

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-02573-7 - Mary Howitt: An Autobiography, Volume 1

Mary Botham Howitt

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## MARY HOWITT.

## CHAPTER I.

*PARENTAGE AND DESCENT.**1758-1796.*

I CAN best commence my narrative with a few particulars respecting my father and his family. He, Samuel Botham, was descended from a long line of farmers, who had lived for centuries in primitive simplicity on their property, Apsford, situated in the bleak northern part of Staffordshire, known as the Moorlands. It was a wild, solitary district, remote from towns, and only half cultivated, with wide stretches of brown moors, where the undisturbed peewits wailed through the long summer day. Solitary houses miles apart stood here and there. Villages were far distant from each other. There was little church-going, and education was at the lowest ebb.

The town of Leek, in itself a primitive place, might be called the capital of this wild district. It was the resort of the rude farmers on the occasion of fairs and markets. Strange brutal crimes occurred from time to time, the report of which came like a creeping horror to the lower country. Sordid, penurious habits prevailed; the hoarding of money was considered a great virtue.

The Bothams of Apsford, who had accepted the teach-

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-02573-7 - Mary Howitt: An Autobiography, Volume 1

Mary Botham Howitt

Excerpt

[More information](#)

ing of George Fox, might be preserved by their principles from the coarser habits and ruder tastes of their neighbours, but refined or learned they certainly were not. The sons, walking in the footsteps of their fathers, cultivated the soil; the daughters attended to the house and dairy, as their mothers had done before them. They rode on good horses, saddled and pillioned, to meeting at Leek on First-day mornings, and were a well-to-do, orderly set of people.

Now and then a son or daughter married “out of the Society,” as it was termed, and so split off like a branch from the family tree, with a great crash of displeasure from the parents, and “disownment,” as it was called, from the Monthly Meeting. In the ancient records of the Staffordshire Monthly Meeting, preserved by the Friends of Leek, they appear, however, to have been generally satisfactory members, living up to the old standard of integrity of their ancestress, Mary Botham, who, a widow at the head of the house in the days of Quaker persecution, was imprisoned in Stafford jail for refusing to pay tithes. In Besse’s “Sufferings of Friends” Mary Botham is also mentioned as set in the stocks and put into jail in Bedfordshire, leading to the supposition that she travelled in the ministry.

Years glided uneventfully on, generation followed generation, until 1745, when the rumour that “the Scotch rebels were coming” filled the scattered inhabitants of the Moorlands with terror. Even the quiet Friend, John Botham, of Apsford, might have prepared to fight; one thing is certain, he hurried wife and children out of the way, and buried his money and valuables. But there was no need of fighting, hardly of fear. The Scotch soldiers, Highlanders who came to that secluded

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-02573-7 - Mary Howitt: An Autobiography, Volume 1

Mary Botham Howitt

Excerpt

[More information](#)

1758–96.]

PARENTAGE AND DESCENT.

3

spot, only demanded food. They sliced the big round cheeses and toasted them on their claymores at the kitchen fire. James Botham, the youngest son of the house, then a lad of ten or twelve, and who died at the age of eighty-nine, watched them thus employed, and talked of it to the last. I remember as a child being one of his most eager listeners.

John Botham, like another King Lear, divided his property during his lifetime amongst his children, three sons and two daughters. But his eldest son, another John, although he received the comfortable old homestead as his portion, being naturally of a roaming, sociable disposition, removed in the year 1750, at the age of twenty-six, to Uttoxeter, in the more southern part of the county. A small but long-established company of Friends, chiefly consisting of the two families Shipley and Summerland, resided there. William Shipley's sister, Rebecca Summerland, a comely, well-endowed widow between thirty and forty, living in a house of her own, may have been from the first an attraction to the new-comer from the Moorlands.

She had married young, and had at the time of which I speak two sons, remarkably tall and stout youths, both amply provided for, and quite ready to be their own masters. Many men had looked upon the widow as a desirable wife, but she had declined all proposals, until wooed and won by John Botham, six years her junior. She became his wife in 1755, and handed over to him her malting business.

Their first son was born in 1756, and called James; their second, Samuel, in 1758, and he was my father.

Here I may mention a favourite playmate of Samuel's childhood, his first cousin, Ann Shipley, two years his

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-02573-7 - Mary Howitt: An Autobiography, Volume 1

Mary Botham Howitt

Excerpt

[More information](#)

junior. In after years she and another first cousin, Morris Shipley, fell in love with each other; and as the rules of the Society to which they belonged did not allow of first cousins marrying, they set off to Gretna Green, and returned man and wife, to the great scandal of the Friends, by whom they were disowned, but afterwards reinstated in membership. Emigrating to the United States, they became progenitors of the important banking firm of that name. She died in 1843, in the ninety-fourth year of her age, and in the full use of her faculties. My youngest sister Emma, then residing in America, had called on her, and been most kindly received.

