

# THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF SAMUEL SMILES

## CHAPTER I

### BOYHOOD AND EDUCATION

I HAVE begun and finished many books, but I never began a manuscript with more trepidation than I now do the following narrative. I would not have dreamt of writing out these memoirs but for the repeated counsels of William Rolston Haigh of Huddersfield, an old friend, whom I had known intimately at Leeds, at Bradford, and at Huddersfield, of which town he was a magistrate, and where I frequently enjoyed his hospitality.

Mr Haigh was a very intelligent man, and a great reader, especially of biography. Many years since, he asked me, "Have you written out your Autobiography yet?"

"Oh, no!" I answered, "there is no probability of that ever being done. I am too busy, besides, with other things that I wish to finish. I have been interviewed, it is true, like most other book writers, artists, and men of notoriety. But my life has been comparatively uneventful; there is really nothing in it."

“Nothing in it?” responded my Mentor. “Why, your books are extensively read in this country and America. They have been translated into nearly every language in Europe. They appear in many of the Indian languages, and even in Siamese and Japanese. I am quite sure that your readers would like to know much more about yourself than has yet been published by your interviewers.”

“That may be,” I said, “but I do not think there are any passages in my life likely to be interesting to the public. My books, such as they are, must speak for themselves, without any biographic introduction.”

“Well!” he observed finally, “think of my advice: I am persuaded that a history of yourself would be more interesting than any of your books.”

This conversation occurred in 1879. I doubted my friend’s counsel; but he returned to the subject again and again. He even took the trouble to tell me how I should write my Autobiography. He gave me the heads of it, extending to four pages. He copied out for me John Bartram’s advice to his friend Benjamin Franklin as to the preparation of his biography.

On Anthony Trollope’s autobiography making its appearance, Mr Haigh wrote to my wife, “Tell your husband to go and do likewise.” My answer was, Benjamin Franklin was a celebrated philosopher, and Anthony Trollope was a distinguished novelist. Thousands will read about them, while few will read about me. They had a history, while I have none—at least, none of any consequence. Nevertheless, I will proceed at my leisure to write out some passages relating to my past life, and leave them for the entertainment of my children and grandchildren, or,

should my sons desire, for the perusal of the general public.

I was born at Haddington on the 23rd of December 1812. The house in which I first saw the light, stood at the head of the High Street, and commanded a view of the Mail Coach, the Union, the Stage Coaches, and the Friday Market.\*

About the beginning of the century, when Napoleon was at the height of his power, the town formed the centre of a camp. Some hundred and thirty thousand of the best troops of France were assembled at Boulogne—with artillery, horses, and transports—flat-bottomed boats—and threatened the invasion of England. It proved to be but a feint, but this country was prepared. Some thought that the Bay of Aberlady might be the point of landing for the foreign troops, and barracks were erected all round Haddington, for the accommodation of infantry, cavalry, and artillery. Other barracks were erected at Belhaven, near Dunbar. Beacons were erected along the coast, to give timely notice of the approach and landing of the French. Regiments of militia were marched into the barracks in constant succession; for the purpose of enabling the regular troops to keep up their forces by enlistment.

Napoleon, however, broke up "the army of England," as it was called, and proceeded to invade Austria, Prussia, and Russia. The continental war went on for several years. Wellington was now in the Peninsula with his victorious army; and at the time when I was born, at the end of 1812, Napoleon

\* The house has since been pulled down and replaced by a Banking Office.

was returning to France with the wreck of his army, baffled by the snows of Russia. Still the militia continued to occupy the barracks around our little town, while the regulars drummed them up constantly for recruits.

Then came the battle of Leipzig, the retreat of Napoleon upon France, the siege and surrender of Paris, the abdication of the Emperor, his banishment to Elba and his return to France in less than a year, his assemblage of the army, and their march northward. Then followed Waterloo. It seems to me like a dream to remember the rejoicings on that occasion—the bands of the militia, the drums and pipes that paraded the town, and the illuminations that followed. Such things make a deep impression on the imagination of a child—"Wax to receive, but marble to retain." Next year, the 42nd Highlanders—the Black Watch—marched through the town. That circumstance stands very clear in my memory. They were received with extraordinary acclamations in every town they passed through; and when they entered Edinburgh the enthusiasm was indescribable.

