



# Puritan Protagonist

*Louis Leonard Tucker*

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## **Puritan Protagonist** Louis Leonard Tucker

Thomas Clap was for twenty-six years rector and then the first president of Yale College. A Congregational clergyman, he was an intellectual figure of transcendent importance in the cultural and religious life of colonial America. However, he is almost a total stranger to American history. No other biography of him exists. He came to Yale College in 1740, when its rector was little more than a chief teacher. During his tenure he created and strengthened the role of president, reorganized and enlarged the library, established rigorous rules for student behavior, revitalized the curriculum, enlarged the faculty, and increased the size of the physical plant. He was, in sum, one of the chief architects of Yale. Clap plunged into the current of religious activity of the period. He fought a long and unsuccessful battle against the Anglican invasion of Yale. A confirmed defender of orthodoxy in religion, he was an active "Old Light" in the Great Awakening controversy. But whether he was expelling students for engaging in separatist activities or abruptly separating the college from the First Church of New Haven, he was animated by a scrupulous sense of duty, swerving not one degree from the lines of conduct marked out by his religious principles. Clap's interest in the intellect was by no means confined to battling Anglicans, enthusiasts, and rationalists. At Yale, he developed a program in natural philosophy and mathematics, collected scientific instruments, and carried on a vigorous correspondence with other scientists in America and England. As a mathematician, "he was of Olympian stature in colonial America." In scientific thought, he was a child of the new age, as progressive as Franklin or Jefferson. Despite his notable success at Yale College, his life there had tragic overtones. Heir of an authoritarian tradition, Clap ruled by force and compulsion and, because of his monumental pride, so involved himself in embroilments with his community and his students that both were glad, finally, when he submitted his resignation in 1766. This book is more than a history of Yale from 1740 to 1766. It is a history also of the intellectual life of the eighteenth century in the United States. But, most of all, it is the biography of a man who was argumentative and opinionated, enlightened and morally strong. Dr. Tucker has made a careful evaluation of Clap's significance as religious thinker, Newtonian scientist, college administrator, and religious and political disputant. Louis Leonard Tucker has served as: a post-doctorate Fellow of the Omohuddro Institute of Early American History and Culture (1958-60); Assistant Commissioner of Education of New York State and State Historian of New York (1966-76); Director of the Massachusetts Historical Society (1976-97). He is the author of eight books. He lives in Cambridge, Mass.

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