

Princeton and the Laos Mission: A Case Study of Princeton Theological Seminary's Influence in the Nineteenth Century

by Herbert R. Swanson



Historians have claimed that Princeton Theological Seminary had an important influence on nineteenth-century American Presbyterianism and on American Protestantism more generally. On closer examination, however, that claim has not been established and the evidence provided seems meager. A case study of nine pioneer members of the Presbyterian Church's Laos Mission, located in northern Siam (Thailand), further demonstrates the difficulties in separating the specific influences of Princeton Seminary from the main currents of its nineteenth-century religious and cultural context. The limits of the historical record and the failure of these Old School Presbyterian missionaries to document the sources of their thinking make it impossible to establish the nature or the degree of Princeton's purported influence on them. The importance of Princeton Seminary to modern historiography, in sum, is the degree to which its history and literature deepen our understanding of its larger Old School, Presbyterian, and American evangelical contexts.

Over the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Princeton Theological Seminary became well known in the United States for being a center for theological education and the home of a succession of famous Presbyterian theologians, including Archibald Alexander, Charles Hodge, A. A. Hodge, and Benjamin B. Warfield. These men and a number of colleagues, former students, and compatriots articulated what has become known as the "Princeton Theology," a uniquely American blend of Scottish Enlightenment philosophy, Reformed confessional theology, and American evangel-

ical piety. Recent scholarship has claimed for Princeton Seminary and its theology a wide influence on nineteenth-century American religious thought and history that extended well beyond the confines of the Presbyterian Church. In most instances, however, the scholars making this claim simply assert Princeton's influence without providing much evidence to support the assertion. Lefferts A. Loetscher, a typical example, contends that Princeton was the Presbyterian Church's most influential theological seminary. He notes as evidence that Princeton Seminary graduates taught at other Presbyterian

seminaries and that, later in the nineteenth century, several of those seminaries used Charles Hodge's *Systematic Theology* as one of their standard texts. In this and most other instances, the difficult issues of what constitutes "influence," whether simple attendance at Princeton demonstrates such influence, and how to actually measure it are passed over, leaving the impression that the surprisingly ill-defined and unsubstantiated assertion of the seminary's influence is a well-established fact.¹

The question of whether Princeton Seminary actually exerted the influence claimed by

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scholars has important implications for the historical study of the relationship of nineteenth-century American evangelical thought to American evangelicals themselves. First, is the historical record available to scholars? Can historians use that record to make a compelling case for the influence of one or another of the various institutions disseminating evangelical thought? Second, how did the influence of institutions such as Princeton Seminary relate to intellectual and theological currents abroad in the nineteenth century? Can its influence be distinguished from those currents? If not, what does it mean to claim influence for particular evangelical institutions and agencies? Third, was there sufficient cognitive diversity among various evangelical populations, such as the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., to be able to attribute substantial influence to one particular educational institution? The assertions of Princeton Seminary's influence represent something more than a curious scholarly quirk; they raise key issues in the history of nineteenth-century American theology and its relationship to American culture.

I

In his introduction to *The Princeton Theology*, Mark A. Noll provides a detailed consideration of Princeton Seminary's influence, but his evidence underscores the issues involved in defining and substantiating the claim. He observes that Princeton's influence rested on four pillars. First, Princeton represented "the largest and most influential center of training for the Presbyterian ministry," and its succession of key theologians taught over 5,500 students, many of whom went on to become important church leaders in several denominations. Second, Princeton University allied itself to Princeton Seminary for most of the nineteenth century, adding still more to the numbers who came under the Princeton influence. Third, the *Princeton Review*, the seminary's flagship publication, was "read with enthusiasm in Old School manses and seminaries throughout the country." Contemporaries praised it as highly influential. Finally, the seminary was an important agency of the Old School Presbyterian Church: Charles Hodge's annual report on the General Assembly was widely read and the seminary was a key center for training Presbyterian missionaries.² Noll concludes of the Princeton Seminary professors: "their influence was primarily intellectual. The students they taught

and the ideas they propounded were not the sole shaping influences on Presbyterians in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but they were among the most powerful."³ Noll does not describe what he meant by intellectual influence and focuses more on the seminary's statistical significance than on any other facet of its role inside or outside the Presbyterian Church.