The talk by our firesides long continued to be about wars, with remembrances of recent campaigns. The barracks round our town were eventually pulled down, and the materials disposed of. My father\* bought a large quantity of army stores, principally blankets and greatcoats. I remember seeing the last of the soldiers' greatcoats sold to a ploughman and carried away upon his back.

All articles of food were very dear in those days. Everything was taxed to the utmost extent. Bread

\* Dr Smiles' father was also Samuel Smiles. He was engaged in trade, first as a paper maker, when paper was made by hand, afterwards as a general merchant in Haddington.—ED.

was sixteen pence the quartern loaf; sugar, ninepence or tenpence; tea, from seven to nine shillings, but oatmeal for porridge, the "staff of life" in Scotland, was moderate; though, compared with present prices, it was dear.

One of the things that struck me very much in my early years, was the illness of my elder brother John. He had an attack of inflammation of the lungs, and Dr John Welsh, who lived close at hand, was called in to visit him. The doctor bled him, and I remember seeing three full cups of blood taken from his arm, lying on the table, waiting for the doctor's next visit. Though the boy was only seven years old, the bleeding at once cured him. Doctors were not afraid to bleed in those days. A few days after, when the boy was downstairs, Dr Welsh called again to see his patient. He put his finger through an unbuttoned hole in the boy's vest, and tickled him. The boy laughed. "Oh!" said the doctor, "his lungs are all right; he will soon be out-of-doors."

Dr Welsh was a most agreeable and cheerful man. Everybody loved him. He had a comely, handsome face, with lively and expressive features. He was the principal practitioner in the town and neighbourhood. Shortly after the above circumstance, Dr Welsh, who had to encounter all sorts of risks, caught typhoid fever from a patient he was attending, and died after a short illness. He was greatly lamented throughout the country.

I remember his widow, Mrs Welsh, who continued for some time to live in the town, and her daughter Jeanie, afterwards Mrs Carlyle. Mrs Welsh was a beautiful woman: tall, dark-haired, and commanding. Jeanie was less lovely; her face was too angular for beauty. Nevertheless, she had many admirers. She

might have married well in her native town; but she disliked the place and wished to get away from it. In 1821, two years after her father's death, she wrote, "It is the dimmest, deadeast spot in the Creator's universe . . . the very air one breathes is impregnated with stupidity."\*

After all, Haddington was not so bad as Miss Welsh painted it. It very much depends upon ourselves whether we are miserable or not in any condition of life. Perhaps Miss Welsh was not of a very contented frame of mind, and her letters seem to show this. She was not pleased with her local surroundings, and was waiting for her Genius.

Mrs Welsh and her daughter, after Dr Welsh's death, occupied the upper flat of Mr Roughead's large mansion, nearly opposite the house in the High Street which my father had bought, and to which we had removed from the house where I was born. I often saw Mrs Welsh and her daughter walking about; but as I was some eleven years younger than Jeanie, and was then but a boy, I had no personal communications with her. It was said that she was fond of Edward Irving, who had been an assistant master in the Burgh School; but he had gone to Kirkcaldy, and become pledged to a minister's daughter there. So Miss Welsh had to wait. But at last the Genius came in the shape of Thomas Carlyle. More than enough has been written about this union, so that it need not be further referred to. Excepting this—that after Mrs Carlyle had removed from Craigenputtock to London, she called upon my mother when she came down to her native place, and gave her to understand that she was quite as

\* Early letters of Jane Welsh Carlyle. Edited by David G. Ritchie, M.A.

miserable with her Genius as she had ever been at Haddington. There was a reason for this, that cannot be described in this place.

