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LIVES OF VIRGINIA BAPTIST MINISTERS.

By James B. Taylor, Pastor Second Baptist Church, Richmond.
1837. pp. 444. small 8vo.

There is one thing in this book, that we like particularly: it is, that it divides among eighty persons, a volume such as we too often see devoted to the biography of a single man, no whiter more worthy of commemoration than seventy-nine of these eighty. It is a praiseworthy triumph over the epidemic cacoethes of book-making: and we hereby tender our acknowledgments to the amiable and pious author, for not having made each of these his deceased brethren, the subject of a separate tome, as large as this which he has constructed to their united memories. May his example be followed by many hereafter, when tempted to palm upon the public their five hundreds of pages, about the single lives of good people, who while they lived were never heard of a day's journey from home, and whose memories are as barren as those of Pope's Parish Clerk, or Johnson's Broomstick.

Several of the men spoken of in these 'short and simple annals,' were known to us, either personally, or by reputation: and we grew nearly to man's estate under the ministry (though not in the church) of one among them. This circumstance, and our liking, fostered by early, and frequent, and kindly intercourse, for many of their persuasion, and for some parts of their worship,—make the present volume rather interesting to us. Some of the biographies—those of Shubael Stearns, Robert B. Semple, Abner W. Clopton, Samuel Harris, and Lott Cary, for instance—even independently of such associations, might interest almost any thinking and benevolent mind.

To convey an idea of the matter and manner of the book, we present an abridgment of the first life it contains, with some extracts. There are passages, which fastidious readers may deem of too nasal a tone; and some occurrences are described, in which other readers will perhaps discern a strong affinity to the phenomena of animal magnetism.

SHUBAEL STEARNS, whose name (his biographer informs us) "will be had in everlasting remembrance," —and certainly, it is a remarkable name—was born in Boston, in 1706. His father too was named Shubael; his mother's maiden name was Larriford. Of his early life, little or nothing is known. About 1740, an extensive revival of religion occurred in New England, through the agency of Whitefield and others, who, with their followers, were called New Lights, and 'Separates.' These Mr. Stearns joined, 1745. Soon
after, becoming "impressed with the obligation to preach the Gospel," he entered upon the work. "He continued with the Pedobaptists until 1751, when, examining the word of God, he became convinced, that in failing to submit to the ordinance of immersion, he had neglected a most important command of the Redeemer. The futility of infant Baptism was also discovered, and he determined to take up his cross, be baptized, and unite himself with the Baptists. He was immersed by Elder Wait Palmer, at Tolland, Connecticut." Mr. S. labored in New England for two or three years; but "soon became restless in contemplating other portions of our country, which were destitute of the preached word. He pant ed to carry the news of redeeming mercy, where they had been as yet but partially proclaimed. He labored under a most solemn impression that it was his duty to travel more extensively. Accordingly, he left his native state, and pursued his course in a southwesterly direction, scarce knowing whither he went. That he was under Divine guidance, was proved by subsequent events." At length he reached Virginia, and dwelt preaching, awhile, in Berkeley and Hampshire counties, where he was eminently useful.

Next, he settled permanently in Guilford county, North Carolina—attracted by 'the great spiritual desolation which prevailed' there. His labors appear to have prospered. 'Such was the anxiety to hear the Gospel preached, that people would frequently travel a day's journey to attend a religious meeting.' Mr. Stearns and his party introduced doctrines quite new in that region—the doctrines of 'being born again'—conviction—and conversion.

"But their manner of preaching was, if possible, much more novel than their doctrines. The Separates, in New England, had acquired a very warm and pathetic address, accompanied by strong gesture, and a singular tone of voice. Being often deeply affected themselves when preaching, correspondent affections were felt by their pious hearers, which were frequently expressed by tears, trembling, sermons, and exclamations of grief and joy. All these, they brought with them into their new habitations, at which, the people were greatly astonished, having never seen such things on this side before. Many mocked, but the power of God attending them, many also trembled. In process of time, some of the Inhabitants became converted, and bowed in obedience to the Redeemer's sceptre. Those uniting their labors with the others, a powerful and extensive work commenced, and Sandy Creek Church soon swelled from 10 to 600 members." Mr. Stearns died in November, 1771; after having 'traveled extensively in North Carolina and Virginia, and been instrumental in doing much good.'

The following account of his personal gifts, explains not unsatisfactorily, the efficacy of his preaching: and the two cases of Tidence Lane and Elhanathan Davis, certainly have a striking family likeness to those reported by Col. Stone, and Mr. Charles Poyer:

