

ROBERT E. LEE THE CHRISTIAN

By William J. Johnstone

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Foreword

In the southern Indiana home of my favorite uncle, whose honored name I bear, there hung a picture of the radiant face from which shone the magnanimous soul of Robert E. Lee. As a lad I stood before it often and long, lured, not by the military uniform with brass buttons, but by the look of gentleness and kindness. There was formed between us an enduring spiritual friendship. An indelible picture was stamped upon my mind, which is undimmed to this day.

Eighteen years ago, while gathering material in the Library of Congress for my book on *George Washington the Christian*, I became interested in the religious life of Robert E. Lee. Mrs. Johnstone and I went to Richmond and Lexington, Virginia, to visit the places intimately associated with him. It was then that I resolved that some day I would write a book on *Robert E. Lee the Christian*.

“Rhetoric should not usurp the place of history. Truth, simply told, is better than oratory.”*

There is a tendency to exalt unduly the virtues of great men, and to magnify the religious character of one professing to be a Christian. Some may doubt the genuineness of a man’s piety, fearing that his profession of religion was merely nominal. Incidents, letters, “orders” of the army, etc., will show beyond a doubt that, with General Lee, vital godliness was a reality.

“No picture of Robert E. Lee could be complete that did not portray the religious side of his character. It was the basis upon which all else rested. It was the source of his strength,

*Johnstone includes many uncited quotes in this portrait of Lee. The assumed source is his “Notebook” as listed in the “Sources of Information” section at the end of this book.

the law of his life, the guide for his every act, and the support upon which he leaned in every trial.”

His confidential letters to members of his family reflect his Christian faith.

“Naturally, without effort, without obtrusiveness or ostentation, his never-failing trust in God and submission to His will shines out in his intimate letters to the members of his family. Neither victory nor defeat deflects his soul from its constant look upward to the Almighty Disposer of events.”

It has been noted “how little of war and how much of Christian feeling and domestic affection” his home letters contain.¹

“His correspondence reveals him as a man who lived in the presence of God; who looked to God continually for guidance and strength; whose mind and heart were saturated with faith and trust in God.

“Those who knew General Lee in private could not fail to remark that religion was with him something more than an empty name; that it was a power lodged in the heart and controlling his whole nature.”²

In his public papers, written during the war, he never failed, whenever opportunity offered, to call the attention of the people to the great Disposer of all human events and to inspire them with gratitude or submission, as the circumstances might suggest. Even in a brief telegraphic dispatch, he rarely fails to make mention of the Sovereign Ruler of all.

When General Lee won a victory, he gave the glory to a higher Power. A firm believer in an overruling Providence, his dispatches, reports, and orders gratefully recognized “the Lord of Hosts” as the “Giver of victory,” and breathed a spirit of trust in and humble dependence upon Him. Throughout the war almost every military dispatch or private letter written

by him contained some allusion to his trust and confidence in God.

Pages could be filled with quotations from General Lee's orders and dispatches, expressing profound "gratitude to Almighty God"; his "thanks to God"; his "gratitude to Him who hath given us the victory"; his sense of "the blessing of Almighty God"; his grateful thanks to the only "Giver of victory"; and his "ascribing unto the Lord of Hosts the glory due His name."

"No one can familiarize himself with Lee's life without seeing that he was a man consecrated to the work of his Divine Master, and amid all conditions possessed a mind stayed on Him."

"He constantly felt, and in every proper way acknowledged, his utter dependence upon God's overruling providence."

"A prisoner of war on parole"—his application for "amnesty" never granted; his beautiful Arlington home, bequeathed to his wife by the adopted son of George Washington, confiscated by the Federal government; the Washington family relics taken from Arlington, retained by the government; disfranchised—the commonest privileges of citizenship, to vote or hold office, accorded the most ignorant of freed slaves, "who could neither write nor understand its laws, and to aliens who could not speak its language," but denied to General Lee—he bowed beneath the weight of the cross and labored earnestly to accomplish what he wrote in a letter:

I think it wisest not to keep open the sores of war but to follow the example of those nations who endeavored to obliterate the marks of civil strife and to commit to oblivion the feelings it entangled.

Colonel Charles Cornwallis Chesney, a distinguished British military critic, said of Lee:

“The day will come when the evil passions of the great civil strife will sleep in oblivion, and North and South do justice to each other’s motives and forget each other’s wrongs. Then history will speak with clear voice of the deeds done on either side, and the citizens of the whole union do justice to the memories of the dead.

