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### Mary Howitt

Mary Howitt (1799-1888) was one of the most prolific female writers and translators of her day, producing over a hundred titles in her lifetime. Held in high regard by her contemporaries, Howitt was best known for her Scandinavian interests, particularly for her translations of Frederika Bremer and Hans Christian Andersen. She also published numerous collections of poetry and stories, sometimes in partnership with her husband, the writer William Howitt. This two-volume autobiography was published posthumously in 1889, and was completed and edited by her daughter Margaret. Volume 1 covers the first forty-four years of Howitt's life: a Quaker childhood, marriage to William Howitt, the birth of their children, and family life in Nottingham, Esher and Heidelberg. It also includes several illustrations of family members and various residences. For more information on this author, see [http://orlando.cambridge.org/public/svPeople?person\\_id=howima](http://orlando.cambridge.org/public/svPeople?person_id=howima)

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# Mary Howitt

*An Autobiography*

VOLUME 1

MARY BOTHAM HOWITT  
EDITED BY MARGARET HOWITT



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*Woodburytype.*

*Yours very sincerely  
Mary Howitt*

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# MARY HOWITT

An Autobiography

EDITED BY HER DAUGHTER

MARGARET HOWITT

“Confide to God that thou hast from Him; oh thou soul weary of wandering! Confide to the Truth, that which is from the Truth within thee, and thou shalt lose nothing.”

ST. AUGUSTINE

*IN TWO VOLUMES*

VOL. I.

LONDON

WM. ISBISTER LIMITED

15 & 16 TAVISTOCK STREET COVENT GARDEN

1889

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How this autobiography gradually grew into shape can best be told in my mother's own words, drawn from the correspondence of half a lifetime.

In 1843 she thus addresses her elder sister, Anna:—

“Many tenderly endearing incidents came crowding into my mind of our young life in Uttoxeter, especially connected with thy unselfish, amiable, sweet spirit, which seems to me without a shade. Thou and I had been for years, nay, all our girlhood, *one*; we had no thought or feeling unshared. There are little incidents which have occurred in my life, such as a look, a changing colour, nay, even a sigh, that will remain in my mind for ever. It is especially so as regards thee and those times. I remember so much, which, I dare say, thou hast forgotten, but which draws my heart, as by the most powerful attraction, to thee. How I shall like to talk over these things with thee!”

Endowed with a retentive memory, deep-rooted affections, and poetic feeling, my mother delighted to speak of the Past with her children. We, in our turn, were always asking this, that, and the other question, when incidents especially charmed and interested us. She had,

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in a little juvenile work belonging to her “Tales for the People and their Children,” and entitled “My Own Story,” given us some details of her childhood. But as the autobiographical sketch ceased when she was ten, it did not suffice us. It seemed to us like a beautiful idyllic romance to hear of the two tender, poetical, enthusiastic sisters, Anna and Mary, as maidens on the banks of the Dove.

The very restricted, silent, almost conventual life which they led, even their quaint, plain attire, had a charm of original purity about it, with a vernal freshness and fragrance as of primroses and cowslips. We were always wanting a great deal more information of a girlhood distinguished by a keen love of Nature, an insatiable hungering and thirsting after poetry and books, and an undercurrent of artistic impulse and vitality. We wished that all her graphic descriptions could be connected together in one clear, consecutive narrative.

In the summer of 1868, much, therefore, to our satisfaction, she wrote a chronicle of her parentage and early life, which, when completed, she read to our aunt Anna, receiving from her additional information and useful suggestions. Then the memoirs remained in abeyance until after my father’s decease in the spring of 1879, when her mind became once more steeped in recollections, especially of her husband’s life and character.

Speaking of William Howitt—whose name and her own are, to use the simile of an American author, indissolubly wedded in English literature—she says:—

“His birthplace, Heanor, was an obscure and rural

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nook linked to the outer world by the carrier's cart, retaining many traces of feudal rudeness, and filled with a motley assemblage of eccentric, undisciplined, but often very humorous individuals, whose odd sayings and doings amused my husband throughout his life. Indeed, the scenes and characters of his secluded youth produced upon him the same permanent fascination as those of mine had done in my case, and which imparts a biographical rather than inventive quality to our works of fiction.

