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Edited by Isaac Todhunter

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I.

1794...1819.

It has been said of Dr Whewell that, “a more wonderful variety and amount of knowledge in almost every department of human inquiry was perhaps never in the same interval of time accumulated by any man.” Such a statement, made by a philosopher so eminent as Sir John Herschel, will naturally excite an interest in the career of the subject of his commendation. That career, as manifested in printed works and in correspondence, I now propose to trace; and I trust that no imperfection in the mode of treatment will prevent the reader from recognising the lineaments of a great and good man.

A remark respecting the name may deserve some attention on account of the person to whom it is due. The following sentence occurs in a letter addressed to Professor Whewell on Jan. 17, 1839, by the late James Bailey, the well-known editor of the English edition of Forcellini’s Latin Lexicon: “I have often thought of communicating to you the origin of your name, which is a very rare one, and mispronounced by all South-country men. It is a corruption of Wheelfell, a place between the rivers North Tyne and Read.” Dr Whewell himself believed his name to be identical with “Wyvill.”

William Whewell was born at Lancaster on May 24, 1794. He was sent first to the grammar school of his native town, but afterwards to that of Heversham in order to be qualified for holding an exhibition at Trinity College, Cambridge, connected with

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LANCASTER AND HEVERSHAM.

it. In a speech at the opening of a new school-house at Lancaster in 1852, Dr Whewell referred with approbation to the training which he had received in Arithmetic, Practical Geometry, and Mensuration; and he acknowledged in appropriate terms the kindness of the master, Mr Rowley. He spoke of the new interest, and the new dignity, which had been given in recent times to the schoolmaster's position, and of the improvement in the conduct of the scholars: it would seem however from the tone of his speech, and from some expressions in his correspondence, that his recollections of the Lancaster school of his youth were not altogether favourable. On Sept. 28, 1854, Dr Whewell preached at Heversham, and his sermon contains allusions to his former familiarity with the place.—“...I say that many such persons do constantly, in their thoughtful moods, turn away their minds from the scenes of movement and struggle, of pomp and splendour it may be, of excitement and expectation—turn them away to some early remembered spot, in which they can imagine such peace and quiet to reside, as they cannot conceive are to be found in the regions to which their subsequent career has introduced them. The mild sunshine and the dew of the morning seem to them still to linger in the places to which their memory thus turns; while all the way that they have since travelled is scorched by the glare of too bright a day, and filled with the stifling dust of crowded paths.” “Some of us who are now here assembled can remember the aspect of these walls, and the sound of these services, for more than one generation of men; some, it may be, for more than two generations, as generations are commonly reckoned. To the eyes of such, how entirely is the aspect of the congregation changed! How few are there of the faces, which were once so well known to us, if in no other way, at least by their regular appearance in their accustomed place on the stated occasions of worship! The countenances of those to whom we were wont to look with respect and affection as our teachers, our guides and directors, our friends and advisers, are here no longer. The silver hairs of those times no longer grace their well-known seat of worship: and heads which then wore the unchanged hue of the spring of life are now hoary with the advance of winter. Eyes then mild with the wise kindliness

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COLLEGE FRIENDS.

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which long years had brought, are now closed for ever: and cheeks which even in age wore the healthy hue which these rural scenes foster, have ere this been blanched by the last paleness."

A few of Dr Whewell's early exercise books have been preserved, and they shew that at school he paid great attention to classical studies, including versification in both Greek and Latin. He entered Trinity College in October, 1812. Some notion of his college life may be gathered from his letters, especially those addressed to Mr Morland, a master in the Grammar School at Lancaster; it is obvious that he entered heartily into the studies and the rational amusements of the place, manifesting the vigorous earnestness which belonged to all he undertook throughout his life. He was fortunate in the society he cultivated, especially in his intercourse with two eminent persons of somewhat maturer age; namely, Herschel, his academic senior by three years, and Richard Jones, who, though his contemporary in the University, was about four years older than himself. He was also intimate with Mr Gwatkin and Mr Wilkinson, both of St John's College, who were two years senior to himself. His familiar associates of his own college seem to have been men of his own year, or junior to himself; among the former we find Julius Charles Hare, Thomas Paynter, and Richard Sheepshanks; and, among the latter, Hugh James Rose. It was, probably, through the medium of Mr C. Bromhead of his own year and college, that Mr Whewell became acquainted with an elder brother, Sir E. Bromhead of Caius College, who took his B.A. degree in 1812. Some years later Sir E. Bromhead introduced to Mr Whewell, and through him to the Cambridge Philosophical Society, the famous mathematical memoirs of George Green.

