

## McNair, John Calvin <sup>[1]</sup>

### McNair, John Calvin

by John Macfie, 1991

**22 Feb. 1823–19 Jan. 1858**

John Calvin McNair, teacher and minister, was born near St. Pauls, the son of Malcolm and Margaret Dalrymple McNair. His maternal grandfather, Archibald Dalrymple of Moore County <sup>[2]</sup>, served in the House of Commons <sup>[3]</sup> in 1801 and the senate in 1807. His paternal grandparents were Duncan and Katherine McCallum McNair, who emigrated from Scotland in 1786.

McNair obtained B.A. (1849) and M.A. (1852) degrees from The University of North Carolina <sup>[4]</sup>. Afterwards he taught at various schools and became principle of the Summerville Academy near Lillington. During his formative years and probably also in college, McNair developed "a passionate devotion to natural science" and on many occasions during his teaching period he gave public lectures at schoolhouses "to the very great delight of the community."

In the fall of 1856 he entered the Theological Seminary of Columbia, S.C., where a leader of the faculty "was not at all hostile toward the allegorical interpretation of the [Garden of] Eden narrative," and in April 1857 he was licensed to preach by the Fayetteville Presbytery. Early that summer McNair sailed for Scotland to attend the New College of the Free Church and the University of Edinburgh. There he studied church history, belles lettres, and natural science.

Early in January 1858, while touring the western coast of Scotland with a small excursion party, he was "seized with a low fever," probably pneumonia, and died in Edinburgh a few days later. He was buried in the old Grange cemetery there. At the base of the monument erected by his mother was inscribed a quotation from Gen. 23.4: "I am a stranger and a sojourner with you; give me a possession of a burying place with you." McNair was survived by his mother, who lived to be ninety-seven, and two sisters, Catherine and Mary Ann.

McNair left his estate to The University of North Carolina on condition that it establish a lecture series to demonstrate the mutual relation of science and theology to each other and to prove, as far as possible, the existence of God from nature; moreover, the speakers should have both an evangelical background and a grounding in science. No doubt McNair envisioned that the lectures would display equal regard for each viewpoint. In practice, this proved to be difficult. Nevertheless, the wide range of subjects and the selection of speakers indicate that McNair's objectives have been largely realized.

The first lecture was given in 1908 by Francis H. Smith, professor emeritus of the University of Virginia, who spoke on Nature: A Witness for the Unity, the Power, and the Goodness of God <sup>[5]</sup>. Other speakers included Henry Van Dyke, on "Poetry," in 1911; William L. Poteat <sup>[6]</sup>, on *Can a Man Be a Christian Today?* in 1925; Robert A. Millikan, on Time, Matter, and Values <sup>[7]</sup>, in 1932; J. Robert Oppenheimer, on "Some Reflections on Science and Culture," in 1959; and Loren Eiseley <sup>[8]</sup>, on "The Search for Man," in 1971.

#### References:

*Alumni Review* 16 (1927–28 [portrait]).

*Charlotte Observer*, 15 Jan. 1928.

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Daniel L. Grant, *Alumni History of the University of North Carolina, 1795–1924* (1924). <https://docsouth.unc.edu/true/grant/grant.html> <sup>[9]</sup> (accessed August 29, 2014).

Malcolm Fowler, *They Passed This Way* (1955).

S. C. Linder, "William L. Poteat," *North Carolina Historical Review* 40 (Spring 1963).

James B. McNair, *McNair, McNear, and McNeir Genealogies* (1923). <https://archive.org/details/mcnairmcnearmcne00mcna> <sup>[10]</sup> (accessed August 29, 2014).

#### Additional Resources:

Columbia Theological Seminary. *Memorial volume of the semi-centennial of the Theological seminary at Columbia, South Carolina*. Columbia, S.C.: Printed at the Presbyterian Publishing House. 1884. <https://archive.org/details/memorialvolume00colu> <sup>[11]</sup> (accessed August 29, 2014).

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