“The bold, happy lad to whom Nature had been nurse, guide, and guardian never had his brain dwarfed by excessive study, and gradually amassed a vast stock of learning. As a young man, when the use of tobacco was not carried to the present excess, he for a short time accepted that indulgence, but perceiving the power it might gain over him, and resolving never to become the slave of any enjoyment, he speedily and entirely relinquished it. He never accustomed himself to the use of wine or spirits, or the habit, either for pleasure or labour, of turning night into day.

“He was through the whole of his literary career a steady, industrious worker. He faithfully fulfilled every engagement in the accomplishment of task-work; and maintained with equal exactitude his regular relaxation and refreshment, and that simply of fresh air and exercise. Thus preserving a sound mind in a sound body, he reached his eighty-seventh year without the failure of any mental or physical faculty.

“He traversed much of Great Britain on foot, princi-

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pally to gather up personal knowledge for his 'Rural Life in England,' his 'Visits to Remarkable Places,' and his 'Homes and Haunts of the Poets.' He was very conscientious in never describing as known to him what he himself had never visited. Hence he became familiar with the character of England, its scenery and its people as existing half a century ago. He had immense sympathy and an infinite fund of humour; wherever, therefore, he paused for a night, or sat to rest by the wayside with peasant people, he left behind him a memory that long survived."

In August 1879 my mother, then recently become a widow, and physically suffering from the shock of her bereavement, writes from Dietsheim, her summer home in the Tyrol, to her elder daughter, Anna Mary :—

"I sit in my upper chamber with the door open to the balcony, the awning up, and a pleasant, gentle breeze refreshing me, as if an angel softly wafted an air-fan. I watch the shadows of the swallows flitting over the sun-lighted awning, but the birds I see not, excepting such as fly past more distantly and leave no shadows. Through the iron railings of the balcony I see the pleasant landscape, and the people busy in their rye-harvest, the crops of which they are bringing home. How delightful it is!—a quiet life, which the Heavenly Father permits, and which is so sweetened by the remembrance of all my dear departed ones.

"Then, in memory, I go back with you to the old times. I do not think I have forgotten any incident. I walk again amid the crocuses of the Nottingham

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meadows, by the full, flowing, placid Trent; wander with you under the old, yet ever-new, elm-trees of Clifton Grove. We visit once more Hardwick Hall, Annesley, and Thrumpton. We sit down as of yore in the friendly basket-maker's cottage at Wilford. All this morning and yesterday I have been occupied with the Past, not, however, so much yours as pre-eminently mine, making in thought a little harmonious narrative of a still unwritten chapter of my youth."

## TO THE SAME.

"*Dietsheim, September 13, 1879.*—What a most beautiful, accurate, and appreciative article on your beloved father's works is that in the July number of the *Edinburgh Review*, under the heading 'Rural England!' I wonder who the writer is. I think some one living in one of the south-eastern counties, from the familiar references to the country features and incidents of such a locality."

"*September 18, 1879.*—I read, write, and take quiet little strolls. Yesterday I gathered the last flowers of the trollius, the golden ball, as we called it when we were children. It was a favourite of your father's. He always brought in the first and the last. When I saw them again, they touched my heart very deeply. I gathered all I could find, and shall keep them as long as they look the least fresh, for the sake of those blessed days, which I did not value as I should have done. If one could only give to each day a stamp of that tender,

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imperishable love which springs up in one's heart when one can no longer pour it out in deeds of service. What would I not give now for a little walk, even on the dullest road, with that true, old companion, with whom I can never more wander on earth !

“How sorry I am you destroyed that copy-book full of your early sketches done at Nottingham ! There was in it your father standing on the parlour-hearth, with its fine lofty mantelshelf. There was, too, old William Theobald, the Quaker Swedenborgian, once baker at Ackworth School, sitting in his antiquated drab suit, at some meal in the kitchen—a splendid sketch. What a pity it is that precious book is gone !”

