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Walter White

Excerpt

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THE JOURNALS
OF
WALTER WHITE

CHAPTER I

EARLY YEARS, 1811—1844

THE writer of these diaries was born at Reading on April 23, 1811, of parents whose intellects and education were far superior to those of most tradespeople early in this century. In religion a Methodist and by trade a cabinet-maker, the father brought up his son to follow in his footsteps. Quoting Walter White's recollections of his early childhood, written in 1843, we find he says—

My earliest recollections go back to the time when I was about three or four years old, and the only circumstances I remember of this time is repeating a hymn sitting on my father's knee

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—this was a favourite fireside occupation on the Sabbath afternoon. I have some dim remembrance of being praised for my repetition. The hymn was, I believe, one of Miss Taylor's on Creation; very simple, and well adapted to the mind of a child; one line of it I have never forgotten from that time to the present, which arises, I suppose, from its flowing musically and pleasantly off the tongue—"The rivers and the rills." . . . My school reminiscences of this period are but few and uninteresting. I went with my brothers and sisters to a school for little boys and girls, kept by a maiden aunt of ours, who is yet alive and to whom we are indebted for initiation into the mysteries of the alphabet, and *ba, be, bi, bo, bu*. My memory retains no impression of the manner in which the victory over these battalions of difficulty was achieved. But after the completion of the initiatory process, the safe passage of the *pons asinorum*, I remember that I could spell better than any other of my school-fellows and was always ready with my answers to the Catechism, in which we were exercised regularly once a week. I was fond of reading and anxious for instruction, but being of a fearful and timorous disposition, and withal not a little dull and

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stupid, I was universally considered a dunce. My ignorance of everything except the mere words of my book was complete, still I was always at the head of the Testament or reading class, till one fatal day, seduced by a bribe from a boy who was my senior by two or three years, and whose knowledge of general matters was as great as mine was small, seduced I say by this boy into a betrayal of my position, I suffered my eye to wander from my book, became confused when my turn came. My betrayer took advantage of this, read my verse, and walked *up* into my place while I *descended* into his. I shall never forget the agony of mind this caused me, how bitterly I repented of my folly, and determined to hold myself constantly on the watch to recover the position I had so foolishly lost. Young as I was I had the sense to understand the triumph of my opponent was not a fair one, one for which I was indebted to my weakness rather than to his own talent. I do not remember that I ever again occupied my former position at the head of the class.

Sewing was a pursuit I sometimes followed while at this school, my performances in this feminine art were very well and neatly executed. I had a natural love of neatness and order and

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was not a little pleased when I carried home a bag as the fruits of my industry. This love of order has remained with me, an untidy room was and is my abhorrence. When a boy I have often seized an opportunity when the rest of the family were absent to put the room where they had been sitting in complete order, and then disappear that their surprise might be the more complete on their return. I have often thought it strange that with all this love of order, I have never been able to arrange my thoughts in a clear and definite manner. In an argument as in reading I am very apt to lose sight of what has preceded and thus become confused and barren. I was at this time a most egregious coward, for which base quality I think I am partially if not wholly indebted to the advice of my mother. Her advice was always to run away from a dog, and if a boy met and assaulted me in the street always to take to my heels, never to think of defending my own rights but to submit to anything rather than to fight. "It is better," she would say, "to run a mile than to fight a minute." The consequence of this was that I became mischievous; it was not in the nature of boyhood to bear everything without attempting in some sort at retaliation. I there-

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fore sought all opportunities of tormenting persecutors where I could do so without injury to myself, but in this I lost my self-respect. I despised myself for not being bold enough for a fair stand up fight. Could I have done this as I often most earnestly longed to do, I should have acquired greater firmness and independence of character and have entertained juster views of myself and those around me. I have often had to deplore this timidity, for when I have been on country walks and the footpath has led through a farm yard where there was a dog I have either made a great detour or stopped short in my walk, though a beautiful view perhaps lay beyond and which was the object of my stroll. A shower of rain would at the time of which I now write have put me into an agony of fear, from some unaccountable cause the sight of rain excited in me the deepest turns, and if I were indoors no inducement could tempt me out. After I had got over this fear it clung to me in another form which was the dread of bathing.

