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Arthur Helps

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Life and Labours of Thomas Brassey

An important figure in British business history, the civil engineering contractor Thomas Brassey (1805–70) stood at the forefront of railway construction across the globe in the nineteenth century. He was also instrumental in the development of the Victoria Dock and part of London's sewer system. Originally published in 1872 and reissued here in its 1888 seventh edition, this first biography of Brassey was written by his personal friend, the public servant and author Sir Arthur Helps (1813–75). It describes Brassey's many remarkable achievements as a prolific contractor working in Europe, Asia, Australia and the Americas. A brilliant businessman, representing the best of British skill, leadership and organisation, Brassey employed tens of thousands of men around the world at the peak of his career. Having collaborated with prominent engineers such as Joseph Locke and Robert Stephenson, he secured for himself a long-lasting reputation for integrity and dedication.

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1805–1870

ARTHUR HELPS



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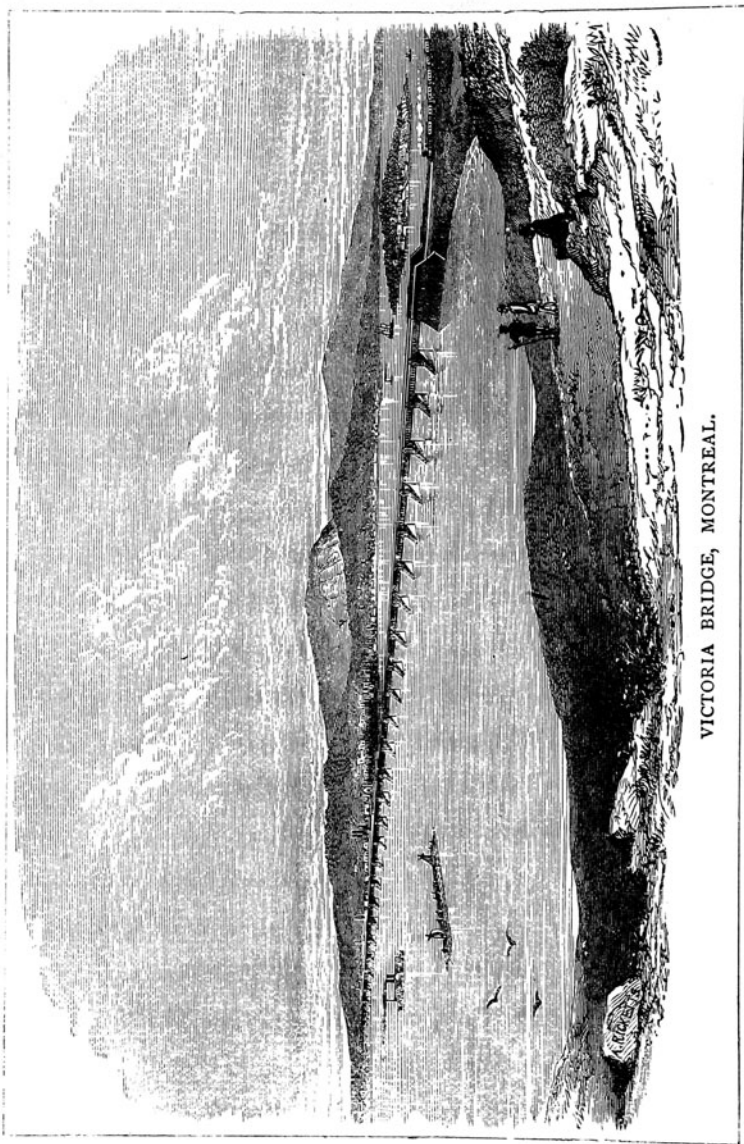
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VICTORIA BRIDGE, MONTREAL.

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LIFE AND LABOURS

OF

THOMAS BRASSEY

1805—1870

BY THE LATE

SIR ARTHUR HELPS, K.C.B.

SEVENTH EDITION

LONDON: GEORGE BELL AND SONS, YORK STREET

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DEDICATION.

TO THE QUEEN.