"Mr. Stearns was a man of small stature, but of good natural parts, and sound judgment. Of learning, he had but a little share, yet was pretty well acquainted with books. His voice was musical, and strong, which he managed in such a manner, as one while to make soft impressions on the heart, and each tears from the eyes in a mechanical way; and anon, to shake the very nerves; and throw the animal system into tumults and perturbations. All the Separates Baptists copied after him in tone of voice, and actions of body; and some few exceeded him. His character was indisputably good, both as a man, a Christian, and a preacher. In his eyes was something very penetrating; there seemed to be a meaning in every glance. Many stories have been told respecting the enchantments of his eyes and voice; but the two following examples we give with the more confidence, because the subjects of them, viz: Tidence Lane and Elhanathan Davis, were men of sense and reputation, and afterwards became distinguished ministers of the Baptist Society. When the fame of Mr. Stearns's preaching (said Mr. Lane) I had reached the Yadkin, where I lived, I felt a curiosity to go and hear him. Upon my arrival, I saw a venerable old man sitting under a peach tree with a book in his hand, and the people gathering about him. He fixed his eyes upon me immediately, which made me feel in such a manner as I never had felt before. I turned to quit the place, but could not proceed far. I walked about, sometimes catching his eyes as I walked. My uneasiness increased, and became intolerable. I went up to him, thinking that a salutation and shaking hands would relieve me; but it happened otherwise. I began to think that he had an evil eye, and ought to be shunned; but shunning him, I could no more effect, than a bird can chase a rattlesnake, when it fixes its eye upon it. When he began to preach, my perturbations increased, so that nature could no longer support me, and sunk to the ground." Mr. Lane afterwards became a very useful Baptist minister, and was one of the first of the denomination who removed to Tennessee, where he administered, until his death, with reputation and success.

Elhanathan Davis had heard that one John Btoward was to be baptized such a day, by Mr. Stearns. Now this Stoward being a very large man, and Stearns of small stature, he concluded there would be some diversion, if not drowning; therefore, he gathered about eight or ten of his companions in wickedness, and went to the spot. Mr. Stearns came, and began to preach. Elhanathan went to hear him, while his companions stood at a distance. He was no sooner among the crowd, than he perceived some of the people tremble, as if in a fit of the ague; he felt and examined them, in order to find if it were not a dissimulation; meanwhile, one man leaned on his shoulder, weeping bitterly; Elhanathan, perceiving he had wet his new white coat, pushed him off, and ran to his companions, who were sitting on a log at a distance. When he came, one said, 'Well, Elhanathan, what do you think now of these people? affecting them by a profound and reproachful epithet. He replied, 'There is a trembling and crying spirit among them, but whether it be the spirit of God or the devil, I don't know; if it be the devil, the devil go with them; for I will never venture myself among them.' He stood awhile in that resolution; but the enchantment of Stearns's voice drew him to the crowd once more. He had not been there before the trembling seized him also; he attempted to withdraw, but his strength failing, and his understanding being confounded, he, with many others, sunk to the ground. When he came to himself, he found nothing in him but dread and anxiety, bordering on hysteric. He continued in this situation some days, and then found relief by faith in Christ. Immediately he began to preach conversion work, as he was, and scanty as his knowledge must have been.'

Many persons are little aware of the extent to which religious persecution once existed in Virginia, and others of the Southern states. About the middle of the last century, there were laws requiring all persons to attend worship every Sunday at the established church, on pain of fine and imprisonment; and making it penal to attend any Dissenters' place of worship, unless it were one licensed by the Governor and council, in a manner prescribed. The Baptists appear to have been the especial victims of this tyranny. They were not only harassed by oppressive enforcements of those unjust laws; but were subjected, moreover, to unnumbered lawless interruptions, and violent personal outrages from brutal men, while preaching or worshipping after the dictates of conscience. To be pelled with stones, dragged from the pulpit, beaten with clubs, and thrown into prisons,—were the ordinary and expected consequences of a Baptist Minister's preaching with the zeal which marked his sect. The constancy those men displayed, in braving insult, pain, and death, for what
they deemed the truth, entitles them to all the esteem
which martyrs everywhere have earned: and we doubt
not, that the wrongs they endured, enlisted them with
deep enthusiasm and more perfect unanimity under
the banner of religious as well as political freedom;
and contributed largely to its final triumph. — By
the way, contemplating these persecutions, ought we not
to check the proneness common in the southern states,
to taunt New England with bigotry and persecution?
Ought it not somewhat to lessen our abhorrence of the
mote in our brother’s eye,—to find that we have at
least as thumping a one in our own?
A few more extracts, displaying samples of the
persecutions we allude to, will close this article. The first
we shall cite, occurred in Georgia; and is told in the
life of Daniel Marshall. Being on a visit to that
state as an itinerant preacher,

“While in prayer, he was seized, in the presence of his au-
dience, for preaching in the parish of St. Paul; and made to
give security for his appearance in Augusta, on the following
Monday, to answer this charge. Accordingly, he stood a trial, and
after his meekness and patience were sufficiently exercised, he
was ordered to come no more, as a preacher, into Georgia.”

Dalton Lane, another of the Baptist preachers, be-
sides being threatened by the magistracy and others,
was once purged by his own father, with a deadly wea-

Samuel Harriss held a prominent station in society—
was sheriff, justice of the peace for the county,
and colonel in the militia,—and therefore might have
expected toleration in whatever religious course he
chose to pursue. Yet he, becoming a Baptist and a
preacher, was more than once dealt with by persecu-
tors. In Culpeper county,

“He was once arrested and carried into court as a disturber
of the peace. In court, a Captain Williams vehemently accused
him as a vagabond, a heretic, and a mover of sedition over-
ery. His escape out of the county by twelve o’clock the next day, on
his application to the court, that he should not preach in the county
again, for the space of twelve months; or be committed to prison. The
colonel told them that they lived two hundred miles from there; and
that it was not likely he should disturb them again, in the course of one
year. Upon this he was dismissed. From Culpeper he went to
Fairfax, and preached at Carter’s Run.