Noll and Peter Wallace, more recently, flesh out Princeton Seminary's statistical significance by presenting a set of eleven tables profiling students who attended the seminary between 1812 and 1929. They argue for Princeton's influence on the basis of these tables, but again they fail to define the term. Most of the tables reveal nothing about the seminary's influence on its students or of its students on the Presbyterian Church and larger world. Figure 7 is perhaps the most suggestive as it describes the primary occupations of seminary graduates, showing that just over 71 percent became pastors, nearly 11 percent worked as educators, and nearly 6 percent became foreign missionaries.⁴

In the course of their arguments, Noll and Wallace point out some of the problems facing those who would study Princeton's influence. They acknowledge that such "anecdotal testimony" is inconclusive, showing only that Princeton had a strong influence on some graduates and little or no influence on others. They also note that the seminary's influence is difficult to measure, stating that "It would also need a detailed study of the graduates themselves, for simple attendance at an institution by no means guarantees that the student came to embrace the views of the institution's teachers."⁵ This observation casts considerable doubt on the tendency of scholars to cite the large number of Princeton Seminary graduates as proof of its influence, especially in the absence of the detailed studies proposed by Noll and Wallace. The authors, however, still claim for Princeton an "obvious" general and broad influence, in spite of the problems in detailing such an influence. They cite the number of Princeton graduates who taught at other seminaries and colleges and the number of graduates who became moderators of the general assemblies of various denominations. Yet they admit that the numbers of professors and moderators who graduated from Princeton Seminary "do not constitute normative judgments about a seminary's quality," nor, presumably, about its influence. Noll and Wallace argue rather that historians have to give attention to the activities of the seminary's

graduates played in Presbyterian and American Protestant church history.

On the one hand, Noll and Wallace propose that Princeton's influence can be measured by studying the roles its graduates later played in the Presbyterian Church and other denominations. On the other hand, they remind us that mere attendance at Princeton does not constitute proof of the seminary's influence. Without disputing that many Princeton Seminary graduates went on to play important roles in the church and nation, Noll and Wallace raise serious doubts as to whether or not those students mediated the influence of the seminary. We might also note that while they have not defined the term "influence," the authors seem to be arguing that the seminary's primary influence was ecclesiastical and political rather than intellectual. In sum, in spite of the general scholarly consensus that Princeton Seminary was highly influential in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the nature, magnitude, and reality of that influence has not been established.

Other considerations reinforce the sense that historians do not know if Princeton was as influential as claimed. In terms of historiographical method, Noll and Wallace are correct in their observation that Princeton's influence cannot be adequately measured merely by counting the number of students who sat in its lecture halls. The historiographical problem of Princeton's influence is further compounded by the seminary's intimate relationship to major currents in earlier nineteenth-century American theological and philosophical thought. Princeton Seminary stood in the conservative wing of the mainstream of American evangelicalism, more skeptical than many perhaps regarding radical piety and the antics of frontier revivalists, but still in the mainstream. The seminary particularly shared with the vast majority of Americans a commitment to Scottish Common Sense Philosophy, Baconian science, and a Newtonian world view. Sydney E. Ahlstrom notes that Common Sense Philosophy in America comprised "a vast subterranean influence, a sort of water-table nourishing dogmatics in an age of increasing doubt."⁷ Princeton also shared other key elements of its theological thinking with other American evangelicals, including most notably a common view of scripture.⁸ Those who would insist on Princeton Seminary's influence face the serious dif-

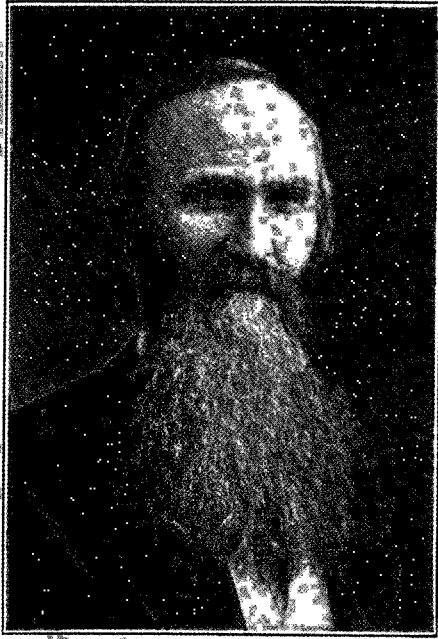
ferences and the specific influences of the seminary itself. Even where we find Princeton Seminary graduates articulating a theology clearly similar to that of their mentors, it is not enough to claim that former students who thought like Princeton did so because of Princeton's influence, unless causal links of one type or another can be made between that person's thinking and the seminary.

