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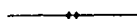
978-1-108-04544-5 - Threading My Way: Twenty-Seven Years of Autobiography

Robert Dale Owen

Excerpt

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THREADING MY WAY.



“Que faites-vous là, seul et rêveur ?”

“Je m’entretiens avec moi-même.”—

“Ah ! prenez garde du péril extrême

De causer avec un flatteur.”

PAPER I.

MY ANCESTORS.

IN the winter of 1858-59, I was threading the streets of Glasgow, Scotland, seeking the residence of an old friend, formerly my father’s confidential clerk, and who still, though an octogenarian, rejoiced in the name of John Wright, junior.

It was a portion of the city that had grown up many years after I had known anything of Glasgow. Uncertain of my way, and having for some time scrutinized the countenances of the passers-by, as is my wont before accosting any one in the street, I met with a face that pleased me : hale, ruddy, the shadow of some sixty years resting lightly and cheerfully upon it, despite the snow on head and beard ; a benignant face, of leisure, that did not look as if it would grudge five minutes to a stranger. It lit up kindly when I asked how I should find the street I sought.

“I am going in that direction, and shall be glad to walk

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with you." Then, after a pause: "You'll be a stranger in Glasgow?" The well-known accent and the turn of phrase brought all my youth back to me; and, in reply to my smile, he added: "Or are you a Scotchman yourself, may be?"

"I scarcely know," I replied, "whether to call myself a stranger or not. It is more than thirty years since I have seen your city, yet Glasgow is my native place."

"Ah! In what part of the city were you born?"

"In Charlotte Street."

"Were you? But in which house was it?"

"In the last house on the right hand, next to the Green; close to the iron gates that used to close the street."

"Why, man! That was David Dale's house! How in the world did you happen to be born there?"

"Very naturally. I am his grandson."

"An Owen, then?"

"Yes."

He stretched out his hand; and the firm, Scottish grip made my fingers tingle.

David Dale was a remarkable man; and he lived and laboured through a busy and prosperous life, during a remarkable period of time. He witnessed, and did his part in aiding, the world's first Titanic steps in Industrial Science.

Born in Ayrshire and in the year 1738, in humble circumstances; educated, as all children of reputable parents throughout Scotland even then were, in a strictly disciplined public school; he evinced, even while at work as a journeyman weaver, what became afterwards his chief characteristic,—expending regularly a portion of his scanty wages in relieving his poorer neighbours. With the steady perseverance of his country he gradually won his way to riches and position; so

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that, ere he had much passed middle age, he was already a wealthy merchant and bank director.

When nearly forty, he won the hand of Miss Ann Caroline Campbell, daughter of John Campbell, who, having been, during the rebellion of 1745, Cashier of the Royal Bank of Scotland, got together a body of still loyal troops, conveyed the specie belonging to his bank to the castle of Edinburgh, which held out against the Pretender; and so saved to the government a large amount of funds. This John Campbell came of a noted family and had a romantic history; his grandfather being a Scotch earl.

John Campbell of Glenorchy, born 1635, and created first Earl of Breadalbane in 1681, was (according to Nisbet) a man of sagacity, judgment, and penetration.* He aided King Charles II., and sought to induce Monk to declare for a free Parliament. He served in Parliament for the shire of Argyll, and was privy councillor under James II.

When King William had unsuccessfully endeavoured to reduce the Highlands, Breadalbane undertook it singly with twelve thousand pounds; and “effected in such a manner as to obtain the thanks of James for saving his people whom he could not succour.” †

“Being accused of complicity in the massacre of Glencoe, the Parliament, in 1695, instituted a process of high treason against him; he was committed prisoner to Edinburgh castle, but afterwards released without trial; it is said, because no evidence was found against him.

Macky, a contemporary, says of him, probably not without reason: “It is odds, if he lives long enough, but he is a duke: he is of a fair complexion, and has the gravity of a Spaniard,

* Douglas, *Peerage of Scotland*, p. 238. † *Ibid.*, p. 230.

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is as cunning as a fox, wise as a serpent, and slippery as an eel.”*

He died in 1716 ; leaving, by his wife, the Lady Mary Rich, daughter of the first Earl of Holland,—

1. Duncan, Lord Ormelie.
2. John, second Earl of Breadalbane.
3. The Honourable Colin Campbell, of Ardmaddie.

For this Colin Campbell, who was my great-great-grandfather, I have a far greater respect—with ample reason, I think—than I could ever entertain for that cold-blooded father of his, even if the complicity of the latter in the shocking affair of Glencoe had never been surmised. The son, who was an officer in the Life Guards, seems, indeed, neither to have had the gravity, nor the cunning, nor the worldly wisdom of his ancestor ; but to have possessed instead, inherited perhaps from his mother, the richer qualities of the heart.