My grandmother's second marriage brought her much disquietude. It was an enduring displeasure to her grown-up sons, and made a considerable breach in the hitherto united meeting. I use here the phraseology of Friends, "meeting" in this sense being equivalent to church or religious body. She speedily discovered, moreover, that her husband had no faculty for regular business. He was an amateur doctor, with a turn for occult sciences, and later on for animal magnetism—a system of cure by means of "sympathetic affection" between the sick person and the operator, introduced by Father Hehl, a Jesuit at Vienna, about 1774. For this purpose my grandfather used Perkins's metallic tractors—two small pointed bars of brass and steel, which being drawn over the diseased parts of the body were supposed to give relief through the agency of electricity or magnetism. He also prepared snuffs and vegetable medicines. His roving sociableness, combined with a love of nature, caused him to spend much time amongst friends and acquaintances up and down the country. His accredited healing powers, his grave and scriptural way of talking, his position in the Society of

Friends, he having been an acknowledged minister from about his twenty-fourth year, the interest he took in mowing, reaping, and other agricultural pursuits, perhaps in remembrance of his early years at Apsford, made him welcome in many a village, farmhouse, and Quaker's parlour, whilst he on his part cast aside his wife's anxieties and all needful forethought for the future of their two sons.

Rebecca Botham, therefore, took upon herself the entire management of affairs. She sent the lads to the best reputed Friends' school of that time, kept by Joseph Crosfield at Hartshill, in Warwickshire. Later on she provided handsome apprenticeship fees, and decided their callings in life. It was then a principle with Friends, that their sons, of whatever rank by birth, must be educated to follow some useful trade or profession. Law was forbidden to them, and but few, strange to say, were educated for the practice of medicine, although the art of healing appears peculiarly consonant with their humane and benevolent sentiments.

She placed James with a merchant, the father of a schoolfellow with whom he had formed a strong friendship, and who dwelt in Lancaster; at that time a place of greater maritime and commercial importance than Liverpool. She apprenticed Samuel to William Fairbank of Sheffield, one of the most noted land-surveyors, whether amongst Friends or others.

Unfortunately the ever-prudent and affectionate mother died in 1771, in the first year of the apprenticeship of her youngest son. Probably about the year 1784 or 1785 the young land-surveyor returned to Uttoxeter to establish himself there in his profession. On his so doing he made an appalling discovery. His father had mortgaged the

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-02573-7 - Mary Howitt: An Autobiography, Volume 1

Mary Botham Howitt

Excerpt

[More information](#)

greater part of his wife's property, and a considerable portion of the income that remained was needful to pay the interest.

The ill-will with which the elder half-brothers regarded their mother's second marriage was increased by these after circumstances. They considered that they had not only been robbed of their birthright, but that it had been squandered by their stepfather.

It was a joyless beginning of life to my father. He was, however, young, and endowed with much of his mother's spirit and determination. He sold some of the less valuable property to free the rest, and took up his abode with his father in a humble tenement belonging to them in Carter Street. It consisted on the ground-floor of a whitewashed parlour, with a kitchen at the back. There was in the sitting-room a broad fireplace in a porch-like recess, but without a mantelpiece, and he, wishing to give a little ornamentation or finish to the bald piece of masonry, painted a series of graduated or interlaced lines in grey and black to represent a cornice. It was sure to be accurately and effectively done, as he possessed considerable skill in this sort of delineation. It, however, displeased his father, who, with his rigid notions, considered it indulging the lust of the eye.

Nothing more of the kind was attempted. Indeed my father would soon be too much occupied by his profession to have time for home decoration, being employed to enclose the Heath, an extent of common land to the north of the town; the appointment fell like a gift of God's providence into his hands. This and other professional earnings, together with the aid of his brother James, who had settled in Liverpool as a broker in West Indian produce, gradually enabled him to redeem the

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-02573-7 - Mary Howitt: An Autobiography, Volume 1

Mary Botham Howitt

Excerpt

[More information](#)

1758-96.]

PARENTAGE AND DESCENT.

7

mortgaged estate. Yet even this praiseworthy success was clouded by the death of his brother, who was carried off by fever only six weeks after his marriage, in 1787, to a young Friend, Rebecca Topper. In due course of time a posthumous daughter was born, who was likewise called Rebecca. The widow removed with her parents to Chelmsford, where she later married a Friend named John Marriage; her daughter likewise becoming subsequently the wife of another member of the same family.

My father seldom spoke of the sorrowful commencement of his career. On one occasion he related, however, what, in a moment of weakness and failing trust in God, he had been tempted to do. In those days a popular belief in the occult power of so-called witches prevailed. The most noted of the period and locality was Witch Hatton, who lived in the high Moorlands, from where his father came. To her he went in the darkest time of his perplexity, when he could see no possible means of rescuing his father's affairs from their terrible entanglement. He did not reveal to us, his daughters, what the witch had said or done. He simply told us, with a shuddering emotion, "he had left the house with deep self-abasement, inasmuch as he saw that he had been in the abyss of evil."