Some of Mr Whewell's friends, however, were of a less studious turn than those who have been mentioned, and tradition still retains the name of one in whose company not a little of his time was supposed to have been wasted.

In November, 1813, Mr Whewell delivered a Latin declamation in the college chapel, according to a custom which lingered until recent years; his subject was Cæsar and Brutus.

In 1814, Mr Whewell gained the Chancellor's Medal for the

best English prize poem on the subject of Boadicea. The poem was printed in the *Classical Journal*, number xix., and has been reproduced in various collections of University Prize Poems; it consists of 340 lines. Sir John Herschel, himself a cultivator of versification, speaks of this as “a spirited production, which may be read with pleasure as something beyond a college exercise, and evidencing that strong vein of poetical talent which showed itself on many subsequent occasions.”

In the poem, speaking of some wonders which were reported to have occurred, Mr Whewell says:

Yes, they have mark'd; and speak in portents dread
 The wrath that trembles o'er th' oppressor's head.
 Push'd from its base his idol Victory falls,
 Unbodied furies howl along the walls,

I quote these lines for the sake of the word *unbodied*. In the well-known poem by Shelley, entitled *To a Skylark*, which is dated 1820, we have the line

Like an unbodied joy whose race is just begun.

The word *unbodied* here always puzzled me, and I remember some years since seeing a paper in which a critic pointed out many apparent inaccuracies or misprints in Shelley's poems, and conjectured that here for *unbodied* we ought to read *embodied*, which is used more than once by the poet elsewhere. I do not know whether the occurrence of the word in *Boadicea* lends any support to the received text of Shelley's line.

A candidate for a poetical prize in the University would naturally avail himself of an opportunity to celebrate the praises of beauty.

O Beauty! heaven-born Queen! thy snowy hands
 Hold the round earth in viewless magic bands;
 From burning climes where riper graces flame
 To shores where cliffs of ice resound thy name,
 From savage times ere social life began
 To fairer days of polish'd, soften'd man,
 To thee, from age to age, from pole to pole,
 All pay the unclaim'd homage of the soul.

KEEPING AN ACT.

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But *snowy* seems scarcely a satisfactory epithet when we consider the *burning climes*; we must at least restrict it to the *candidior nive*, and omit the *frigidiorque manus* of a famous line.

A letter dated Lowick-bridge, July 21, 1814, from Joshua King, who was senior wrangler in 1819, to Mr Whewell, conveys the writer's warmest thanks for the valuable and much esteemed present of the prize poem,—the perusal of which he does not doubt will give him infinite pleasure.

I have already alluded to the instruction in the elements of mathematics which Mr Whewell received at the Lancaster Grammar School; he also had the benefit of some training from Mr John Gough, the famous blind mathematician of Kendal: see the *Biographical Notices of some Liverpool Mathematicians*, by Mr T. T. Wilkinson, in Vol. xiv. of the *Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire*. A letter is preserved addressed to Mr William Whewell, Friarage, Lancaster, dated Kendal, Sep. 26, 1814, and signed J. Gough; it relates to the collision of hard bodies, but is not in accordance with the theory on that subject adopted by writers on mechanics.

At the beginning of 1815, Mr Whewell was looking forward to that part of his academical exercises which was called *Keeping an Act*. He says in a letter to his friend Mr Morland on January 3, 1815, "I have not time to explain the whole ceremony to you at present, but it consists in a person getting up into a box to defend certain mathematical and moral questions, from the bad arguments and worse Latin of three men who are turned loose into an opposite box to bait him with syllogisms. In the mean time I am seized with an inconceivable desire to read all manner of books at once, and have at this present writing no less than two folios and six quartos of different works upon my table, which would prove to any one who is in the habit of reading that I am very idle."

In the early part of 1815 a fever broke out at Cambridge, and Mr Whewell left the place for a short time, and visited London in company with Mr Gwatkin.

An interesting fact with respect to Mr Whewell's associates at this time is recorded in a letter to him from T. Forster, dated Tunbridge Wells, Dec. 24, 1841. "We have all made some ad-

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vances in mere *physical* science, but in *metaphysics*, as far at least as I am concerned, I am not conscious of having advanced one single step, since the period when you and I and Herschel and Babbage used to meet at our Sunday morning's philosophical breakfasts in 1815." This Mr Forster seems not to have taken any degree at the University; his name occurs as the author of 35 papers in the Royal Society's Catalogue of Scientific Papers. He was about seven years older than Mr Whewell, who was thus the youngest of the philosophical party.