At all events this Colin, true to his pastoral name, fell desperately in love with a Miss Fisher, the handsome daughter of a respectable farmer living on his father’s estate. If he had seduced and deserted her, it would no doubt have been passed over, as a mere peccadillo, to be expected in the career of any young noble of that day. But he committed that unpardonable sin, for which we have no appropriate word—not having yet learned (thank God !) to consider it a sin—but which the French call a *mésalliance*. So far as one can judge of the facts at this distance of time, he was irregularly, but, accordingly to Scottish law, legally married to one whom the old father no doubt contemptuously set down as a “peasant hussy.” And the culprit the son of one Earl and grandson of another ! Very shocking, of course !

* Macky’s Memoirs, p. 199.

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The young officer tried to obtain the recognition of his bride by his parents; and when his request was met by a haughty refusal, he left his native country; residing, when off duty, in a French seaport; and continuing to live with his wife until his death, which occurred (at the age of twenty-nine) in 1708. He left one child only, whom its parents named after the grandfather, who persisted in ignoring its existence. Breadalbane died eight years after he lost his youngest son; but whether he ever repented driving that son into exile to gratify family pride, does not appear.

At a later period the widow and her son brought suit to procure the acknowledgment of the marriage and the recovery of her husband's property. The terms upon which this suit was finally compromised sufficiently indicate the light in which the Breadalbanes regarded the matter. The family paid over to the claimants thirty thousand pounds; a sum which, taking into account the difference in the value of money now, and then, is to-day the equivalent of three or four hundred thousand dollars. But neither the mother's name nor the son's appears in the British Peerage; and it may probably have been a condition of the compromise that this point should not be pressed! A wise woman, that peasant ancestress of mine! She accepted the substantial; and refrained from insisting on reception by a family who imagined they had a right to look down upon her.

John Campbell—the Cashier, not the Earl—did well in the world. He married Lady Stirling of Glorit; and when she died without issue, contracted a second marriage with Miss Campbell of Tofts, by whom he had five children. Of these, General Colin Campbell, afterwards Lieutenant-Governor of Gibraltar, was one, and my grandmother, Ann Caroline

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Campbell, another. Upon her seem to have descended the charms which may have led captive the Life Guardsman ; for my grandmother Campbell was noted throughout Scotland as one of the most beautiful women of her day ; though she failed, unfortunately, to transmit her fair looks to her grandchildren of the Owen branch.

David Dale's marriage with this lady, was, as I have always heard, a most harmonious union ; and, in every respect save its comparatively brief duration, a happy one. She died when her eldest child, my mother, was about twelve years old ; and upon that child devolved thenceforth the care of a widowed father and four younger sisters ; a charge, the duties of which she fulfilled with a devotion and prudence beyond her years.

But David Dale himself, and his connection with the marvellous events of his time, are better worth writing about than his wife's relatives or their fortunes.

George III., succeeded to the British throne in 1760, and it was the lot of that weak sovereign to witness, during his sixty years' rule, a succession of inventions and discoveries such as was never before crowded into the reign of earthly monarch. They revolutionized the producing powers of man.

Though the expansive force of steam was understood, and even mechanical effects were produced by its agency, before the Christian era, yet when George became king, the steam-engine proper was unknown. Watt was at work upon it in 1765, and patented his invention in 1768-69.

So, again, when George ascended the throne, the foundation of all textile fabrics, that is, thread, whether woollen, cotton, linen, or silk, was spun on the single wheel ; the same of which the

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hum is still to be heard in some of the cabins of the West : * the spinner, with utmost exertion, producing but a few hanks by a day's labour. Ere he died, that same king, had he passed through his British dominions, might have found nearly half-a-million engaged, in vast factories, in spinning and manufacturing cotton ; each spindle turning out, on the average, some three hundred times as much yarn as before.

In 1771 the first cotton mill—a small one, worked by horse-power—was built. Eleven years later, Arkwright had four or five thousand persons employed in various mills, though his patents were still contested. He sought partnerships with capitalists ; they furnishing the money and he contributing his right to use his cotton machinery. In 1782 my grandfather and he had entered into such a partnership ; the waters of the Clyde, † about thirty miles above Glasgow, to be used as motive power.

In 1784 a village and several large cotton mills were completed. The site was a strip of valley land adjoining the river, about a mile from the ancient town of Lanark : and the entire waters of the Clyde, brought through a rock tunnel a thousand feet long, formed the mill-race.