One approach that provides some important insights into the relationship of Princeton to its nineteenth-century context is to look at particular case studies of selected groups of Old School Presbyterians. If Princeton exerted an important influence anywhere, surely it would be among its core constituents, the members of Old School churches. Within the Old School, we would expect that Princeton would hold particular sway over Presbyterian missionaries sent out by the Board of Foreign Missions (BFM) during the nineteenth century, not least of all because of the seminary's leading role in producing missionaries.⁹ The nine members of the Presbyterian BFM's mission in northern Siam, the Laos Mission, appointed between 1867 and 1880 represent one such group. These five women and four men came from diverse backgrounds and geographic locations. They included three married couples, two single women, and one single man. At the time of their appointments to the Laos Mission, they ranged in age from 21 to 39 years old, the oldest born in 1828 and the youngest in 1858. Their number included two ordained clergymen, both members of Princeton Seminary's Class of 1856.¹⁰

Is there evidence that Princeton Seminary influenced the thinking of these nine missionaries? Is there a clear, evidential link between Princeton's theology and world view and that of these missionaries? What follows is a look for historiographical proof of such a link, focusing on Princeton's influence on the missionaries' thinking as being easier to prove than its influence on their behavior.

II

The Laos Mission was founded in April 1867 when the Reverend Daniel McGilvary (1828–1911), Sophia Bradley McGilvary (1839–1923), and their two children arrived in the city of Chiang Mai. Chiang Mai was the largest of the five north-



Dr. and Mrs. McGilvary, 1881, from Daniel McGilvary, *A Half Century Among the Siamese and the Lao: An Autobiography* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1912), 239.

ern dependencies of Siam (historical Thailand), a city that from the thirteenth through the sixteenth centuries was the capital of the Lan Na Kingdom. The Reverend Jonathan Wilson (1830–1911) and Kate Wilson (1833–1885) joined the McGilvays in February 1868. The mission established the First Presbyterian Church of Chiang Mai that same year, even before the missionaries gained any converts. After a brief period of evangelistic success during which the mission gained seven converts, the Chiang Mai authorities initiated a brutal suppression of the new religion in September 1869, which resulted in the death of two northern Thai Christians and the scattering of the rest. The mission did not begin to recover from this persecution until 1876, and in 1880 it founded three new congregations, thus marking the end of its pioneer era. In addition to the McGilvays and Wilsons, five other missionaries worked under the Laos Mission during that pioneer era: Dr. Charles Vrooman (1841–1882), Dr. Marion Cheek (1852–1895), Sarah Bradley Cheek (1850–1933), Edna Cole (1855–1950), and Mary Campbell (1858–1881).

Daniel McGilvary graduated from Princeton Seminary in 1856 with impressive Old School credentials. He was raised in a pious family in a North Carolina hotbed of conservative Old School Scottish immigrant Presbyterianism, where he was a member of a solid congregation, the Buffalo Church. As a child his days were filled with the exercises of Presbyterian piety and the lessons of a Presbyterian education; by the age of ten he had

memorized all 107 questions and answers of the Shorter Catechism. His tiny home library contained religious books and periodicals mostly published in Philadelphia. Year after year he witnessed the impressive sacred rites and social camaraderie of the “Buffalo Communion,” a carryover from Scotland of an intensely evangelical Presbyterian communion ritual. Before becoming a missionary, McGilvary served as a local church elder, attended Princeton Seminary, and after graduation briefly served two Old School North Carolina congregations as a pastor.¹¹

McGilvary is the only one of the pioneer members of the Laos Mission to make direct reference to the Princeton theologians in his letters and papers. Soon after his arrival in Chiang Mai, for example, he forwarded a brief article entitled “Brethren, Pray for Us” to the *Foreign Missionary*. In that article, he quotes his former professor J. Addison Alexander to the effect that Paul’s injunction to the Thessalonian Christians to pray for him (I Thessalonians 5:25) almost amounts to a commandment.¹² In 1874, McGilvary visited the Orthodox Congregational Theological Seminary in Hartford, Connecticut, and commented favorably on the fact that its professors were “all Orthodox men to the handle.” He singled out one of them for special comment, writing that “Dr. Childs is a Princeton man, and interprets and teaches the Bible and the Shorter Catechism just as Drs. Hodge, [Robert Lewis] Dabney or [William S.] Plummer would.” While he observed that the rest of the faculty all came “square up” to the accepted measures of Calvinist orthodoxy, it is notable that he singled out for special attention the one man from Princeton—and that he equated Hodge with other Presbyterian theologians who were not directly linked to Princeton.¹³ In an 1872 letter to the BFM, moreover, McGilvary responded to the news that the *Princeton Review* might not continue to be sent to the mis-