About the same period he took the liveliest interest in the first outbreak of the French Revolution, in the supposition that it would lead to the release of the Christian world from "the fetters of Popery," as he termed it. He and two of his acquaintances in Uttoxeter, William Warner, a young lawyer, and Thomas Hart, a young man of fortune, afterwards a banker, joined in the same newspapers and met regularly for the discussion of events which might usher in the second coming of

Christ and the dawn of a new day of human brotherhood. His Quaker principles, however, made him scruple at many deeds and utterances over which his associates rejoiced. He began to perceive that something more abhorrent than even Popery was evolved in the vaunted liberty and equality. By degrees his two associates came to regard him as a renegade, and withdrew their intimacy, but not their personal regard. They themselves remained firm friends. As married men they resided near each other, and their wives and children were on the best terms; and when death carried off the lawyer, the banker, true to a last request, walked once a year over Warner's grave, that he lying below might know that he was not forgotten by his oldest friend.

In the threatening aspect of public affairs, English landowners appear to have become anxious about the amount of acres in their possession, and my father found constant employment. On one occasion, a dispute having arisen regarding the measurement of an estate, which he was called in to adjust, the rival surveyor, on seeing the methodical way in which he set to work, withdrew the very first day, on the plea that it was no use measuring land as if it were gold.

The extreme accuracy of my father's work was, however, appreciated by proprietors, and consequently many large estates in Staffordshire, Shropshire, and even in South Wales were measured by him. His long sojourns in Shropshire brought him intimately acquainted with the Friends at Coalbrookdale, who had a warm regard for him. Here, perhaps, his interest in iron-forges had its beginning, and in South Wales many opportunities for speculation were offered him, which had their fascination, though not always answering his hopes.



Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-02573-7 - Mary Howitt: An Autobiography, Volume 1

Mary Botham Howitt

Excerpt

[More information](#)

1758-96.]

PARENTAGE AND DESCENT.

9

He was a man of a singularly spiritual turn of mind, holding with entire sincerity the Quaker doctrine of the indwelling influence of the Holy Spirit. He sought its guidance with the simplicity and faith of a child; and when disappointment and loss came, received them submissively as a needful discipline, and steadily persevering in his own legitimate calling, gave thanks in the silence of his spirit for the training which the Divine Teacher had vouchsafed.

To quote one instance which he sometimes related. He had become a shareholder, probably with the Bishtons, two brothers of Shifnal, in some coalfields in Carmarthenshire, the coal being stacked at a wharf they had at Kidwelly. Early in the spring he went thither to see how affairs were going on. All seemed prospering, with immense stacks of coal ready to be shipped away as orders came in. It was a satisfactory review, and he anticipated with pleasure the profits that would ensue. The weather was fine, and he went to bed at his lodgings near the shore. He comfortably fell asleep, then almost immediately awoke with a deep depression of mind, a solemn sense of adversity and tribulation. A heavy spiritual burden had fallen upon him. Outwardly all was still, with a sort of deep, dead hush that seemed portentous. It was impossible to sleep. Anon the wind rose, and the voice of the sea came up moaning and roaring like an irresistible force of destruction. He heard the people of the house astir, and the next moment a knocking upon his door and a voice bidding him rise, for the sea was in the town. Hastily dressing, he rushed out. The roaring, foaming waters had entered the street, and the poor distracted inhabitants were seeking to save their possessions. He joined his help to others, snatched up

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-02573-7 - Mary Howitt: An Autobiography, Volume 1

Mary Botham Howitt

Excerpt

[More information](#)

terrified children and carried them off to a place of safety, and led frightened horses and cattle out of danger; gave them all the aid in his power as his bounden duty, believing the whole time that this terrible visitation was sent specially to him. He knew that all those valuable stacks of coal by the shore, which had so lately been his pride, were washed away. "Let them go," was the answer of his submissive spirit. The sea swept through the town with hungry violence, demolishing many houses and causing general ruin and dismay.

The wholesale calamity made his own individual loss seem small. But the solemn and sorrowful experience of that night was never wholly effaced from his mind, and it was an event of which he was averse to speak.

About the year 1791 he was employed by Lord Talbot to survey his estates in Glamorganshire, and he remained in that county some years, pursuing his profession, and still connected with iron and coal works. Now and then in his later years he would relate incidents of his life at this time, which probably was far from unpleasant. Once, whilst engaged on an estate that lay remote from town or village, he was located in a farmhouse. The family consisted of the father, mother, and two daughters, stout young women, who took upon themselves the management of the farm; so that if anything went wrong with the cattle in the evening, they would start up from their female employment and make all right, whilst their father sat quite still. The girls, at the same time, were fond of reading, and not without general intelligence.

One event that occurred during his stay with them my father mentioned with a peculiar unction. The grandmother, who dwelt at some distance, was taken ill, and the mother went to attend upon her. When sitting,