitutional rights of the States,—one thing is sure, that history must accord to the Confederate army in Virginia, under Generals Lee, Jackson, and others, the exhibition of fortitude, bravery, chivalric courtesy, and knightly courage never surpassed in any nation or period of time. Try then to hear of these things, and remember.[3]

Boyce knew that the South must change after the war, and he worked to contribute positively to that change and to restore relations with Baptist brethren in the North, but he did not want it forgotten that the South had been noble and its leadership great.

Boyce accepted with full confidence the task described by Jon Butler as the "African Spiritual Holocaust," the conversion of the slaves to Christianity. Butler argues that "slavery's destruction of

African religious systems in America constituted not only wholesale cultural robbery but cultural robbery of a quite vicious sort." Butler makes his case through studying the systematic breakdown of African native religion among the colonial slaves, a "holocaust that destroyed collective African religious practice in colonial America," to be replaced by Christianization in antebellum, postrevolutionary America. According to Butler, the "systems" that gave coherence, meaning, beauty, security, and hope to Africans were destroyed but individual practices survived. Religious practices according to system were reorganized to be consistent with the dominant religious persuasion of their captors and a crippling system of affectionate regard known as "paternalism." The original culturally appropriate and helpful religious systems of native Africans "collapsed in the shattering cultural destructiveness of British slaveholding."[4] Butler's analysis of this process reveals much about the systematic deconstruction of the societal humanity of Africans who had come from a wide variety of backgrounds and the complicity of Christian ministers in this process. His argument also reveals his tenaciously held commitment to the cultural origins of all religion, including Christianity.

Boyce inherited a mature system of paternalism and embraced its definitions of the relation between slave and master fully. Boyce, in addition, testified to a transcendent concern for his slaves and the entire population of African slaves. Along with others in his social and religious position, he believed that God had committed a special stewardship to Christians, especially Baptists, of the South in preaching and teaching the gospel to the slaves entrusted to their care. While it is difficult to grasp how a conscientious Christian could be convictionally sympathetic to the arguments for slavery, one must concede that after the perspective of one hundred fifty years, the resultant social changes induced by the Civil War, and several cultural revolutions, including a major conflict in the civil rights movement, the context of our reception to arguments is quite different from Boyce's. He, like his peers, found the exegetical argument sound, and that trumped every other concern.

The peculiar obligations resting on Southern Christians were taken too lightly, Boyce believed, and part of the divine retribution for not evangelizing with sufficient love and zeal was the removal of slavery. However slavery may have been defined culturally, politically, and economically, Boyce knew that the religious dimension had infinitely greater importance than any of those transient and temporal matters. Hopefully, he would have changed his mind about slavery as an honorable arrangement for melding a "degraded" race into a society dominated by the economic concerns of the Americanized Anglo-Europeans of the South. In time he would have conceded that the slave system was insensitive cultural brutality and racial superiority a myth. He would have approved the justness in the observation that some religions in particular and much about religion in general, even Christianity, were socially constructed. Boyce would see that as intrinsic to humanity's rebellion against God. But that the message of Christ's incarnation and atoning work and the operations of the Holy Spirit to bring about repentance from sin and faith in Jesus Christ—his commitment to the doctrines of grace and justification by faith—were only the results of social forces he did not and would never embrace. These, Boyce remained convinced, are revealed from the mind and purpose of God by the Holy Spirit and will never change from one generation to another nor from one culture to another.

Central to everything in his life was his commitment to the gospel of Jesus Christ. His particular gift in service of the gospel was the teaching of theology. This was present in his mind from the earliest days of his remembrance when he heard from the family pew the theologically driven pastoral messages of Basil Manly Sr. and then William T. Brantly Sr. His study at Brown under Francis Wayland reinforced this, and his conversion under the preaching of Richard Fuller showed him the transforming power of coherent doctrine fervently proclaimed and applied. His experience as an editor of a denominational newspaper steeled his spirit for a life of theological controversy, and his education at Princeton provided an elongated demonstration of the clarity and transsectarian applicability of the great doctrinal truths of Reformed Christianity. His preaching experience at Columbia, South Carolina, followed by his teaching theology at Furman gave him an invincible conviction affirming the usefulness of theology, Calvinistic theology, in the churches.

However much Boyce's background might have predisposed him to elitism, his theological conviction and his zeal for the strength and purity of Baptist churches drove him to an unrelenting advocacy of theological education for Baptist preachers from every level of social standing, economic condition, and educational preparation, that is, among white Southerners. The recurring chorus of every public message, the driving theme of every promotional speech, the intensified focus of every explanation of the seminary's goal had the theological curriculum, with systematic theology as the centerpiece, as its theme. Every preacher should get theological education in some way. Such study helps clarify and strengthen the necessary activity of biblical exegesis, it gives power and coherence to preaching, Boyce argued, and it keeps God-in-Christ at the center of life and ministry. Find an older and capable preacher to study with, get a few good books and master them, or go to seminary—but do it somehow, and the best way is the seminary.

Boyce lived and breathed theological education. For the preacher it greatly transcended classical education in importance. If one must choose between them, choose theology. He used his influence to begin the school, he sought to stabilize Confederate currency to salvage the endowment of the school, he used his personal finances as collateral to support the school, he ruined his health in moving the school to a more secure environment, and he drove himself to death in assuring both the financial and theological stability of the school. When he died, the last audible utterance from his lips concerned the seminary and his friends, the professors. As he lay dying in Pau, France,

> he was out of his head a great deal and in his wanderings his talk was mainly always of the Seminary. We would constantly catch the names of the different professors. The day before he died he was conscious for several hours but could not talk as his tongue was much swollen. He recognized us and pressed our hands and returned our kisses but did not attempt to talk. The English clergyman whom we called on to visit him, saw him for a few moments that morning and

> prayed and talked with him. Father said a good deal to him but it was impossible to understand what he was saying. He soon became unconscious remaining so until the end.[5]

Boyce distinguished between the permanent and the transient. He treasured much that was transient but was willing to accept, and even to effect, change when he saw it to be necessary. The permanent, however, he would never surrender. To those projects designed to promote the eternal, to prepare a gospel ministry, to elevate divine truth, to these he gave his time, his energy, his money, and finally his life.