sion with the statement that he "would not like to forfeit the pleasure of its perusal."¹⁴ These and a few other passing references to the Princeton circle of theologians indicate an easy familiarity with their thoughts and writings, which in turn suggests the possibility of their influence on McGilvary.¹⁵

One might look at these references to Princeton Seminary in a number of ways and draw from them differing conclusions. They surely demonstrate some degree of Princeton's influence on McGilvary; he knew the Princeton circle and its writings. At the same time, he makes no such allusions to theologies or seminaries other than Princeton: Yet these passing references do not reveal the degree, extent, or direction of Princeton's influence on McGilvary. On their basis alone, the historian cannot state unequivocally that Princeton had a serious influence on his thinking, particularly when we take into account the small number of such references in an admittedly large body of letters and papers.

The most impressive evidence for Princeton's influence on McGilvary is the way in which his own theology parallels that of the Princeton theologians. Three examples will suffice. First, McGilvary shared Princeton's restrained views on revivalism. In the last days of his pastorate in two rural North Carolina Presbyterian churches in 1858, he invited a guest preacher to preach at a communion service and at an evening service prior to the Sunday celebration of the sacrament. This preacher made a strong impression on the congregation, and McGilvary later reported that at the evening service there was a "deep seriousness throughout the congregation" that led to a desire to hold further services, which subsequently led to a series of evening meetings and a period of revival.¹⁶ In his comments at the time, McGilvary emphasized the solemn nature of the evening prayer meetings; there was no excitement, no shouting, and seldom any sighing or calling aloud. Only the speakers' voices broke the silence. McGilvary insisted that a "spirit of prayer" prevailed throughout the revival, most clearly seen in the congregation's quiet, intense attention during the services. He felt that this profoundly quiet spirit confirmed that the revival was truly God's work and not contrived by any human agency.¹⁷ McGilvary's observations call to mind Archibald Alexander's warning that emotional revivalism only stirred up "feelings which belong almost entirely to our animal nature" and

did not lead to a true "sincerity of love" or the true "character of God" at all. Alexander felt that such revivalism could end up being merely "an idol of our own imagination."¹⁸

Second, McGilvary shared Princeton's understanding of the role of science, frequently termed "Baconianism," which was rooted in the Common Sense Philosophy of Thomas Reid (1710–1796) and a number of other eighteenth-century Scottish Enlightenment thinkers. The Scottish school took strong exception to David Hume's (1711–1776) radical attack on the certainty of human knowledge, both of the physical world and of God. It argued that God created an orderly, ascertainable world and gave humanity the senses necessary to understand it. Most importantly, God planted within humanity a universal, timeless "common sense" that gives the whole human race assurance that the physical world is real. Common Sense Philosophy (or Common Sense Realism) was first transported to the United States in the last half of the eighteenth century and eventually exerted a profound influence on American thought, not least among Old School Presbyterians.¹⁹ Historians of Princeton generally agree that Common Sense Philosophy had a particularly important influence on its theology, although they do not always agree as to precisely what that influence was.²⁰

In a series of articles published in the *North Carolina Presbyterian* from June through August 1869 under the collective title "Medical Missions and Missionary Physicians," McGilvary presents his rationale for the employment of missionary medicine as a key element in the practice of foreign missions. These articles demonstrate McGilvary's commitment to Common Sense Philosophy and Baconianism and represent a remarkable exercise in the inductive method of Enlightened common sense reasoning. In the first three articles of the series, he establishes the biblical principle that missionary work is "the great work of the church," commanded by Jesus and then, in Baconian fashion, surveys an impressive array of material from missionary sources, minutely demonstrating his thesis concerning the significance of medical work for foreign missions. In sum, the line of argument in these first three articles adheres strictly to a Baconian inductive approach in which McGilvary begins with biblical principles, presents a mass of detailed data, engages in a minute examination of the facts, and establishes the truth and meaning of the general principle proven by those facts.²¹ The