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Walter White

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The Journals of Walter White

Although he left school at fourteen to work as an upholsterer and cabinet-maker, Walter White (1811–93) would spend forty years working in the library of the Royal Society. White was mostly self-taught, a voracious reader who also learnt German, French, and Latin, and a diligent attender at lectures and other events offering self-improvement. After a brief emigration to the United States, he returned to Britain in 1839, and was offered a post as ‘attendant’ in the Royal Society’s library in 1844; this led to his cataloguing much of the collection, and in 1861 he was appointed Librarian. He became acquainted with many of the Society’s members, including Thomas Carlyle, Charles Darwin, and Lord Tennyson. These journals, published posthumously by his brother in 1898, begin with a brief account of his early years before charting his intellectual progress and career, ending in the year he retired, 1884.

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Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town,
Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi, 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/9781108045131

© in this compilation Cambridge University Press 2012

This edition first published 1898

This digitally printed version 2012

ISBN 978-1-108-04513-1 Paperback

This book reproduces the text of the original edition. The content and language reflect the beliefs, practices and terminology of their time, and have not been updated.

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THE JOURNALS
OF
WALTER WHITE

ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF THE ROYAL SOCIETY

WITH A PREFACE BY HIS BROTHER
WILLIAM WHITE
AND
A PORTRAIT IN PHOTOGRAVURE

LONDON
CHAPMAN AND HALL, LD.
1898

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RICHARD CLAY & SONS, LIMITED,
LONDON & BUNGAY.

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PREFACE

WALTER WHITE'S *Diary* owes its interest to various sources. His long employment at the Royal Society brought him in contact with many eminent persons during a long stretch of years, from 1844 onwards; and the numerous topics, literary as well as scientific, suggested by these meetings, are amply dealt with in the journal from which this volume is compiled. Tennyson and Carlyle, Faraday and Tyndall, Grove and Huxley, Wheatstone and Airy, are names which will at once occur to the memory of the reader of this volume. Their number might be added to from all quarters; but it is necessary here only to point out the salient features of the *Diary*, and not to summarize its contents.

Another element of interest is associated with the journal from the fact that it records the life—almost from day to day—of a man who strove unsuccessfully to earn a satisfactory livelihood as a cabinet-maker, who educated himself far above the level of most gentlemen of his day, and who eventually obtained a position which was not only congenial to his tastes, but useful to those with whom he was associated. The contrast shown in these pages between the workman of early days, and the Assistant Secretary of the Royal Society of later years, is one of no small interest and attraction. In 1844 Walter White became Sub-Librarian to the Royal Society, then in Somerset House. Within ten

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years he was promoted to the post of Assistant Secretary. In both capacities he undoubtedly acquired the faculty of making himself extremely useful to the Fellows of the Royal Society. He had long been able to read, write, and speak French and German, and had some knowledge of other continental languages. His general education, mainly self-acquired, was thorough and practical. He was accurate, painstaking, and receptive. He saw when a proper chance in life was offered him, how it could best be used to the advantage of himself and of others. And every characteristic here indicated is traceable in his Diary. The original handwriting of the diarist has been carefully copied and followed. The journal itself is contained in four octavo manuscript volumes, closely written in a small, and not always clear hand. It has been thought better to give mistakes where they occur, in the form in which the diarist has recorded his thoughts.

Passages relating to the late Lord Tennyson have been selected and arranged in chronological order as a separate chapter. It is evident that the two men had something in common, at all events for a time. No effort is made to add to the interest which the Diary possesses, from extraneous sources, except perhaps in printing the letters to which Walter White owed his introduction to his predecessor in the office of Assistant Secretary of the Royal Society, and it has rarely been found necessary to burden the pages of the volume with matter that is not contained in the Diary itself.

The foregoing remarks fully express the reasons which have induced me to consent to the publication of selections from my brother's Diaries. As the eldest

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son of a large family, he was looked up to by his juniors with some deference and admiration. Always with a strong sense of duty, he followed his daily calling with conscientious diligence while he engaged with much zest in the recreations and amusements common to youth and early manhood, in all he did manifesting a lively humour.

My brother was a diligent reader and student from his school-boy days, and early committed his thoughts to writing, both in prose and verse; in the latter often developing the humorous in relation to the incidents of family life, but often also to express his filial regard for parents and home. Some of these rhymes, on varied subjects, appeared in several periodical publications, and were afterwards published in a separate volume.

As will be seen in the earlier pages of the Diary, my brother's aspirations were never fully satisfied until he found congenial employment in the service of the Royal Society, in which he was engaged for upwards of forty years, with so much satisfaction to himself and his principals.

WILLIAM WHITE.

*Edgbaston, Birmingham,
October 1897.*

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