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The Life of John Metcalf

Blinded by smallpox at the age of six, John Metcalf (1717–1810) led a life that might have featured in an eighteenth-century novel. Popularly known as ‘Blind Jack of Knaresborough’, Metcalf had many and varied careers, including musician, horse trader, fish supplier, textile merchant and stage-wagon operator. Developing a method for building roads on marshy ground, using heather and gorse as a foundation, he eventually became one of the eighteenth century’s great road builders, laying over 120 miles of high-quality roads in Yorkshire, Lancashire, Derbyshire and Cheshire. Published in 1795 and based on conversations with Metcalf, this book recounts his life in a series of anecdotes. Metcalf starts with his boyhood escapades and his becoming an accomplished swimmer, climber and gambler. Among the later episodes recounted are his service in raising troops to fight Jacobite rebels, during which he was present at the battles of Falkirk Muir and Culloden.

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The Life of John Metcalf

Commonly Called Blind Jack of Knaresborough

JOHN METCALF



Cambridge University Press
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John Metcalf
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JOHN METCALF AGED 79.
Drawn by J. R. Smith.

THE
L I F E
OF
JOHN METCALF,
COMMONLY CALLED
Blind Jack of Knaresborough.
WITH
Many Entertaining ANECDOTES of his EXPLOITS in
Hunting, Card-Playing, &c.
Some PARTICULARS relative to the
Expedition against the REBELS in 1745,
IN WHICH HE BORE A PERSONAL SHARE;
AND ALSO
A Succinct ACCOUNT of his various CONTRACTS for
Making ROADS, Erecting BRIDGES,
AND OTHER UNDERTAKINGS,
IN
*Yorkshire, Lancashire, Derbyshire,
and Cheshire;*
Which, for a Series of Years, have brought him into
PUBLIC NOTICE, as a most
EXTRAORDINARY CHARACTER.

EMBELLISHED WITH
A STRIKING HALF-LENGTH PORTRAIT.

YORK:
PRINTED BY E. AND R. PECK, LOW-OUSEGATE.
1795.

[*Entered at Stationers' Hall.*]

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TO a generous public little apology will be necessary for offering to their patronage the Story of an Individual, who, under circumstances the most depressing in their nature, has been, for a considerable part of a long life, their assiduous and useful servant.

The Blind, in all ages and countries, have engaged, in a peculiar degree, the sympathy of mankind;—and, where original poverty has been annexed to their misfortune, it has been esteemed the utmost exertion in their favour, to enable them to minister to the amusement of society, as the only means for keeping them independent of it: To this general rule, however, a surprising exception is here shewn; and it is fortunate for the credibility of this little piece, that it is given to the world during the life-time not only of its HERO,
a 2 but

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but of many others who were witnesses of the various extraordinary *facts* it contains.

It is fit, however, to notice the disadvantages under which it now makes its appearance;—and which, from circumstances, were unavoidable: The person whose task it was to render it, in some degree, fit for the press, had much difficulty to encounter in arranging the dates, scarce any attention having been paid to chronological order; and the various anecdotes having been set down, as the recollection of them arose in the mind of the narrator, by an amanuensis wholly unqualified for the purpose, and given in a language intelligible to those only who are well acquainted with the Yorkshire dialect.—To those inaccuracies was added, a literal *disrespect of persons*; the first and third being indiscriminately used throughout. To avoid constantly-recurring egotisms,

ADVERTISEMENT.

v

egotisms, the preference is here given to the third person; though it is feared even that will be found too often in the proper name, where it might have been, in many instances, supplied by the pronoun.—But a long absence having necessarily suspended the attention of the Editor, and the desire for publication before the close of the Harrogate season being urgent, he is not allowed time to correct his own errors. For the same reason, the part containing an account of the share which Metcalf bore under the late Colonel Thornton, in his expedition against the rebels; his various undertakings as a road-maker, &c. have received little other correction than what could be given by interlineation. Throughout, however, not the least violence is done to the facts; to insure the purity of which, the M.S. has been read over to Metcalf himself, and corrected by his desire, wherever any little accidental error has appeared.

Though

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Though it was absolutely necessary to bring the style into something like grammatical order, and to purge it of barbarisms, yet pains have been taken to preserve its simplicity; and in some instances, where a few sentences of dialogue are introduced, the original words remain. Imperfect as it is, a hope is nevertheless entertained that it will prove amusing; and happy shall the Author of its Apology be, if the profits arising from the sale shall prove of sufficient value to smooth the decline of a life, which, though marked by eccentricity, has not been spent in vain.

THE