A good education is equivalent to a good fortune. My parents were both of opinion that, though they had comparatively little money to leave to the several members of their large family, the training of their minds in early life was the best possible equipment for their encounter with the struggles and difficulties which they would have to meet in future years. John Knox was a native of the town in which I was born. He was to Scotland what Martin Luther was to Germany. "Let the common people be taught," was one of John Knox's messages. His advice was followed, and the results were great. A poor and sterile country was made strong by its men. The parish and burgh schools of Scotland, and the education given there, are but the lengthened shadow of John Knox. There was a good grammar school in Haddington even in the Reformer's boyhood. He was taught there by the monks, until he went for further training and education to the University of St Andrews.

My first teacher was Patrick Hardie. He had a private school in St Ann's Place, and there I learnt my A B C. In a few years, Mr Hardie was appointed by the Town Council teacher of English and Mathematics at the Burgh School; and I followed him to his new quarters.

Hardie was a good teacher. He taught reading, writing, and arithmetic, very well. He cultivated in his pupils the gift of memory. He made us learn by heart, and recite, poetry and speeches by memorable orators. I remember that I had to learn, with another schoolfellow (Nesbet), an act from

Home's tragedy of Douglas, and a long passage from Campbell's Poems, entitled "The Wizard's Warning," and recite, or rather act the passages with as much eloquence and action as we could muster. All this was very useful; and these passages, learnt at school, remained in our minds for many years.

These are the good points of Hardie's character as a teacher. But he had other points, which were quite the reverse. He was a tyrant and a toady. He had favourites, who were mostly the sons of provosts, bailies, or town councillors, to whom he owed his position; or they were the sons of well-to-do men, who could give him dinners and drink. I was the son of none of these distinguished personages, and not a favourite. My father was an Anti-Burgher—a sort of Quaker Presbyterian, who would not take the Burgess Oath—and therefore not likely to be either a town councillor or a bailie.\* Hardie hated Dissenters—he had been one himself—but especially Anti-Burghers.

I was only an average boy, distinguished for nothing but my love of play. I looked forward with delight to my Wednesday and Saturday afternoons, when we had shinty, or football on the sands, or went stravaiging about the country in search of birds' nests, sloes, or haws. I fear I was fonder of frolic than of learning, though I made my way with the rest. I could not have been very bright, for one day,

\* In the North, provosts and bailies are persons of great importance. They occupied, at that time, what was called "the breest of the laft" at the Parish Church. A man at Peebles had been elected a bailie; he was proceeding along a bye-street, when he encountered a woman driving a cow. "Get out o' the way, man," said the driver. "Woman," said the obstructor, "*I'm no a man; I'M A BAILIE!*"

when Hardie was in one of his tyrannical humours, he uttered this terrible prophecy in a loud voice: "Smiles! you will never be fit for anything but sweeping the streets of your native borough." A nice encouragement for a little scholar!

Schoolboys often imitate the tyranny of their masters. They pick up the brutal words which he has so vehemently uttered, perhaps in a moment of passion; and my schoolfellows nicknamed me after the man who then swept the streets of my "native borough." I shortly after left the school, and had forgotten all about the nickname, when it was recalled to my recollection by Charles Sheriff, son of a farmer at Mungo's Wells. He detested Hardie much more than I did, and said that he had never learnt anything from that teacher. This, however, was a mistake, for, notwithstanding his tyranny and cruelty, in his calmer moments he was an excellent teacher.

Hardie occasionally used the most fearful language in dealing with his pupils. I have heard him say: "I will flog you, sir, within an inch of your life"; "I will dash your brains against the wall"; "I will split your skull into a thousand pieces!" Poor little terrified pupils! I have seen Hardie flog a boy so hard and so long, that he had to hold his sides, and sit down exhausted. Eventually he had to give this up, because of his health!

His favourites, to whom he was always mild and sleek, used to burn the taws (the instrument of torture) at the end, in order to make them black and hard, knowing that the cut thong of leather would never be used to raise wales upon *their* backs.