“*Meran, February 1880.*—Your aunt Anna is getting me all the information possible about our father's family. She is searching, for the purpose, through old Monthly Meeting books, which have been lent her. I cannot tell you how kind and helpful she is. She never seems to feel it a trouble to be bothered by me.”

“*December 21, 1880.*—I had quite forgotten many of my poems and tales, and have begun, when in the humour, to read them. It is just like perusing the works of some one else, so completely had they passed out of my mind. I had in earlier days such a constant, enduring sense of the struggle for life in my soul or in my brain, that I had not time, I regret to say, to elaborate my work, or to dwell upon it with any fondness and lingering. I am, therefore, quite thankful when I come

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upon any really good sentiment or bit of simple, true religion."

Towards the close of 1884 she writes to a friend:—

"My dear married daughter, Anna Mary, came to see us at Meran the beginning of May. It was nearly three years since we had met, and I thought it would probably be our last meeting on earth, I naturally supposing I should be the first summoned hence. She came to Meran at the time of roses, bringing with her a collection of drawings and sketches, which she had earlier made of her parents' 'Homes and Haunts.' She began at once to make sketches of our present surroundings, with a sense of their being needed. Towards the end of June we left for Dietenheim. There too she made many drawings and sketches, as she had always done on her visits to us, for the character of the place was kindred to her spirit. In July the weather was intensely hot. On the night of the 19th a violent gale suddenly came up from the north. The icy wind seemed to pierce her. She complained of sore throat, which rapidly developed into diphtheria; and on the night of July 23rd she passed away. Now the sketches so thoughtfully and lovingly made by her will illustrate the 'Reminiscences,' which I have promised the Editor of *Good Words* to write for that periodical. It seems strange to me, after my long rest from all literary labour, and now devoid of all authorly ambition, to be thus engaged. I shall, however, have Margaret's co-operation."

To her friend, Mrs. Gaunt, she says, later, December 27, 1885:—

“It is very gratifying to us to find that you read those ‘Reminiscences’ with interest, for we desire that they who have known and loved us in former days should do so. I say *we*, because Margaret helps me. I drew up, some years ago, the original autobiography of my youth; and all that follows, being of later date, has to be filled in, and to receive its life-touches, so to speak, from the old family letters, of which we have many hundreds; being all great letter-writers, and, at the same time, fond of describing people and things as well as places. These letters, therefore, are regular chronicles of long-past days, and naturally furnish the groundwork and the incidents of the narrative, which is, as you may believe, interesting, and often somewhat sorrowful. But the canvas on which our pictures are drawn is of necessity so circumscribed, that we are often disheartened by being compelled to omit many portions which are interesting and curious, and even valuable, as being bits of real life. However, these are only ‘Reminiscences;’ and some time or other, if people like them, much fuller pictures may be given.”

The desire being generally expressed for these brief “Reminiscences” to be expanded and amplified, my mother commenced gradually making the needful preparations. I read to her letters for the purpose of selection; she also wrote down, under the name of “Gathered-up Fragments,” past events as they might occur to her, and which her amanuensis had to incorporate in the

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narrative. This occupation, though slowly, was nevertheless steadily pursued to within a few weeks of her death, and when the framework was sufficiently completed for the autobiographic character to be maintained throughout.

By the kindness of various correspondents and intimate friends placing her letters to them at her daughter's disposal, the work has been much enriched, and finally brought to a close. It is hoped in her spirit. Had she been spared to superintend the publication, the only possible difference in this Life might have been a preference given in the selection of letters to those more pointedly bearing allusions to literary pursuits and to the characters and doings of her children—in the maternal eyes those dearer selves, for whose good she counted every labour light and the greatest sacrifice easy. Death, the revealer, seemed, however, to permit the choice rather to be given to such as conveyed a special insight into her character, and some indication of those seeds of love and joy which, in her onward course, she was ever sowing in the hearts of the oppressed and the sorrowful.

MARGARET HOWITT.



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