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978-1-108-02096-1 - The Autobiography of Mrs. Alice Thornton, of East Newton,
Co. York

Alice Thornton

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The Autobiography of Mrs. Alice Thornton, of East Newton, Co. York

Alice Thornton (1626–1707) was a middle-class woman who was best known for her autobiography describing the English Civil War and its effects on her life. She was the daughter of Christopher Wandesford (1592–1640), Lord Deputy of Ireland, and enjoyed a privileged upbringing. His death, followed by the Civil War, caused a crisis in the family, who eventually settled in Yorkshire in considerably straitened circumstances. This volume, first published in 1873 by the Surtees Society, contains the first published edition of Thornton's autobiography, which provides fascinating details of her life. Her relationships with her husband and children are fully described, and she writes candidly concerning her health problems, pregnancies, and the deaths of six of her nine children. Thornton also shows a keen awareness of the lack of autonomy which marriage then entailed. This volume provides valuable information concerning women's place in society during the seventeenth century. For more information on this author, see http://orlando.cambridge.org/public/svPeople?person_id=thoral

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ALICE THORNTON
EDITED BY CHARLES JACKSON



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Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore,
São Paulo, Delhi, Dubai, Tokyo, Mexico City

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781108020961

© in this compilation Cambridge University Press 2010

This edition first published 1873

This digitally printed version 2010

ISBN 978-1-108-02096-1 Paperback

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THE
PUBLICATIONS
OF THE
SURTEES SOCIETY.

ESTABLISHED IN THE YEAR

M.DCCC.XXXIV.



VOL. LXII.

FOR THE YEAR M.DCCC.LXXIII.

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THE
AUTOBIOGRAPHY
OF
MRS. ALICE THORNTON,
OF
EAST NEWTON, CO. YORK.

Published for the Society

BY ANDREWS AND CO., DURHAM;
WHITTAKER AND CO., 13 AVE MARIA LANE;
BERNARD QUARITCH, 15 PICCADILLY;
BLACKWOOD AND SONS, EDINBURGH.

1875.

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At a Meeting of the SURTEES SOCIETY, held in Durham
Castle, on Tuesday, June 2nd, 1874, Mr. ROBINSON in the
Chair,

IT WAS ORDERED, "That the Autobiography of Mrs.
Thornton of East Newton should be edited for the Society by
Mr. Charles Jackson."

JAMES RAINE,

Secretary.

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THE autobiography which is now for the first time given to the world through the medium of the Surtees Society, is a specimen of a kind of family history which lies hid, we believe, among the archives of many of our ancient houses ; concealed there, partly because it touches upon matters of domestic concern, and partly because, in the opinion of its owner, the trivial subjects or the devotional aspirations which such volumes generally record ought not to be brought out into the full glare of day. We can appreciate this feeling, although we cannot concur with it. Works like the present, from their intrinsic merit, have a right to be considered *publici* as well as *privati juris*. Do to them as Archbishop Matthew wrote on the title of one of his favourite tomes, as a hint to its future possessor, *Lege, Relege, Perlege*.

Alice Wandesford (afterwards Thornton), the author of this volume, was born at Kirklington in the southern part of Richmondshire, in February, 1626-7.* The village of Kirklington lies a few miles to the north of Ripon, in a beautifully undulating country, somewhat low, indeed, as in a basin, but surrounded by rich pastures and woodlands. An ancient church, built in the fourteenth century, is an ornament to the village ; and there is a hall, erected in the time of Henry VII., which, although somewhat in decay, has evidently been the residence of a family of distinction and substance. Thither came in the fourteenth century, through an alliance with the heiress of Musters, the

* Page 2.

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race of Wandesford, which enriched itself still farther in the days of Henry VIII. by a double marriage into the house of Fulthorpe. This gave them many additional acres, and a new mansion at Hipswell, on the southern bank of the Swale, between Catterick and Richmond. A fragment of the old hall, decorated with the armorial bearings of the Fulthorpes, may still be seen.

Christopher Wandesford, Mrs. Thornton's father, was a person of no ordinary character and ability. The filial piety of his daughter drew up a memorial of his life, which seems, unhappily, to have disappeared; not, however, before one of his descendants drew from it a few graphic pictures which make us regret the more the loss of the remainder.* Mr. Wandesford's portrait, which is still extant, represents a fair, oval-faced man, with a sanguine complexion and auburn hair; a face in contour somewhat resembling that of the unfortunate Charles, and such as Vandyke loved to perpetuate on his canvass. We see a noble gentleman of a very comely presence and bearing, and this Mr. Wandesford undoubtedly was. He had a good estate in spite of his father's extravagance, and this he considerably augmented without being in any sense penurious. In his domestic virtues he was a model for all. He was a man of strict religious principle and honour, with the keenest sense of what duty and his position demanded. But, more than this; he proved himself a statesman of repute, in an age when statesmen were numerous. The great Earl of Strafford was his cousin, and drew his kinsman, who had been his intimate companion, into that world of politics of which he was so fond. Wandesford accompanied his friend and patron to Ireland, where he became Lord Deputy,

* Written by the Rev. Thomas Comber, and alluded to before. Dr. Whitaker, in his *History of Richmondshire*, gives a very admirable sketch of Mr. Wandesford's life and character.