“In strategy mighty, in battle terrible, in adversity as in prosperity a hero indeed, with the simple devotion to duty and the rare purity of a Christian knight, he joined all the kingly qualities of a leader of men.”³

In this book, the chronological order has been followed, that we may see how constantly and continuously he was guided and sustained, throughout his whole life, by Divine Grace and Wisdom. Lee’s age and the date of the events are given at the beginning of each section. Quotations from Lee, except very short ones, are in smaller type, without quotation marks.

After years of study of the life and character of Robert Edward Lee, I fail to find, in his whole career, from the cradle to the grave, a flaw in his relations to his family, his friends, his associates, or his enemies; in his conduct at home, in school, in the field, in the college, or in the church; and in his moral, social, and religious character.

The Rev. R. A. Holland, in a memorial address at the Kentucky Military Institute shortly after General Lee’s death, exclaims:

“Behold in him a character which, if not perfect, conceals its faults with the effulgence of its virtues, even as the sun conceals the spots on its dazzling disk.”

Since the days when “Enoch walked with God”; since the days when “Abraham was called the Friend of God”; since the days when the Son of Man taught that “Whosoever will

save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it”; since the days when the evangelist John was known as “that disciple whom Jesus loved”; since the days when the apostle Paul declared that he “was not disobedient unto the heavenly vision,” no great historic personage blazes with a greater luster of purity, nobility, and lofty Christian manhood throughout his whole life than Robert E. Lee.

William J. Johnstone,

Merriam Park,
Saint Paul, Minnesota

Endnotes:

- 1 Long, p. 34.
- 2 McKim, p. 205.
- 3 Chesney—in Jones (2), p. 72.

Christian Lineage

[Birth, 1807 – Age 10, 1817]

THE LEES

Such a character as Robert E. Lee does not just happen—it is the product of generations of Christian ancestry. It is not an individual accomplishment—it is a family development.

Of pure Norman blood, the long and illustrious line of the Lees may be traced back to Launcelot Lee, who accompanied William the Conqueror and his 60,000 knights—the flower and chivalry of Normandy—upon his conquest of the English throne, and was rewarded for his services by an estate in Essex, A.D. 1066. For 700 years the name of Lee occurs continually in English history, and, we are told, “always in honorable mention.”¹

One of his paternal ancestors, Lionel Lee, raised a company of gentlemen and marched with Richard Coeur de Lion on his third crusade to the Holy Land in 1192, and “for his gallantry at Acre, and in other battles with the infidel, was, on his return home, made the first Earl of Litchfield, and presented by the king with the estate of Ditchley; subsequently held, as all the readers of Walter Scott must remember, by that indomitable old knight, Sir Henry Lee, who figures so conspicuously in *Woodstock*.”²

Two other Lees “so distinguished themselves as to have their banners suspended in Saint George’s Chapel, Windsor, with the Lee coat-of-arms emblazoned thereon.”³

The founder of the family in America was Richard Lee, great-great-grandfather of Robert E. Lee, who came from England to Virginia. His will shows that he was a man of

high character, and of notable piety for an age of free living and worldly tendencies. In that document he bequeaths his soul “to that good and gracious God that gave it to me, and to my blessed Redeemer, Jesus Christ, assuredly trusting, in and by His meritorious death and Passion, to receive salvation.”⁴

THE CARTERS

Lee’s mother was Anne Hill Carter. “A daughter of the family of Carter, long distinguished in the Virginia colony for the munificent application of large wealth to purposes of charity, learning, and religion.”⁵

His great-great-grandfather was Robert Carter. A large stone, which in former times stood at the east end of Christ Church in Lancaster County, Virginia, bore record that he was:

“An honorable man, who by noble endowments and pure morals, gave luster to his gentle birth.... Possessed of ample wealth, blamelessly acquired, he built and endowed at his own expense this sacred edifice—a signal monument of his piety toward God. He furnished it richly.”⁶

Among the papers of Lee’s mother, the wife of Major-General Henry Lee, and the daughter of Charles Carter, was found the following obituary testimonial:

“In fulfilling the duties of his station, he proved himself to be an Israelite indeed, in whom there was no guile.”⁷

HIS FATHER

Lee’s father was the celebrated cavalry leader of the War for American Independence, Major-General Henry Lee, popularly known as “Light Horse Harry,” the personal and political friend of Washington, who summed up his career, “First in war, first in peace, first in the hearts of his countrymen.”