On his return he called at Capt. Thomas Clinkham’s, in
the County of Culpeper, where there was a meeting. While cer-
tain young ministers were preaching, the word of God began to
burn in Col. Harriss’s heart. When they finished, he arose and
addressed the congregation: “I partly promised the devil, a
few days past, at the course—one, that I would not preach in this
county again in the term of a year. But the devil is a pernici-
ous wretch, and covenants with him are not to be kept; and
therefore I will preach.” He preached a lively, animating ser-
mon. The court disturbed him no more.

On another occasion, in Orange County, he was pulled down as
he was preaching, and dragged about by the hair of the head, and
sometimes by the leg. His friends rescued him. On an-
other time, he was knocked down by a rule fellow, while he was
preaching. But he was not dismayed by these, or any other
difficulties.”

John Walker, of Spotsylvania, was bred to the
law; but turned out a thorough profligate—gaming,
drinking, and swearing, so that he acquired the sobri-
quot of Swearing Jack Walker, to distinguish him from
others of the same name. It was a common remark,
that ‘there could be no deviltry among the people, un-
less Swearing Jack was at the head of it.’ No wonder,
therefore, that he was also sometimes called the Devil’s

Adjutant, to muster his troops; and that he was once
arrested under three warrants at the same time, on
account of one person. To complete his ‘deviltry,’ he
was a furious persecutor of the Baptists. Yet he, him-
self, became converted, by the preaching of Lewis
Craig, whom he had persecuted; was baptized; and
soon after began to preach. His zeal now, was pro-
portioned to his former profligacy: and he preached
with so much energy, as to be considered a fanatic,
whom it was necessary to curb. The persecutions he
suffered in several counties, were of the most painful
character.” The following letter, written during an
imprisonment of forty-six days in Middlesex jail, sets
forth the facts attending one of these persecutions,
much more vividly than any description at second hand could do:

“Urbania Prison, Middlesex County, Aug. 12, 1771.

Dear Brother in the Lord,—At a meeting which was held at
the house of Mr. Craig, in this County, last Saturday, whilst brother
William Webber was addressing the congregation, from James
18, there came running towards him, in a most furious rage,
Captain James Montague, a magistrate of the county, followed
by the parish of the parish, and several others, who seemed
greatly enraged. The magistrate, and another, took hold
of brother Webber, and dragged him from the stage, delivered
him, with brethren Walchle, Robert Webb, Thomas
Greenwood, and myself, into custody, and commanded
that we should be brought before him for trial. Brother Wad-
ford was severely scourged, and brother Henry Street received
one lash, from one of the persecutors, who was prevented from
proceeding to farther violence by his companions; so that, short, I
may inform you that we were carried before the above mentioned
magistrate, who, with the parish, and some others, gave us
one by one, into a room, and examined our pockets and wallets
for fire-arms, &c charging us with carrying on a mutiny against
the authority of the land. Finding none, we were asked if we had
license to preach in this county; and, learning we had not,
it was required of us to give bond and security not to preach any
more in the county, which we modestly refused to do, where-
after, upon dismissing brother Wafford, with a charge to make
his escape out of the county by twelve o’clock the next day, on
pain of imprisonment; and dismissing brother Falkner, the rest
of us were delivered to the sheriff, and sent to close jail, with a
charge not to allow us to walk in the air until court day. Bless.
God, the sheriff and jailer have treated us as much
kindly as could have been expected from strangers. May the
Lord reward them for it. Yesterday we had a large number of
people to hear us preach; and, among others, many of the great
ones of the land, who behaved well, while one of us discoursed
on the new birth. We find the Lord gracious and kind to us be-
ond expression, in our afflictions. We cannot tell how long we
shall be kept in bonds; we therefore beseech, dear brother, that
you and the church supplicate night and day for us, our benefac-
tors, and our persecutors.

“I have also to inform you that six of our brethren are con-
fin’d in Caroline jail, viz: Brethren Lewis Craig, John Burris,
John Young, Edward Hendlon, James Goodrick and Bartho-
lomon Cheming. The most dreadful threats are raised in
the neighboring counties against the Lord’s faithful and humble

JOHN WALLER.”

Several others of the men whose histories are told by
Mr. Taylor, suffered similar violence; too many to be
here recited. We close the volume, with a commenda-
tion of its curious facts, and no less curious phraseology,
to the reader who seeks half a day’s amusement: but
with a deep and earnest pressing home of the stern
and instructive lessons it conveys, to him who doubts
the danger of entrusting power to any sect or class,—
whether holy or profane. Other lessons, too, it con-
veys: but they all shrink to trifles, beside that one.