

China Yesterday

# FORTY YEARS IN SOUTH CHINA

THE LIFE OF REV. JOHN VAN NEST TALMAGE, D.D.

BY

REV. JOHN GERARDUS FAGG

MISSIONARY OF THE AMERICAN REFORMED (DUTCH) CHURCH,  
AT AMOY, CHINA



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# INTRODUCTION

BY REV. T. DE WITT TALMAGE, D.D.

Too near was I to the subject of this biography to write an impartial introduction. When John Van Nest Talmage went, my last brother went. Stunned until I staggered through the corridors of the hotel in London, England, when the news came that John was dead. If I should say all that I felt I would declare that since Paul the great apostle to the Gentiles, a more faithful or consecrated man has not lifted his voice in the dark places of heathenism. I said it while he was alive, and might as well say it now that he is dead. "He was the hero of our family." He did not go to a far-off land to preach because people in America did not want to hear him preach. At the time of his first going to China he had a call to succeed Rev. Dr. Brodhead, of Brooklyn, the Chrysostom of the American pulpit, a call with a large salary, and there would not have been anything impossible to him in the matters of religious work or Christian achievement had he tarried in his native land. But nothing could detain him from the work to which God called him years before he became a Christian. My reason for writing that anomalous statement is that when a boy in Sabbath-school at Boundbrook, New Jersey, he read a Library book, entitled "The Life of Henry Martyn, the Missionary," and he said to our mother, "Mother! when I grow up I am going to be a missionary!" The remark made no especial impression at the time. Years passed on before his conversion. But when the grace of God appeared to him, and he had begun his study for the ministry, he

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said one day, "Mother! Do you remember that many years ago I said, 'I am going to be a missionary?'" She replied, "Yes! I remember you said so." "Well," said he, "I am going to keep my promise." And how well he kept it millions of souls on earth and in heaven have long since heard. But his chief work is yet to come. We get our chronology so twisted that we come to believe that the white marble of the tomb is the milestone at which a good man stops, when it is only a mile-stone on a journey, the most of the miles of which are yet to be travelled.

The Dictionary which my brother prepared with more than two decades of study, the religious literature he transferred from English into Chinese, the hymns he wrote for others to sing, although himself could not sing at all, (he and I monopolizing the musical incapacity of a family in which all the rest could sing well), the missionary stations he planted, the life he lived, will widen out, and deepen and intensify through all time and all eternity.

I am glad that those competent to tell of his magnificent work have undertaken it. You could get nothing about it from him at all. Ask him a question trying to evoke what he had done for God and the church, and his lips were as tightly shut as though they had never been opened. He was animated enough when drawn out in discussion religious, educational, or political, but he had great powers of silence. I once took him to see General Grant, our reticent President. On that occasion they both seemed to do their best in the art of quietude. The great military President with his closed lips on one side of me, and my brother with his closed lips on the other side of me, I felt there was more silence in the room than I ever before knew to be crowded into the same space. It was the same kind of reticence that always came upon John when you asked him about his work. But the story has been gloriously told in the heavens by those who through his instrumentality have already reached the City of Raptures. When the roll of martyrs is called before the

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Throne of God, the name of John Van Nest Talmage will be called. He worked himself to death in the cause of the world's evangelization. His heart, his brain, his lungs, his hands, his muscles, his nerves, all wrought for others until heart and brain, and lungs and hands, and muscles and nerves could do no more.

He sleeps in the cemetery near Somerville, New Jersey, so near father and mother that he will face them when he rises in the Resurrection of the Just, and amid a crowd of kindred now slumbering on the right of him, and on the left of him, he will feel the thrill of the Trumpet that wakes the dead.

Allelujah! Amen!

BROOKLYN, June, 1894.

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## PREFACE

The accompanying resolution of the Board of Foreign Missions of the Reformed Church in America, November 16, 1892, explains the origin of this volume:

*“Resolved, That the Board of Foreign Missions, being firmly convinced that a biography of the late John V. N. Talmage, D.D., for over forty years identified with the Mission at Amoy, would be of great service to the cause of Missions, heartily recommend to the family of Dr. Talmage the selection of an appropriate person to prepare such a memoir, and in case this is done, promise to render all the aid in their power in furnishing whatever facts or records may be of service to the author of the book.”*

The writer raised his pen to this task with hesitancy. He had known Dr. Talmage only little more than a year; long enough, indeed, to revere and love him, but not long enough to tell the story of so rich and fruitful a life.

Dr. Talmage was a man of unconscious greatness. If he could have been consulted it is doubtful whether a public record of him would have ever seen the light. His life to him would have seemed too commonplace and unworthy. He was exceedingly careful in the use of language. He could not endure exaggeration. Nothing so commanded his admiration as honesty and accuracy of statement. That ought to be sufficient to guard any one who speaks of such a man against indiscriminate eulogy.

We have endeavored as far as possible to make this memoir an autobiography.

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To carry out this purpose has not been without difficulties.

Dr. Talmage did not keep a continuous diary. He did not preserve complete files of his correspondence as if anticipating the needs of some possible biographer.

The author's enforced retirement from the mission field in the midst of collecting and sifting material, has been no small drawback.

It is hoped, however, that enough has been gleaned to justify publication. Sincerest thanks are due to those brethren who contributed to the concluding chapter, "In Memoriam."

If these pages may more fully acquaint the Church of Christ with a name which it should not willingly let die, and deepen interest in and hasten by the least hair-breadth the redemption of "China's Millions," the author will feel abundantly rewarded.

**JOHN G. FAGG.**

ARLINGTON, NEW JERSEY

October 1, 1894.

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## I. THE ANCESTRAL HOME

John Van Nest Talmage was born at Somerville, New Jersey, August 18, 1819. He was the fourth son in a family of seven brothers and five sisters.

The roots of the Talmage genealogical tree may be traced back to the year 1630, when Enos and Thomas Talmage, the progenitors of the Talmage family in North America, landed at Charlestown, Massachusetts, and afterwards settled at East Hampton, Long Island.

Dr. Lyman Beecher represents the first settlers of East Hampton as "men resolute, enterprising, acquainted with human nature, accustomed to do business, well qualified by education, circumspect, careful in dealing, friends of civil liberty, jealous of their rights, vigilant to discover, and firm to resist encroachments; eminently pious."

In 1725 we find Daniel Talmage at Elizabethtown, New Jersey. Daniel's grandson, Thomas, during the years between 1775 and 1834 shifts his tent to Piscataway, New Jersey, thence to New Brunswick, thence to Somerville, where the stakes are driven firmly on a farm "beautiful for situation." Thomas Talmage was a builder by trade, and erected some of the most important courthouses and public edifices in Somerset and Middlesex Counties. He was active in the Revolutionary war, holding the rank of major. It was said of him, "His name will be held in everlasting remembrance in the churches." He was the father of seven sons and six daughters.

The third son, David T., the father of John Van Nest Talmage, was born at Piscataway, April 21, 1783. He was married to Catharine