Mr Whewell spent the Long Vacation of 1815 in Cambridge, preparing himself for the approaching mathematical examination; his friend Mr Gwatkin urged upon him the necessity of vigorous study, but it appears from Mr Whewell's reply that he by no means neglected amusement and relaxation.

On taking his B.A. degree in 1816, Mr Whewell was second wrangler; it had been anticipated that he would have been senior, but that distinction was gained by Edward Jacob of Caius College, then under twenty years of age. At the end of a week's examination the first and second wranglers stood out clearly from all their competitors; the next eight wranglers were provisionally bracketted, as being nearly equal in merit, and according to the custom then prevalent they had to undergo a further scrutiny in order to settle their relative places. The order of the names was preserved in the award of the Smith's prizes, Mr Jacob obtaining the first, and Mr Whewell the second.

Edward Jacob possessed great ability, which had been carefully directed by his college so as to bear with concentrated force on the mathematical competition. Mr Whewell's own taste would naturally lead him to the more varied study which has always been encouraged at Trinity College; that great foundation can, without danger, pay less exclusive regard to mere academic triumphs than its smaller rivals. Mr Jacob went to the bar and justified the reputation he had gained in the University; but he died at an early age, as years are reckoned in that laborious profession, and thus he did not reach the conspicuous eminence which had been anticipated for him; so that his fame mainly rests on the fact that he outstripped so formidable a competitor in the Cambridge race.

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HERSCHEL AND JONES.

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The father of Edward Jacob was William Jacob, known for his writings connected with Political Economy, and especially for his work on the *Production and Consumption of the Precious Metals*. Mr Jones, the friend of Mr Whewell, was intimate with the Jacob family—attracted to them probably by his devotion to the same studies as the father, and by his connexion with the same college as the son—and the name of Jacob is occasionally mentioned in the letters of the two correspondents, but the allusions are generally to the father and not to the son.

The list of graduates for the year 1816, though exhibiting a good supply of names afterwards distinguished, has only one besides that of Mr Whewell which became known in science, namely that of his friend and fellow-collegian Mr Sheepshanks.

Mr Whewell, in accordance with a common practice, engaged in private tuition after taking his B.A. degree, and continued in this occupation for about seven years. Among his pupils were Mr Thorp, now Archdeacon of Bristol, Mr Mansel, probably son of the former Master of Trinity College, Mr Dodsworth, Mr Heneage, Mr Kenelm Digby, the late Sir J. W. Lubbock, and the late Mr Horace Waddington, afterwards Under Secretary for the Home Department. The tutor does not seem, however, to have taken very kindly to his employment, since it absorbed the time which he was eager to spend in incessant study.

In the summer of 1816 Mr Whewell passed some weeks at Burlington with a party of pupils. In a letter to his friend Mr Wilkinson he records a fall from his horse, which made him blind and deaf for five minutes, but left no permanent injury.

In the latter part of the year we find him complaining of one of the inevitable vexations of prolonged residence in college—the departure of friends from Cambridge. He says in a letter to Mr Morland, dated Nov. 10, 1816, with reference to Mr Herschel and Mr Jones: “Two of my most intimate acquaintances, and I will add two men of the greatest intellectual powers and attainments that I ever saw or ever expect to see, have left the university; and their departure has made an irrecoverable gap in my enjoyments.”

In March, 1817, Mr Whewell says in a letter to Mr Herschel

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that he has six pupils, and that he is or ought to be reading for a fellowship. Towards the end of the month he was a prominent actor in a scene which he himself describes in a letter to his friend Mr Rose, and which is still well remembered by one who was present. The *Union* is the name given to a society at Cambridge, composed principally of the younger residents in the University, which furnishes the advantages of a library and reading rooms, and encourages debates on set subjects among its members. It now possesses an ample and well-arranged building, but in those early days of its history it was in a less flourishing condition, and hired a room at the Red Lion Inn. Mr Whewell was President in the month of March 1817, when Dr Wood, at that time Vice-Chancellor, took with him the Proctors, Mr Okes of Caius College, and Mr French then of Pembroke College and afterwards Master of Jesus College, together with a tutor from Trinity and from St John's, and proceeded to the place of meeting. The Proctors were sent into the room to desire the members to disperse, and to meet no more. The President, mindful of the dignity of his position, requested the messengers to withdraw that the Society might consult on the matter. This could not be granted, but a deputation, consisting of the President, Mr Thirlwall, and Mr Sheridan, was permitted to have an interview with the Vice-Chancellor. The deputation was urgent, but the Vice-Chancellor was obdurate; and all that was conceded was permission to finish the current debate, and to retain the room merely for the purpose of reading.