* The ancient emblems of female industry, the distaff and spindle, have been in use certainly more than three thousand years. At what period these were superseded in India by the spinning-wheel is not on record, but four hundred years ago the spinning-wheel was unknown in Europe, having first been used by English workmen in the reign of Henry VIII. For thirty centuries (and how many more we know not) the invention of the world found nothing better wherewith to manufacture thread than a small wooden wheel impelled by the foot on a treadle, and giving motion by a cord or belt to a single spindle. And now ! A century since it would have required the manual labour of one-third the population of the world to supply as much cotton yarn as is turned out to-day by the cotton-mills of Great Britain alone.

† The most important river of Scotland, passing by Lanark, Hamilton, Bothwell, and Glasgow, and terminating at Greenock, is the great estuary known as the Frith of Clyde.

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Then, for the first time, Arkwright (not yet Sir Richard) came to Scotland to visit the new manufactory. Taking a post-chaise from Glasgow, Mr Dale and he reached the summit of the hill which commanded a view of the village, and on the gentle slopes of which were laid out small garden spots, separated by gravel paths. It was a fine summer evening. Getting out of the carriage, Mr Dale led his partner to a favourable point, whence could be seen not only the entire establishment, including the vast factory buildings, the mechanics' shops, the school-house, and the rows of stone dwellings for the work-people, but also the picturesque river winding its way below the mills between abrupt walls of shrub-covered rocks, the landscape bounded by a beautiful champaign country stretching out on the other bank. Well do I remember the scene!

“How does it suit you?” my grandfather asked at length.

Arkwright scanned the whole with a critical business eye for some time before he answered: “Capital! that site was selected with great judgment.”

“You like the way the streets are laid out and the mill buildings placed?”

“Very well—couldn't be better.”

“Each family in the village has one of these garden patches.”

“A very good idea.”

“We had to tunnel the rock for a long distance at a heavy expense; but we gained a fall of twenty-six or twenty-eight feet.”

“It's a spot in a thousand,” cried Arkwright. “Might have been made on purpose.”

“I'm glad you like it.”

“I do, very much.” Then, after another long look over

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the village and all its surroundings, he added, pointing to a wooden cupola within which the factory bell was hung: "But that ugly steeple—or whatever it is—what made you put it off at the end of the building?"

"Why, where would you have it?"

"Over the middle of the mill, of course."

"I don't see any 'of course' about it. It's just right where it is."

"You think so?" asked Arkwright.

"To be sure I do, or I wouldn't have put it there."

"Well, you've a curious idea of things. I'd like to hear a single good reason for having the thing stuck on to the end of that mill, the way you've got it."

"If a man's so blind he can't see that was the proper place, it is na worth while finding him reasons for it."

"Blind! A man with half an eye might have seen better. I don't care to argue with a man that hasn't more common-sense."

This was too much for my grandfather. "Arkwright," said he, "I don't care to have a man for a partner who would get stirred up anent such a trifle, and talk such nonsense about it too."

"Neither do I. So there's one thing we do agree about. I'm ready to sell out to you to-night."

"Good! Let's get into the carriage and I'll show you all over the place. Then we'll go back to the auld town" (so Lanark was usually called), "get something to eat and a glass of toddy,"—(my grandfather was a strictly temperate man, but no Scotchman in those days thought an occasional glass of Highland whiskey toddy an offence against temperance),—"and I dare say we can hit it off atween us."

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That evening Richard Arkwright and David Dale dissolved partnership, the latter remaining sole proprietor of the village and mills of New Lanark.*

If such an issue in so important a matter seem strange, it was yet natural enough in the case of men born and circumstanced as these men had been. Successful strugglers both, through difficulty and opposition up to great success, accustomed as both had been, from their youth, to take their own way and to find that way the fortunate one, they had become unused to contradiction. Men of strong, untrained energy, they had grown to be self-willed even in petty things.

Their success in life, however, was not wholly due to character and abilities. The lines had fallen to them in wondrous places. They were pioneer workers in the richest mine ever opened to human enterprise. It had not entered into the heart of man to conceive the physical results that were to follow a contrivance simple almost to commonplace; consisting, substantially, in the substitution of rollers, driven by machinery, for the human hand. That invention determined the fate of nations. Coupled with the modern application of steam, it was mainly instrumental in deciding the giant struggle between England and the first Napoleon.

The soft fleece of the cotton plant is peculiar in character. When freed from seeds and impurities, its fine, strong fibres slip past each other readily, and can, with facility, be arranged so as to lie in parallel lines. In the earliest days the Hindoo, holding in his left hand a staff around one end of which was wrapped a portion of the vegetable fleece, drew out, with

* This anecdote, which I have heard many times from my father's lips, was confirmed to me, in all its essential particulars, by Mr John Wright, during the visit to him referred to at the commencement of this chapter.