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# Oxford Dictionary of National Biography

## Wardlaw, Ralph

(1779–1853)

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**Wardlaw, Ralph** (1779–1853), Congregational minister and theologian, was born on 22 December 1779 in Dalkeith, near Edinburgh. He was the fourth of eight children of William Wardlaw (1741–1821), merchant and later a bailie of Glasgow, and his second wife, Anne Fisher (*d.* 1784), daughter of James Fisher, professor of divinity in the Associate Synod (popularly known as the Burgher church), a nonconformist Presbyterian denomination. The family moved to Glasgow six months after Ralph's birth, and his mother died in childbirth when he was only five. After attending the Glasgow grammar school (1787–91) Ralph matriculated at the University of Glasgow in October 1791, while not yet twelve years of age. From 1795 to 1800 he prepared for the ministry of the Associate Synod. The Associate Synod was at that time being split by a bitter dispute over the nature of the relationship between church and state. Alienated by the controversy, young Wardlaw was drawn to the Congregational church, which was then being revitalized in Scotland through the evangelistic work of the brothers Robert and James Haldane. Wardlaw joined the Congregational church in 1800, and soon gained recognition as a forceful evangelical preacher at meetings sponsored by the Haldanes. He had developed into a handsome, vigorous man of medium height and slim build, with a love for literature and poetry, and a gift for expressive language. The Congregationalists in Glasgow built a church for him on North Albion Street, and Wardlaw was ordained as its minister on 16 February 1803. Several months later, on 23 August 1803, he married his cousin, Jane Smith, the daughter of a Secession minister in Dunfermline. They would eventually have eleven children together, nine of whom survived to adulthood.

In 1808 the Congregational church in Scotland experienced a disruption when the Haldanes and their followers rejected the doctrine of infant baptism and seceded from the Congregational church, entering the Baptist church. It was a bitter break. Wardlaw, who had published a pamphlet in support of infant baptism the previous year, remained within the Congregational church. When in 1811 the Congregational church formed the Glasgow Theological Academy for the training of its ministers, Wardlaw was appointed professor of systematic theology, serving alongside his friend

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Greville Ewing, who taught biblical literature. Combining his professorship with his busy urban pastorate, he developed a reputation as both a forceful champion of orthodox reformed theology and an evangelical activist. In 1812 he took a leading role in the formation of the Glasgow auxiliary of the British and Foreign Bible Society, serving as its secretary for twenty-seven years. He worked to establish schools for the children of the labouring poor of Glasgow. His treatise on the doctrine of the atonement, published in 1814 in response to the Unitarian teaching, presented a lucid exposition of the care of the poor, rejecting compulsory assessments on property for poor relief and insisting that the care of the poor should be left to voluntary charitable societies. In May 1818 he travelled to London to preach one of the annual sermons on behalf of the London Missionary Society, which brought him acclaim from the English nonconformist community, and in September of that year he was granted a doctorate in divinity by Yale College in the United States. His growing Glasgow congregation erected a large new chapel, with an imposing Grecian front and accommodation for 1600, which was opened late in 1819.

A long-standing opponent of slavery, Wardlaw was one of the founders of the Glasgow Anti-Slavery Society in 1823. He came to reject the moderate anti-slavery position that the abolition of slavery should be a gradual process. In November 1830 he delivered a powerful speech before the Glasgow Anti-Slavery Society, in which he demanded the immediate abolition of slavery. This was a courageous position to take in Glasgow, which had long-standing trading connections with the West Indies. The speech led to the break-up of old friendships, a decline in attendance at his church, and personal attacks upon him in the press. Although his health collapsed under the strain in the spring of 1831, he would not relent in his advocacy of immediate abolition.

The following year saw the beginning of the voluntary movement in Scotland, with a number of leading nonconformists calling for the disestablishment and disendowment of the Church of Scotland. Religion, the voluntaries argued, should be placed on a purely voluntary basis, with all denominations enjoying equal status before the law and none having a connection with the state. Wardlaw became active in the voluntary movement from the autumn of 1832, speaking at public meetings, and in 1833 he was elected president of the Voluntary Church Association. For him voluntarism was a matter of religious principle, and he refused to engage in invective against the established church. In 1838 he was a member of a deputation from the Scottish central board of dissenters sent to London to lobby politicians against the proposal to grant public money for building new churches in connection with the establishment. The following year, at the invitation of representatives of the main English nonconformist denominations, Wardlaw presented a series of lectures on voluntarism in London—in response to the lectures given in support of establishments by his fellow Scot, the celebrated Thomas Chalmers, in 1838. His fellow nonconformists heralded Wardlaw's lectures as a triumph, and some 14,000 copies of the lectures were sold within a few months.

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In the mid-1840s Wardlaw turned his attention from disestablishment to protestant church union, taking an active part in the Evangelical Alliance, formed in 1845, and contributing (alongside his former opponent Chalmers) to the influential collection *Essays on Christian Union* published that same year. His last years were troubled by controversy, as in 1849 a faction within his congregation charged him with having misused his pastoral connection with an elderly widow thirty years before to obtain a gift of money. He successfully defended his reputation, but the attack had pained him deeply. Wardlaw died in his home in Easterhouse, Glasgow, on 17 December 1853, and received a public funeral. He was buried at the Glasgow necropolis on 23 December. A figure of courage, eloquence, and learning, Wardlaw contributed significantly to the growth of religious and political liberalism in Britain.

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R. Wardlaw, *Systematic theology*, ed. J. R. Campbell, 3 vols. (1856)

R. Wardlaw, *Discourses on the principal points of the Socinian controversy* (1814)

R. Wardlaw, *National church establishments examined* (1839)

*DNB*

## Archives

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U. Edin. L., corresp.

DWL, corresp. relating to Dublin Theological Academy

## Likenesses

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D. Macnee, oils, 1851, Corporation Art Gallery, Glasgow

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J. Andrews, stipple, NPG

J. Faed, engraving (after portrait by D. Macnee), Scot.  
NPG

H. Haig, engraving (after portrait by W. Bonner), Scot.  
NPG

D. Macnee, ink and wash drawing, Scot. NPG

G. B. Shaw, engraving (after drawing by H. Anelay), Scot.  
NPG

## Wealth at Death

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£1732 16s.: inventory, 1854, NA Scot., SC 36/48/40, fols.  
187–8

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National Archives <[http://  
discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/c/F36628](http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/c/F36628)>