Succeeding Vice-Chancellors, however, did not exhibit much interest in the matter, and so the debates were after no long interruption renewed, but in order to evade the formal prohibition some obvious artifices were employed; a member for instance would move that a certain newspaper should be discontinued, and then criticise at length the political principles which that newspaper advocated.

It is natural to conjecture that Mr Whewell hesitated for some time as to the choice of his future profession; he does not seem to have been fond of lecturing or of private tuition, and he did not take orders until about 1825. On this subject we may give an extract of a letter to him; the writer was Richard Whit-

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ADVICE AS TO A PROFESSION.

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combe, who by the evidence of his letters, and by the testimony of those who still remember him, was a man of considerable ability; he was an intimate friend of Mr Hugh James Rose, went to the bar, and probably died early. He is, I presume, the author of a short article published in Vol. I. of the division of History and Biography in the *Encyclopædia Metropolitana*, entitled *Menanther, Middle and New Comedy*. Mr Whitcombe says in a letter dated April 29, 1817: "But how stands the case with you? What is your beau ideal of life? To attain to eminence in, and efficiently serviceable to your country—or to gain a name, in an age better able to appreciate merit than this, by pushing on the land-marks of knowledge? I think you know me too well to accuse me of flattery—and therefore I will say that your object ought to be of one of these kinds. If you are outrageously modest, remember that your *model* must be of perfection. Seriously, you cannot but feel that you have talents to succeed to any extent you wish—flattery from me to you is out of the question—it would be absurd, but it would also be what is far worse. Your talking, then, of not having prospects of success in the law, I overrule at once. I ensure your succeeding there—but, if I must give you a decided opinion, I do not wish to see you enter on it. I think that your mind is calculated to do more, and to receive more enjoyment in the active and unfettered pursuit of knowledge of its own selection than it would in the shackles of any profession. The knowledge of law, as a science, studied philosophically, I have no doubt is delightful—even the detail of it I should like—and yet—Special Pleading!—but will your thirst of knowledge be slaked from this one stream how pure so ever? and if, in the midst of your professional labours, you ever cease to sigh for more frequent and extended opportunities of pursuing genuine Science, will it not be when you have torpified the vigour of a Mind which was not endowed with strong powers for inactivity or prostitution. Do not dread the necessity of an eternity of Cambridge. Live in London if you like—your fellowship will support you for the present, without drudging your intellects at £40 per annum for stupid pupils, and I shall be vexed if you do any such thing after October. And, when you see how very little talent has raised very many

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men do not doubt that you may raise yourself by your mind, without sticking a wig on your head. Literature, I honestly think, is your natural bent. If so, *ruat cœlum*, follow it! But you must judge for yourself."

We see the impression which Mr Whewell's ability had already made on a clever friend, and we may infer that the friend had been consulted as to the choice of a profession: moreover the advice given was substantially, if not literally, followed. A passage in a sermon which Dr Whewell preached in his college chapel on Oct. 23, 1864, seems to recall the dread of a continued residence at Cambridge which he had himself felt nearly half a century before. "But some of you may continue to be resident members of this community for many years, or it may be for the whole of your lives. Such a lot may, at the present moment, appear to you dreary and desolate. Yet it need not be so. Such a lot is not at all inconsistent with the constant culture of all kindly affections, with an enduring enjoyment of literary pleasures, and with a truly Christian spirit, enduring all things and waiting calmly for the end in faith and hope."

In the year 1817 Mr Rose proposed to translate from the French the work of Lacroix on the *Application of Algebra to Geometry*, and Mr Whewell half promised to assist him, and to furnish some notes; but the scheme was never carried out, for Mr Whewell was not very earnest, and Mr Rose himself seems to have been much more devoted to literature and theology than to mathematics.

Mr Whewell spent the Long Vacation of 1817 in Cambridge, preparing for the ensuing Fellowship Examination at his college. A long letter addressed to his friend Mr Rose in September discourages the latter from proceeding with an ambitious scheme he had formed of starting a Cambridge Review: Mr Whewell points out with great judgment the difficulties which would beset such a young staff of writers as it was proposed to employ.

Mr Whewell was elected Fellow of Trinity College in October, 1817; five others obtained Fellowships at the same time; namely, G. Waddington, J. Wigram, and Moody, who were a year senior, and Sheepshanks and E. B. Elliott, who were of the same year.