He resided at Reading with his parents, doing upholsterers' and cabinet-makers' work until October 1830, when he seems to have undertaken one of the tours he so much loved to different parts of England at first, and later on

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extending from the United Kingdom to different parts of the Continent. In 1830 he went to Derbyshire and Staffordshire, where he married at the age of nineteen, the only entry on the subject being in French, “J’allais à M . . . et je fis une heureuse alliance.” He writes—

“Jamais je n’ai tant pensé, tant existé, tant vécu, tant été moi, si j’ose ainsi dire, que dans les voyages que j’ai fait seul et au pied. La marche a quelque chose qui avive et anime mes idées. Je ne puis presque penser quand je reste en place, il faut que mon corps soit en branlé pour y mettre mon esprit. La vue de la compagne, la succession des aspects agréable, le grand air, le grand appetit, la bonne santé que je gagne en marchant, l’éloignement de tout ce qui me fait sentir ma dependance, le tout qui me rappelle à ma situation, tout cela degages mon âme, me donne une plus grand audace de penser.”

As early as in the beginning of 1833 we find him writing (with some anticipation of the last three years of his life)—

I find that much valuable time has been lost and misspent, many fond anticipations have been destroyed, and many schemes have been frustrated, many acquirements that I might have gained I have not gained. Let this not be the

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case at the end of my next book. May I become more active and less selfish, may I acquire habits of study and firm application. Here I am, in the possession of a moderate income, striving to confine my expenses within it, and to enjoy as many as possible of the comforts of life. I believe that I am happy and contented . . . and I hope to train up my family in a manner at once parental and creditable. What my income or circumstances may be at the ending of the next book the Searcher of hearts alone knows. May I be able to review the time elapsed with more real satisfaction than at present.

In February 1833, he and his family had settled down near his parents in Reading, where he was busily occupied in making furniture during the day and improving his mind at night. On March 1, 1833, he writes—

Read Latin ; the more I study this language the more I like it, and the more my desire to know it increases.

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1833.

March 2. Working at wardrobe, bought watch. In the evening got my usual monthly publications, 'Chambers' Journal' and 'The Penny Magazine,' peculiarly interesting. Commenced tabling 'Companion to the newspaper.'

March 5. Finished wardrobe and getting pianoforte in at window in Castle Street, a very troublesome, fatiguing job. Not able to study so read 'Rivals' in the evening, an interesting work.

March 6. Made deal picture frames, finished loo table, and began two basin stands. Working late in the evening, began chest of drawers. Read Latin.

March 13. Began wings to wardrobe and two Loo tables. Paid part of bill to Mr. Jacobs and Page, nothing like being out of debt.

March 15. Working part of day at Loo tables, cogitating during the day on my tale of the Puritans, hope it will succeed, courage! working late in the evenings.

March 17. Mr. Rowe preached from this text,

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“Let the words of my mouth.” Rained fast on coming out of chapel. Mem.: very vulgar to run home.

March 18. Received parcel containing Latin books from Underwood with a very witty letter.

March 20. Feel much inclined to continue writing and to finish my tale which I hope may prove successful.

March 21. Worked hard all day. It will not do to indulge idle habits. Read ‘New Monthly’ after tea, some of the articles good, wish I could write such.

March 22. At 12 o’clock assisted in removing a pianoforte from Mr. Lomers’ to Caversham, succeeded to perfection, no damage. Very hungry and no food.

March 25. Marie wrote letter to Smith and Elder, hope to know the fate of manuscript before end of week.

March 26. Cogitating much on my tale during the day, must set myself assiduously to work to finish it.

April 1. Working at wardrobe, application in its strictest sense essentially necessary. Got magazines in the evening, read them.

April 2. Working at wardrobe, fine working weather. Too much inclined to be idle, of no

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use to make resolutions without strictly adhering to them.

April 10. Anticipating perhaps too much from my tale but hope will linger.

And on the 13th, the entry “Manuscript returned from London.” But this does not seem to have deterred him, as two days later he mentions that he is again writing, and on the 23rd he says—

Reflecting on wealth and happiness. Remain satisfied with my lot and envy not others. Strive to retain this feeling.

May 27. Wonder if I shall become religious or learned, surely not without trying; may Providence assist me.

May 31. Musing on poetry and prose during the day, felt many ambitious thoughts arise but only moderate ones.

June 1. Felt in quite a poetical mood in the afternoon, but had not time to indulge or to make use of it.

June 15. I should like to be a preacher, that is a real good one. Bought first number of ‘History of America.’

Two days afterwards an accident befell him and he cut the top off his finger, which prevented