Hardie did a little surreptitious teaching. He could not very well teach Latin and Greek during

the ordinary school hours, because there was a classical school, also supported by the borough magistrates, near at hand; but he could, and he did, teach Latin after his usual day scholars had been dismissed. I remained, with some other boys, to learn Latin. Before we began, Hardie went upstairs for refreshment, and when he returned to his Latin pupils, he was frequently very much excited. On one occasion he was hearing the lesson of one James Thomson—son of another Anti-Burgher. The lad was not very bright, and rather dour. Jamie answered a question wrongly and stupidly; on which the master became enraged, and violently threw a book full in the boy's face. One of the boards of the book hit him on the upper lip and cut it open. His face was soon covered with blood, and the class was dismissed. The late President Garfield used to say of such places: "It is to me a perpetual wonder that any child's love of knowledge survives the outrages of the schoolhouse."

A story was told among us at school, which may be mentioned here. At Haddington, the sons of provosts and bailies were the favourites, while at the Edinburgh High School the sons of lords and squires were toadied by the masters. On one occasion, a boy was asked by the teacher, "Now, blockhead, can you construe this: '*Nisi Dominus frustra*'?" the motto of the city.

"Yes, sir!" answered the boy, with spirit—"Unless ye be a lord, or a laird's son, ye needna be here."

Learning is not advanced by harshness and tyranny on the part of the masters. These are enough to drive a boy into stupidity and make him reckless. I have always detested the cowardly

cruelty of exceptional schoolmasters, who, because they are stronger, use their power in tormenting the helpless children committed to their charge.

I cannot tell how thankful I was to be taken away from Hardie's School, and sent to the Classical School in the adjoining building. Rector Graham was as much a gentleman as the other was a tyrant. The two men were very different, in appearance and character. Hardie was bilious, pale-faced, with hair of a yellowish-red; his eyes were black, and sparkling when angry. Graham, on the other hand, was round and jovial, though a little pompous, full of fun, fond of quoting Latin, and with a smile for every boy, whether he was the son of a bailie or not. The taws were Hardie's instrument of torture; whilst, though Graham had taws, he never used them. The school was governed by moral suasion, and yet it was kept in perfect order. I think every boy in the school loved old Graham.

The class of boys was no doubt of a better sort than those at the other school. Many of them were English, or the sons of Indian officers, or of large East Lothian farmers. Every branch of learning was imparted in a pleasant and cheerful way. It was not made hateful, but was rendered grateful. I learnt with the rest, and made progress in Greek, Latin, and French. I still remember some of the anecdotes with which certain passages were illustrated. I was not a prize boy. At the summer examinations, besides the bag-full of sweetmeats, prizes were given to those who stood first and second in the various classes. Some of the boys took home armsful of prize books. Two of these were the sons of a minister, and they had been carefully crammed at home. But the prizes did not amount to much.

The boys I refer to made no way in the world. One of them became a minister, and broke down completely; the other became a missionary among the negroes.

What became of the favourites at the one school, and the prize boys at the other? I do not think that any of them made a mark in the world. Some became insufferable prigs, stuck up with self-conceit. The prize boys began as prodigies and ended as failures. Forcing at home did no good. In the battle of life, cramming is comparatively useless.

The most successful of my schoolfellows in after years, was originally a dunce. Hardie could not flog arithmetic into him. He learnt little or nothing at school. Teacher after teacher tried him; and the result was the same. At last he was taken from school, and placed under the charge of a private tutor. Then he showed marks of intelligence. His father, who carried on a large business, suddenly died, and the responsibility thrown upon his only son awakened his intellect and conscience at once. He took in hand the conduct of the business which his father had left him. The young fellow was energetic and persevering, and the business rapidly increased. This so-called dunce ended by becoming a public man of considerable social importance, not the least of which was that he was made provost of his native burgh.

On the whole, provided there was perseverance, those young men succeeded the best from whom little was expected. As for myself, if I have done anything worthy of being remembered, it has not been through any superiority of gifts, but only through a moderate portion of them, accompanied, it is true, with energy and the habit of industry and application.