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acquiring a noble position and estate. Had his life been prolonged, he would in all probability have been rewarded with a peerage, to which his grandson was raised. He died at an early age, killed, it was believed, by hard work, and grief at Strafford's misfortunes and the evil condition of the realm.

Mr. Wandesford's wife was Alice, daughter of Sir Hewett Osborne, whose father, through a romantic adventure,* became one of the wealthiest citizens of London. Sir Hewett was a valiant soldier. He increased his estate by marrying a Fleetwood, by whom he was the sire of Sir Edward Osborne, vice-president of the Council in the North, a gentleman of singular intelligence and wisdom. Sir Edward's sister became Mr. Wandesford's wife. To say that she was worthy of her husband is but slight praise. On his decease she brought her children from Ireland into Yorkshire, not without adventures by the way. For a while they resided at Kirklington; afterwards at Hipswell, the dowager-house of the family. The home education of the children had been of the strictest and most exemplary kind. Father and mother had combined to devote themselves to their good, and few households, probably, even in those days of parental care, were so thoroughly imbued with the principles and practice of religion. Thrice in each day, at six, ten, and nine o'clock in the evening, the family met together for devotion. The mother assembled her children every morning before breakfast, hearing them pray, and read or repeat Psalms and chapters of the Bible, and then they knelt for her blessing. The tenderness with which her daughter speaks of her† in after days shews how deeply seated in her heart was the recollection of her happy childhood. The good father observed them all

* Collins's *Peerage of England*, 1812 ed., 253. Hunter's *South Yorkshire*, i., 142.

† Pp. 100—122.

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with the keenest and most affectionate solicitude. For the guidance of his eldest son he wrote down a series of instructions for his conduct,* which shew that their author was not only a man of shrewd, worldly wisdom, but a person of the highest religious excellence as well. The child for whose welfare Mr. Wandesford was so anxious did not live long enough to carry these exhortations into practice; but the rules which he laid down for his guidance have always been cherished by the members of his family as one of their most precious heirlooms. The example that the father set was not in vain, when it produced such fruits as the home virtues of his daughters and the pious munificence of his grandchild, Mary Wandesford of York.†

The father died, but the mother lived on to carry out his wishes and continue his affection to their children. It was at Hipswell that she chiefly resided, and there, for the most part, Mrs. Thornton grew up to womanhood. She tells us in her book some of the incidents and adventures of her youth, among which the death of her eldest brother is most pathetically described.‡ Her matrimonial projects and perils are also related. They terminated in 1651, in a marriage with William Thornton of East Newton in Ryedale.§ With this portion of Mrs. Thornton's life we are principally concerned.

For more than three centuries the family of Thornton had occupied a fair position among the minor gentry of the North Riding of Yorkshire. In the reign of Edward II. a member of it married an heiress who brought with her the name and estate of East Newton. West Newton, an old property of the Cholmleys, with its ancient chapel and manor-house, lies at a little distance, in the parish of Oswaldkirk. East Newton is situated

* P. 187.

† See her will, p. 323.

‡ P. 57.

§ Pp. 75—82.

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a little under the ridge which divides the vale of Mowbray from Ryedale. Ascend a few hundred yards, and you see Oswaldkirk and Stonegrave beneath you, with the noble woods and castle of Gilling, backed by the round hill of Brandesby with its tuft of trees, on the other side across the deep hollow below you; whilst the eye passes on to Hovingham and the beautiful villages which nestle under the opposite bank. Turn around, and go a short distance towards the north, and you are on the verge of a softer and more widely spreading landscape. You see the Rye winding amid woods and pasture-land, and beyond it are Helmsley and Kirkby Moorside, with half a score of hamlets lying between you and the heather-clad hills in the distance. You are on the edge of a magnificent basin, ornamented by Nature's most lavish hand. On this edge East Newton lies, itself on undulating ground, terminating in rounded hills to the east and south, and sloping gently northwards. The hamlet consists of a few houses clustering around the remnant of an ancient hall. In this many a generation of Thorntons was reared. The most conspicuous person in the family is the collector and transcriber of a number of English romances and verses, preserved in the library of Lincoln cathedral,* of which in modern times great use has been made. Until the beginning of the seventeenth century the family seems to have clung to the Roman Catholic faith. What induced them to desert it we do not at present know; probably it was the persecution to which the Romanists were subjected. We may be sure that the Thorntons would be closely watched, as they were allied by marriage with the Wrights of Plowland in Holderness, who had

* Some notes on the fly-leaves connect this volume with the family of East Newton. I do not think with Mr. Perry that Robert Thornton, archdeacon of Lincoln, had anything to do with it. From the fact that Dean Comber, in his MS. pedigree of the Thorntons, mentions one of the notes on a fly-leaf, I am disposed to think that the MS. was in his time preserved at East Newton.