MOVE TO ALEXANDRIA

Robert Edward was born on Monday, January 19, 1807, at Stratford, on the Potomac, Westmoreland County, Virginia, the same county in which George Washington was born seventy-five years before. When he was four years old [1811], the family moved to Alexandria, Virginia, “the better to educate the children.” When he was six years old [1813], his father went to the West Indies, hoping to restore his health after an injury, remained there five years, and died on Monday, March 15, 1818, on the return journey, at the home of General Nathanael Greene, on Cumberland Island, Georgia, which had been presented to him by the state of Georgia for services rendered her during the War for American Independence. General Henry Lee was buried there.

“WHAT IS HAPPINESS?”

Writing from Nassau, West Indies, Sunday, February 9, 1817, to Robert’s oldest brother, Charles Carter Lee, a student at Harvard University, the father said:

“My dear Carter, what is happiness? . . . Peace of mind based on piety to Almighty God, unconscious innocence of conduct, with good will to man; health of body, health of mind, with prosperity in our vocation; a sweet, affectionate wife; . . . children devoted to truth, honor, right, and duty, with love and respect to their parents; and faithful and warmhearted friends, in a country politically and religiously free—this is my definition.”⁸

ROBERT ALWAYS GOOD

In this letter, the father asks about the different children. Of Robert, ten years old, he said, “Robert was always good, and will be confirmed in his happy turn of mind by his ever-watchful and affectionate mother. Does he strengthen his native tendency?”⁹

This is the earliest statement known about Lee’s character.

Endnotes:

- 1 Jones (2), p. 359.
- 2 Jones (2), p. 360.
- 3 Jones (2), p. 360.
- 4 Mason, p. 9.
- 5 Holcombe—in Jones (2), p. 489.
- 6 White, p. 17.
- 7 White, p. 17.
- 8 White, p. 24.
- 9 Young, p. 22.

Home Training

[Age 11, 1818]

HIS MOTHER

Robert was eleven years old when his father died. Since he was six years old, his training had devolved upon his devoted mother, gentle and pious, with a sincere and simple faith in God's providence. She "appears to have been a woman of high character and to have taught her son practical as well as moral excellence." She "was a communicant of Christ Church, Alexandria, Virginia; and her children were taught the Episcopal catechism by young William Meade, eventually Bishop of Virginia."¹ Robert was born, baptized, and reared in the Episcopal Church. In a letter written March 7, 1866, he said that Bishop Meade "had known me in childhood, when I recited to him the church catechism, taught me by my mother before I could read."²

"The molding hand of the mother was giving shape to that moral character which stands yet in our annals unrivaled for earnestness and self-sacrifice."³

She watched over his daily life and "planted him in the soil of truth, morality, and religion, so that his boyhood was marked by everything that produces nobility of character in manhood."⁴

"Her prayers with her tender admonition were the forces that cast his growing character in that mold of noble self-control that made the child the father of the man."⁵

"At his mother's knee, that divinely appointed school whose instruction no other teacher can impart, and whose lessons

when faithfully given are worth all others we receive, he learned his obligations to his Maker and his fellow man.”⁶

From her he learned to “practice self-denial and self-control, as well as the strictest economy in all financial concerns,” virtues which he retained throughout life.⁷

“It was from her lips he learned the Bible, from her teaching he drank in the sincere belief in revealed religion, which he never lost. It was she who imbued her great son with an ineradicable belief in the efficacy of prayer, and in the reality of God’s interposition in everyday affairs of the true believer.”⁸

In later life, in almost the very words of Abraham Lincoln, he said, “All I am I owe to my mother.” Lincoln said, “All that I am or hope to be, I owe to my aged mother.”

THE BOY

From persons who knew him as a boy, “we are assured that Lee’s childhood was as remarkable as his manhood for the modesty and thoughtfulness of his character and for the performance of every duty which devolved upon him.”⁹

He worshiped in old Christ Church, Alexandria, Virginia, in the same church in which Washington had been a pew holder.

Many a Christmas, with the other boys of the neighborhood, he brought the evergreen and helped to decorate the church.¹⁰

DEVOTION TO MOTHER

Lee’s mother was a great invalid; one of his sisters, Anne, was delicate, and for many years was absent in Philadelphia, under the care of physicians. The oldest son, Charles Carter, was at Cambridge (Harvard University); Sydney Smith, the other son, was in the navy; the other sister, Mildred, was too young to be of much help in household matters. So Robert was the housekeeper, carried the keys, attended to the mar-

keting, managed all of the outdoor business, and took care of his mother's horses.

At the hour when the other schoolboys went to play, he hurried home to order his mother's drive and would be seen carrying her in his arms to the carriage and arranging her cushions with the gentleness of an experienced nurse.¹¹ He was careful to fasten the curtains and close up the cracks with newspapers to keep draughts from her, and he used his powers to entertain and divert her.