As in the case of everyone else, I had for the most part to teach myself, and I suppose I did so to much better purpose than any schoolmaster could have taught me. Then I enjoyed good health, and health is more excellent than prizes. Exercise, the joy of interest and of activity, the play of the faculties, is the true life of a boy as of a man. I had also the benefit of living in the country, with its many pleasures and wonders.

Hereditv had also much to do with my being and instincts. The child is not only father of the man, but the inheritor of the moral and physical condition of his father and mother, and of his ancestors generally, often extending very far back in the family to which he belongs. I have little to say of my ancestry. My parents were sprung from honourable and honest people, who, besides paying their debts, had something to spare for the education of their children. My father's forbears were followers of Richard Cameron. One of them, Samuel Drummond, was at the meeting of the Covenanters at Pentland, in November 1666, when he was cloven down by a Scots Grey—then called The Royal Regiment of Scots Dragoons—under General Dalziel. Fortunately, his life was saved by a religious book which he carried in his bonnet. The family continued to be Cameronians. My grandfather was an elder in that body; I remember being present at a field-preaching at a village within sight of the Pentland Hills, where Samuel Drummond had attended his dangerous field-preaching. My grandfather sent me and my brother John a letter full of good advice, which I still possess. It is not dated, but I think it must have been written in 1821, when I was nine years old.

My mother's ancestors came from the Border.

Her father, Robert Wilson, was descended from a Major of Foot, who settled near Smailholm in the reign of Queen Anne. Robert married Elizabeth Yellowlees, a yeoman's daughter of Cowdenknows, near Earlston. One of my mother's cousins, George Yellowlees, was a good artist. While studying at Edinburgh, he came out to Haddington and painted portraits of my father and mother, which I now possess. He afterwards went to London, made considerable progress in his art, and eventually was appointed Cabinet Portrait-painter to the Duke of Sussex.

My mother's brothers, the Wilsons of Dalkeith, were clever mechanics. George invented one of the first reaping machines, for which he got a prize from the Dalkeith Farming Club. Robert, the eldest brother, carried on a large trade as a builder and carpenter. He was an elder of the Rev. Norman Macleod, while the latter was Parish Minister of Dalkeith. I remember his telling me the following story. An idiot attended the Church, but suddenly disappeared. The Minister met him one day, and took him to task for absenting himself from public worship. He added that there would be no preaching in the bad place. "Eh, sir," replied the idiot, "it'll no be for want o' ministers, then!"

My parents enjoyed the portion of Agur.\* They were neither "hauden doon" by poverty, nor oppressed by riches. Though food was dear, and taxes were high, they had sufficient for themselves and their family. They had also enough—though at some self-sacrifice—for the education of their children. They were able to start us fair in our journey through life; though others were better favoured than our-

\* "Book of Proverbs," xxx. 1-8.—ED.

selves as regards money and friends. These are evanescent, whereas the advantages of education are permanent. I cannot, therefore, be too grateful to my parents for having so early and so sedulously started us on the road of knowledge.

There was another example which they set us, that of industry—more important even than knowledge. My mother was always at her spinning-wheel in spare hours; she not only wished to keep up the house store of linen, but to spin for the plenishing of her daughters. But the family grew rapidly; linen and cotton became cheaper; and the spinning-wheel was eventually banished to the lumber-room. Then the cow had to be provided for, for milk was wanted as an accompaniment for the porridge, which was the children's usual breakfast. Hence a byre was built, attached to the house at the bottom of the garden. My father was a great gardener, and prided himself upon his auriculas, tulips, polyanthuses, and other flowers, which were the favourites in those days. We had to assist in keeping the garden in order, though most of us would have preferred being at play on those Wednesday and Saturday afternoons. Some would have fished in the Tyne, or sought for bird's nests, or climbed the Garleton hills, or played at patriotism in Wallace's Cave, with home-made bows and arrows. All this, when the opportunity allowed, used to be enjoyed with much zest and relish.