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a share in the Gunpowder plot. There was a chapel also at East Newton, dedicated to St. Peter,* which it was the great ambition of Mrs. Thornton to restore. Saturated as she was with the religious principle, it would have been a delight to her to have a shrine so near in which she could daily worship. Her husband in this respect would not enter into her feelings. The revulsion from Roman-catholicism made him a moderate Presbyterian, a belief which his brother-in-law, Mr. Denton, would encourage, and Mr. Comber check. Had he lived, Mr. Thornton would have become a devoted Churchman.

Soon after the youthful couple came into Ryedale they began to make great alterations in their house.† Hitherto it seems to have consisted of a block standing north and south; to the east of this they erected a similar building, joined to the other by passages above ground and below. In the new work were several handsome rooms. To the older part they made additions, throwing out windows, and altering the exterior as well as the inside. The whole must have formed a very comfortable home for a Yorkshire gentleman. At the present day that part of the house which Mr. Thornton built is given up to the purposes of the farm. The other is the residence of the tenant. Long passages, a noble kitchen chimney, several nicely wainscotted rooms, and a large four-post bed with fading hangings of yellow, carry you back to the days of the Thorntons. On the outside is the chapel-croft, the site of a building which has disappeared, the remains of an avenue, and a garden. At the entrance into the grounds stands what is called a summer-house, of brick, somewhat resembling a tower, in which, as tradition

* 5 February, 1397-8. Robertus Thornton de Neuton licentiam habet celebrandi missas in capella in villa de Neuton, durante sedis vacatione (Reg. Dec. et Capit. Ebor. sede vacante).

† Pp. 131, 134.

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asserts, Dean Comber wrote his *Companion to the Temple*. Here, surrounded by his books, he could enjoy a hermit's privacy, whilst outside there were the bracing air and the charming scenery of Ryedale to bring back the colour into his pale, consumptive cheeks.

In this quiet retreat, in the midst of green fields, a mile from any village or house of equal repute, Mrs. Thornton ended her days. Her wedded life was only of short duration. Her husband, who had long been in infirm health, died in 1668.* He was a weak, improvident man, but his widow always looked back to him with affectionate regret. Many a lady in her situation would have fixed her residence in some neighbouring town, but Mrs. Thornton's straitened circumstances, as well as her own love for solitude, made her cling more keenly to her husband's home. She came to East Newton in 1662,† and never left it until she was carried to her grave in Stonegrave church in the winter of 1706-7. Solitude this was in one sense, yet the good lady was not without visitors of her own rank and condition. By the neighbouring clergy and the poor, "Madam Thornton," as she was called, was consulted and honoured. She had always the care of her children and dependents; and, better than all, she had resources within, more used then than at present, for which, even in those days of religious exercises and discipline, she seems to have been distinguished. As far as we know, Mrs. Thornton moved but little from her home. Retirement suited her disposition, and brought her into closer contact with the past, in which she delighted to dwell. The short and happy days of her youth came back to her, followed by the misfortunes which began with her marriage and ended only with her death—the loss of her children, the carelessness

* P. 175.

† P. 134.

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of her husband, her many pecuniary embarrassments, and the unkindness of relatives and friends—the constant presence of all these trials in memory or reality sobered and saddened her life. The book itself which she wrote must tell part of her mournful story. To give even a summary of its contents would take away from the pathos which runs through it.

The cause of writing this autobiography was no doubt one personal to Mrs. Thornton herself. It was chiefly to rebut slander and vindicate her own good name. Like many a lady of good birth and fortune, Mrs. Thornton must have experienced some disappointment in the means and position of her husband. They were scarcely answerable to her expectations, and she was, besides, unfortunate enough to be deprived of the greater part of her own inheritance. Thus for more than fifty years she had a struggle with poverty. Her affairs too were occasionally mismanaged, and she was anxious to clear herself from reproach. She had also to contend with one or two cruel slanderers; and to shew to her descendants that she had neither tarnished an honourable name, nor wasted her means by improvidence, she committed to paper the record of her earlier life.

