

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-06335-7 - The Life of Thomas Chatterton: With Criticisms on his Genius and Writings, and a Concise View of the Controversy Concerning Rowley's Poems

George Gregory

Excerpt

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T H E
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T H O M A S C H A T T E R T O N.

THE ancestry of men of genius is seldom of much importance to the public or their biographers; the commonwealth of literature is almost a perfect democracy, in which the rise or promotion of individuals is generally the consequence of their respective merits. The family of Chatterton, however, though in no respect illustrious, is more nearly connected with some of the circumstances of his literary history than that of most other votaries of the Muses.—It appears that the office of sexton of St. Mary

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Redcliffe, in Bristol, had continued in different branches of this family for more than one hundred and fifty years; and that John Chatterton, the last of the name who enjoyed that office, was elected in March 1725, and continued sexton till his death, which happened in the year 1748*. Thomas Chatterton, the nephew of the preceding, and father to the extraordinary person who is the subject of these memoirs, had, we are informed, been in the early part of life in the station of a writing usher to a classical school†, was afterwards engaged as a singing man of the Cathedral of Bristol, and latterly was master of the free school in Pyle-street in the same city‡. He died in August 1752||, leaving

* Dr. Milles's Preliminary Dissertation to Rowley's Poems, page 6.

† Ibid.

‡ Ib. Mr. Bryant's Obs. p. 514.

|| Ibid.

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leaving his wife then pregnant of a son, who was born on the 20th of November, and baptized the 1st of January following, by the name of THOMAS, at St. Mary Redcliffe, by the Rev. Mr. Gibbs, vicar of that church.

The life of Chatterton, though short, was eventful; it commenced as it ended, in indigence and misfortune. By the premature loss of his father he was deprived of that careful attention which would probably have conducted his early years through all the difficulties that circumstances or disposition might oppose to the attainment of knowledge; and by the unpromising aspect of his infant faculties he was excluded a seminary, which might have afforded advantages superior to those he afterwards enjoyed. His father had been succeeded in the school at Pyle-street by a Mr. Love, and to his care Chatterton was committed at the age

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of five years ; but either his faculties were not yet opened, or the waywardness of genius, which will pursue only such objects as are self-approved, incapacitated him from receiving instruction in the ordinary methods ; and he was remanded to his mother as a dull boy, and incapable of improvement *. Nothing is more fallacious than the judgments which are formed during infancy of the future abilities of youth. Mrs. Chatterton was rendered extremely unhappy by the apparently tardy understanding of her son, till *he fell in love*, as she expressed herself, with the illuminated capitals of an old musical manuscript, in French, which enabled her, by taking advantage of the momentary passion, to initiate him in the alphabet †. She taught him afterwards to read from an old black-lettered Testament, or Bible ‡.

Perhaps

* Bryant's Observations, p. 519.

† Ib. Milles's Prelim. Diss. p. 5.

‡ Milles's Prelim. Diss. p. 5.

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Perhaps the bent of most men's studies may, in some measure, be determined by accident, and frequently in very early life; nor is it unreasonable to suppose that his peculiar attachment to antiquities may, in a considerable degree, have resulted from this little circumstance.

We are not informed by what means or by what recommendation he gained admission into Colston's charity-school; but doubtless, in the situation of his mother at the time, it must have been a most desirable event; however unsuitable such a course of discipline might be to the improvement of Chatterton's peculiar talents. Most of those prodigies of genius, who had hitherto astonished mankind, by the early display of abilities and learning, had been aided by the advantage of able instructors, or had at least been left at liberty to pursue the impulse of their superior understandings; it was the lot of Chatter-

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ton to be confined to the mechanical drudgery of a charity-school; and the little ordinary portions of leisure, with which boys in his situation are indulged, was the only time allowed him to lay the foundation of that extensive and abstruse erudition which decorated even his early years. This feminary, founded by Edward Colston, Esq. is situate at St. Augustine's Back in Bristol, and is much upon the same plan with Christ's Hospital in London, (the only plan perhaps on which a charity-school can be generally useful,) the boys being *boarded* in the house, clothed, and taught reading, writing, and arithmetic. Chatterton, at this period, wanted a few months of eight years of age, being admitted on the 3d of August 1760*.

The

* On the authority of a letter signed G. B. dated Bristol, August 30, 1778, printed in the St. James's Chronicle. In Dr. Milles's Prelim. Diff. it is 1761; but this must be a misprint, as all agree that he was between seven and eight years old when admitted.

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The rules of this institution are strict. The school hours in summer are from seven o'clock till twelve in the morning, and from one till five in the afternoon; and in winter, from eight to twelve, and from one to four. The boys are obliged to be in bed every night in the year at eight o'clock, and are never permitted to be absent from school, except on Saturdays and Saints days, and then only from between one and two in the afternoon till between seven and eight in the evening. The detail of these apparently trivial particulars may at present favour of a culpable minuteness; but their importance will be experienced before I have concluded.

The first years of his residence at this seminary passed without notice, and perhaps without effort. His sister, indeed, in her letter to Mr. Croft, remarks, that he very early discovered a thirst for pre-eminence, and that even before he was

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five years old he was accustomed to preside over his play-mates*. There is a curious letter from Mr. Thistlethwaite of Bristol, published by Dr. Milles in his edition of Rowley's Poems, which contains many interesting particulars concerning Chatterton. In the summer of 1763, Mr. Thistlethwaite, who was then very young, contracted an intimacy with one Thomas Philips †, an usher or assistant-master at Colston's school. Though the education of Philips had not been the most liberal, he

* Love and Madness, p. 161. There is an anecdote of Chatterton (it is given, however, only on a vague and indistinct report) partly to the same purpose. When very young, a manufacturer promised to make Mrs. Chatterton's children a present of some earthen-ware; on asking the boy what device he would have painted on his—"Paint me (said he) an angel, with wings, and a crumpet, to trumpet my name over the world."

† In all probability the person on whose death Chatterton composed an Elegy. I wish we were possessed of more perfect memoirs of Philips. His taste for poetry excited a similar flame in several young men, who made no mean figure in the periodical publications of that day, in Chatterton, Thistlethwaite, Cary, Fowler, and others.

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he yet possessed a taste for history and poetry; and by his attempts in verse, excited a degree of literary emulation among the elder boys. It is very remarkable, that Chatterton is said to have appeared altogether as an idle spectator of these poetical contests; he simply contented himself with the sports and pastimes which appeared more immediately adapted to his age; he apparently possessed neither inclination nor ability for literary pursuits, nor does Mr. Thistlethwaite believe that he attempted a single couplet during the first three years of his acquaintance with him* Whatever grounds Mr. Thistlethwaite might have for this opinion, it, however, only serves to furnish an additional proof of the deceitfulness of those conjectures which are formed concerning the abilities of youth. The pert and forward boy, of active, but superficial

* Milles's Rowley, p. 454.

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superficial talents, generally bears away the palm from the modesty and pensiveness of genius. Such a disposition, which is in reality the result of insensibility, too frequently meets with encouragement, which produces indolence, impudence, and dissipation; while the less shewy, but more excellent understandings, are depressed by neglect, or disheartened by discouragement. Chatterton, doubtless, at that very period, was possessed of a vigour of understanding, of a quickness of penetration, a boldness of imagination, far superior to the talents of his companions. But that penetration itself led him, perhaps, to feel more strongly his own deficiencies; those delicate, yet vivid feelings which usually accompany real abilities, induced him to decline a contest, in which there was a danger of experiencing the mortification of being inferior. If he produced any compositions, his exquisite taste