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George Peacock
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Life of Thomas Young

GEORGE PEACOCK



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L I F E

OF

THOMAS YOUNG, M.D., F.R.S., &c.

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THOMAS YOUNG, M.D., F.R.S.

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L I F E
OF
THOMAS YOUNG, M.D., F.R.S., &c.,

AND ONE OF THE EIGHT FOREIGN ASSOCIATES OF THE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF FRANCE.

BY GEORGE PEA Cock, D.D.,

F.R.S., F.G.S., F.R.A.S., F.C.P.S., ETC.,

DEAN OF ELY,

LOWNDEAN PROFESSOR OF ASTRONOMY IN THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE,
AND FORMERLY FELLOW AND TUTOR OF TRINITY COLLEGE.

LONDON:
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TO
HUDSON GURNEY, ESQ.,
THE OLDEST AND ONE OF THE MOST VALUED OF THE FRIENDS
OF
DR. YOUNG,
THIS MEMOIR OF HIS LIFE
IS INSCRIBED
WITH EVERY SENTIMENT OF RESPECT AND REGARD
BY
THE AUTHOR.

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P R E F A C E.

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It is now more than twenty years since I somewhat rashly undertook to write the Life of Dr. Young. For many years, however, after making this engagement, I found myself so much occupied by the duties of a very laborious college office, that I had no leisure to commence the work; and when the possession of leisure would have enabled me to have done so, my health became so seriously deranged that I felt myself unequal to any continued and severe literary labour. The undertaking was consequently abandoned, and it was proposed to transfer it to other hands; but it was not found easy to secure the services of a person who possessed sufficient scientific knowledge to enable him to write the life of an author whose works were so various in their character and not unfrequently so difficult to understand and analyse, as those of Dr. Young.

It had always been the opinion of Mr. Gurney, one of the most intimate of Dr. Young's friends, that the best monument which could be dedicated to his memory would be a complete edition of his *Miscellaneous Works*, the greatest part of which had been published anonymously, in scientific journals and elsewhere, in a form not easily accessible to literary or scientific students. In consequence of this opinion, in which I

entirely concurred, an arrangement was made by Mrs. Young, somewhat more than three years ago, in virtue of which I undertook to edit the scientific portion of Dr. Young's Works, whilst his Hieroglyphical Memoirs and Correspondence were entrusted to Mr. Leitch. As it was in the first instance intended to prefix to this edition of Dr. Young's Works a short introductory notice only and not a formal memoir, of his life and writings, such explanatory notes and selections from his correspondence were added as were deemed necessary for the general illustration of his literary life and labours. The notes and letters which were added with this view to the volume edited by Mr. Leitch, were of very considerable extent and importance.

When this work was completed—and a great delay had been occasioned by the destruction of the greatest part of the impression, first struck off, by a fire in the warehouse in which it was deposited—Mrs. Young resumed her original design—to which she had always adhered with affectionate constancy and which she had never altogether abandoned—of doing honour to the memory of her husband by a Memoir which should combine a detailed narrative of his personal history with a review of his various publications. She urged her wishes with so much earnestness, that I was at last persuaded—under a sense of the responsibility which I had incurred by disappointing her hopes for so many years—to undertake the task, subject to the condition, however, that I should be at liberty to transfer the materials which I had collected and the portions of the work which in the mean time I might

have finished, to other hands, in case of being again disabled by the recurrence of those serious attacks of illness from which I had previously suffered. It is now about fifteen months since my labours were resumed, and they have been continued ever since with few and not very considerable interruptions; and I gratefully acknowledge the goodness of God for granting me the renewed enjoyment of the blessings of health and strength, which has enabled me to complete my task, imperfectly it is true, but I trust not so much so as altogether to defeat the pious views in which it originated.

The materials which I have employed in editing Dr. Young's Works, and in the preparation of his Life, have been chiefly—in addition to the information supplied by his Works, his Journals, and Letters to his uncle, Dr. Brocklesby, 'in early life—a short autobiographical sketch of his life, written for one of the sisters of Mrs. Young, headed *An Article intended for a Future Edition of the Encyclopædia Britannica*, the greatest part of which is included in Mr. Gurney's very pleasing Memoir—and a large collection of letters addressed to him by Arago, Fresnel, Humboldt, Sir David Brewster, Dr. Brinkley, Mr. George Ellis, Mr. Gifford, Captain Kater, Schumacher, Bessel, Mr. Macvey Napier, Sir William Gell, and many other correspondents. Mr. Gurney furnished me with a nearly unbroken series of confidential letters addressed to him by Dr. Young, from the year 1804 to the end of his life, which have been of the greatest service to

me, as recording without disguise his thoughts and opinions upon almost every subject upon which he was engaged, or about which he was interested. The late lamented M. Arago placed in my hands several letters from Dr. Young, which have become important documents in the history of the progress of the undulatory theory of light. An equally liberal course was followed by Sir David Brewster, though some of the letters thus furnished were in opposition to views of his own. The late Mr. Macvey Napier sent me the letters relating to Dr. Young's contributions to the Supplement of the Encyclopædia Britannica, of which he was the editor; and the Astronomer Royal some others relating to proposed alterations in the Nautical Almanac and other astronomical questions. Other letters were forwarded to me by Mr. Shepherd, of Frome, the late Dr. Bostock, and other correspondents. Dr. Young, in his letters to Sir William Gell, would appear to have occasionally imitated the *plaisanteries* of his lively and ingenious correspondent, and to have been somewhat less guarded in his expressions than was usual with him in his other letters, which are remarkable for the fairness and temperance with which he speaks of men and of things, even when writing to his most intimate friends. Finally, I beg to return my best thanks to the family of the late Mrs. Chambers, Mrs. Earle, and the Countess of Buchan, the sisters of Mrs. Young, who have placed at my disposal a series of letters, written with all the affectionate freedom and confidence of a brother to his sisters, and which present the most lively and agreeable references to the society

in which he was moving, and to the various subjects of interest which arose out of the events of the day.

It is hardly necessary for me to add that, throughout the whole progress of the work, I have received the most important information and assistance from Mr. Gurney.

From various members of Dr. Young's family, and more especially from his nephew, Mr. Thomas Young, of Sackville Street, I have received very valuable information, with respect to the events of his early life.

I have also to express my thanks to Mr. De Morgan, Dr. J. A. Wilson of Dover Street, London, Dr. Clarke of Cambridge, the Astronomer Royal, and others, who have furnished me with information.

I have elsewhere expressed my obligations to Mr. Leitch, which have been further increased by the assistance which he has given me in the progress of this work.

*Deanery, Ely,*  
*December 13th, 1854.*

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