The book is that of a true daughter, wife, and mother. Affection and piety pervade it. The memory and the example of her parents were always uppermost in her thoughts. She never forgets that she is a lady by birth, but it is the inheritance of virtue that she is mainly anxious to commend and perpetuate. It is plain to see how devoted she was to her husband, although by his carelessness and weakness he might at times have been censured with justice. But the true woman shines out when she speaks of her children. Their little ailments, and acts, and words, detailed every now and then with a minuteness which may provoke a smile, were to the affectionate mother the

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main incidents in her life. She was so bound up with their troubles and joys that she carries the reader along with her, and every one must regret that a life so sensitive and loving should have had so large a share of suffering and death. Still she knew from Whom everything came, and submits herself to every dispensation of Providence with true Christian resignation.

Mrs. Thornton's autobiography ends with the year 1669; it is from the diary and letters* of Dean Comber, her son-in-law, that we gain some information about the long remnant of her life. Three of her children, two daughters and a son, grew up to maturity. The son, a child of many hopes and prayers, went to the University, and took Holy Orders, but he got into debt, and died in early middle age under his sister's roof at Durham,† to the unspeakable grief of his mother in Yorkshire. He was the last male heir of his line. The inheritance that should have been his devolved upon his two sisters, the elder of whom, the wife of Dean Comber, was her mother's chief comfort and stay; the younger by an ill-assorted marriage on two occasions brought debt and misery on her family at home. In 1700 Dean Comber died, and was laid in the grave at Stonegrave,‡ of which parish he had continued to be the rector. In 1703 his son William followed him. It seemed as if Mrs. Thornton was to survive every relative that she possessed. She lived on in her husband's house at East Newton, surrounded by worn-out and yet familiar furniture, dispensing her charities out of her scanty estate, and preparing herself for the great change that was to come. She died in 1707, and was buried beside her husband in their aisle at Stonegrave. The monument which she set

* A selection from these papers, which are of considerable interest, is being prepared for publication by the Surtees Society.

† See pp. 303 *n.*, 344.

‡ See his will, p. 330.

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up in his memory, in the shape of a hatchment, with an inscription painted on canvass,* hangs still against the wall. Over her own grave, on the floor, was a stone with nothing upon it save ALICE THORNTON, 1706.

Mrs. Thornton's last will and testament, from which large extracts have been given, is a faithful picture of her principles and character. An early draft of it is in existence, shewing that the document had been long brooded over, and changed and amended. It is probable that the scantiness of the good lady's means made it impossible for her executors to carry out her wishes to the full. The domestic chapel at East Newton was never rebuilt. It was only within the last twenty years that the Thornton aisle at Stonegrave was properly restored and arranged. It was then almost distinct from the church with which it is now incorporated, and at a much higher level than the floor of the nave. Some of the fittings and ornaments which Mrs. Thornton bequeathed to the use of the church are still remembered.

Mr. Comber has in his possession a portrait of his ancestress, Mrs. Thornton. The picture is not a striking one. It represents a middle-aged lady, clad in widow's weeds, which she probably wore to the end of her days after the decease of her husband. In mediæval times she would have been a vowess.

The manuscript, from which this volume is drawn, is in the possession of the lineal descendant of Dean Comber and one of Mrs. Thornton's daughters, the Rev. Henry George Wandesford Comber, M.A., Rector of Oswaldkirk. Mr. Comber has placed it at the disposal of the Surtees Society in the kindest and most unrestricted manner. It consists of three small

* P. 342.

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volumes bound in brown leather, closely written in a small hand, which it is not always easy to decypher. In size, the two first volumes are five inches by three, containing respectively 303 and 291 pages; the third is seven inches by five, containing 216 pages. These three are amplifications of a more tiny book, which has been kindly lent to the Editor by Mr. Thomas Comber, of Newton-le-Willows, another descendant of the Dean.

All these volumes are in Mrs. Thornton's handwriting, but it is evident from the very numerous repetitions which they contain, that they were written at different periods. These repetitions are so considerable, that it has been found necessary not only to make omissions, but to transpose passages here and there, to preserve to a certain extent the chronological sequence of events. Everything, however, has been inserted that is of any interest and value, and the Editor has taken every care to do justice in this respect to the manuscript, and to assist the reader who peruses the work. The plan which he has adopted is the same that was made use of by the Rev. Charles Best Norcliffe, who made a transcript of the Autobiography many years ago, which he has very kindly placed at the Editor's disposal. For this and other assistance, freely and generously rendered, the Editor tenders to Mr. Norcliffe his sincere thanks. He desires also to express his obligations to the Secretary of the Society for his very kind assistance; and to the Rev. Augustus White Wetherall, rector of Stonegrave, for much valuable information derived from the Registers of his parish.

C. J.

July 26th, 1875.