"He waited on her, nursed her when sick, drove with her, obeyed her every wish; and this reciprocal love was a goodly picture in old Alexandria to those who saw mother and son in those days."¹²

More than one of his cousins have recorded that what impressed them most in their youth was "Robert's devotion to his mother." That devotion may be imagined from his mother's words when he was about to leave for West Point Military Academy.

"How," she exclaimed to a friend, in an uncontrolled burst of emotion, "can I ever live without him? He has been son, daughter, protector—he has been all in all to me!"¹³

Endnotes:

- 1 Mason, p. 18.
- 2 Jones (2), p. 436.
- 3 White, p. 24.
- 4 Lee (1), p. 21.
- 5 White, p. 17.
- 6 Holcombe—in Jones (2), p. 489.
- 7 Mason, p. 22.
- 8 Wolseley, p. 13.
- 9 Mason, p. 21.
- 10 Clarke, p. 138.
- 11 Jones (2), p. 362.
- 12 Lee (1), p. 21.
- 13 Jones (2), p. 489.

Model Youth and Young Man

[Age 18, 1825 – Age 22, 1829]

HABITS

He never drank intoxicating liquor, never used tobacco, nor indulged in any of the petty vices to which youth is apt.¹

Said one of the family: “The other boys used to drink from the glasses of the gentlemen; but Robert never would join them. He was different.”²

A near relative wrote after his death, “I knew Robert Lee from the time I can first recollect, and I never remember hearing him censured for anything in my life.”³

ALEXANDRIA ACADEMY

“No breach of discipline nor any neglect of duty was ever charged against him during his years of study in the Alexandria Academy. No unbecoming word ever fell from his lips; but speech and action indicated always that he lived as under his great Taskmaster’s eye.”⁴ December 15, 1866, from Lexington, Virginia, General Lee wrote a letter to his old teacher, Mr. W. B. Leary, in which he said, “I pray that the evening of your days may be blessed with peace and tranquility, and that a merciful God may guide and protect you to the end.”⁵

For special preparation to enter West Point Military Academy, in the winter of 1824-25, he attended the school of Mr. Benjamin Hallowell, a Quaker, for many years a famous teacher in Alexandria. Mr. Hallowell says, “He [Lee] was a most exemplary student in every respect. He was never behind time at his studies; never failed in a single recitation; was perfectly observant of the rules and regulations of the

institution; was gentlemanly, unobtrusive, and respectful in all his deportment to teachers and his fellow students.”⁶

INFLUENCE OF YOUNG MAN’S LIFE

One of Lee’s friends gives a remarkable incident to show the influence which, even at this early day (1825), his simple dignity and high sense of right exercised upon all who came in contact with him, the old as well as the young. Being invited, during a vacation, to visit a friend of his family who lived in the gay, rollicking style then but too common in old Virginia, he found in his host one of the grand old gentlemen of that day, with every fascination of mind and manner, who, though not of dissipated habits, led a life which the sterner sense of the boy could not approve. The old man shrunk before the unspoken rebuke of the youthful hero. Coming to the boy’s bedside the night before his departure, he lamented the idle and useless life into which he had fallen, excusing himself upon the score of loneliness and the sorrow that weighed upon him in the loss of those most dear. In the most impressive manner he besought his young guest to be warned by his example; prayed him to cherish the good habits he had already acquired, and promised to listen to his entreaties that he would change his own life, and thereby secure more entirely his respect and affection.⁷

AT WEST POINT

In 1825, when he was eighteen, Lee entered West Point Military Academy. Here “he avoided tobacco and intoxicating liquors, used no profane or immoral language.”⁸

It is said that during his four years at West Point he never received a reprimand or a demerit.⁹

“Throughout his whole student life he performed no act which his pious mother could not have fully approved.”¹⁰

“His unquestioned temperance and self-control in moral matters appear doubly creditable when we read the statements made by Colonel Thayer, superintendent of West Point at that time, to President John Quincy Adams, as to the drunkenness and dissipation generally prevalent among the young men.”¹¹

Lee graduated in 1829, being twenty-two years old.

Endnotes:

- 1 Mason, p. 26.
- 2 Page (2), p. 10.
- 3 Long, p. 31.
- 4 White, p. 26.
- 5 Jones (2), p. 365
- 6 Long, p. 27.
- 7 Long, p. 26.
- 8 Long, p. 291.
- 9 McKim, p. 203.
- 10 Long, p. 29.
- 11 Bradford, p. 8.