MADAM,

I am very grateful for the permission given me to dedicate this work to Your Majesty.

I desired so to dedicate it, because I do not know of anyone who has a deeper sympathy with the labouring classes than Your Majesty, or anyone who takes a more heartfelt interest in everything that concerns their habits, their education, and their general welfare. Moreover, this sympathy and this interest are not confined to those classes in Your Majesty's Dominions only, but are extended to them wherever they are to be found.

I think also, that it cannot but be very gratifying to Your Majesty to have full evidence that, in a special kind of labour of a very important character, namely, the construction of railways, Your own subjects have hitherto borne the palm, and have introduced their excellent modes of working into various Foreign countries.

Your Majesty will find that the late MR. BRASSEY was an employer of labour after Your Majesty's own heart: always solicitous for the well-being of those who served under him; never keeping aloof from them, but using the powerful position of a master in such a manner as to win their affections, and to diminish the distance which is often far too great between the employer and the employed.

I venture, therefore, to think that the volume will be interesting to Your Majesty on its own account; and that You will be disposed to view with favour the merits, if any, and to deal gently with the faults, of a work written by one who, with all respect, is ever Your Majesty's

Faithful and devoted

Subject and Servant,

ARTHUR HELPS.

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PREFACE.

I FEEL it to be right to acknowledge in detail the great assistance I have received in writing this work. It would be difficult for me to name all the persons from whom I have derived this assistance; but I must mention some of those who have been my principal coadjutors; namely, Mr. Thomas Brassey, Mr. Ballard, Mr. Bidder, Dr. Burnett, Mr. Day, Mr. Dent, Mr. Edwards, Mr. Evans, Mr. Fowler, Mr. Netlam Giles, Mr. Hancox, Mr. Henry Harrison, Mr. Hawkshaw, Mr. Henfrey, Mr. Hodges, Mr. Holme, Mr. Charles Jones, Mr. Longridge, Mr. Louth, Mr. Mackay, Lieut.-Col. Charles Manby, Mr. Milroy, Mr. Frederic Murton, Mr. Ogilvie, Sir Morton Peto, Bart., Mr. Ray, Mr. Rhodes, Mr. Ricketts, Rev. H. Robinson, Mr. Rowan, Mr. Strapp, Mr. Tapp, Mr. Trubshaw, Mr. Wagstaff, Mr. Wilcox, and Mr. Woolcott.

The object of this work is not merely to narrate the life and labours of Mr. BRASSEY; but it aims, also, to show forth the labours of others, which that life elicited. The life of many an eminent man, especially if his eminence has consisted in doing one kind of work very well, does not admit of much interest in the narrative itself, and might be very briefly told. It is a melancholy fact, but fact it is, that great conquerors are mainly the persons whose lives are most interesting, such as Alexander the Great, Julius Cæsar, Cortes, and Napoleon. On the contrary, the lives that have been most serviceable to mankind, as well as the histories of the most peaceful and therefore happiest periods of the lives of nations, give little scope for exciting narrative. The consequences, however, of the actions of these benefactors of mankind are often of the highest interest; and, in this particular case of Mr. Brassey, those consequences were visible in his own lifetime, and may

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therefore naturally be incorporated with any account of his life.

Mr. Brassey must ever be considered as one of the chief pioneers in the great series of industrial enterprises by which the modern world has, we may almost say, been transformed. The interest in his life greatly depends upon the fact, that his career and the establishment of railways commenced almost simultaneously. He certainly was the first person who went out as a contractor into foreign lands, and who first made the British modes of working known in many parts of the globe. It was fortunate for our reputation with the foreigner, that British skill, workmanship, and power of organization, as manifested in railway construction, were made known in foreign countries by one who was a type of the men of his calling, and who possessed in perfection some of the most sterling qualities of the British people.

When I speak thus of Mr. Brassey, I do not mean for a moment to ignore the services of the engineers under whom he acted, or of the partners with whom he acted in these great undertakings. From Mr. Mackenzie, Mr. Brassey's first partner in a foreign railway contract, from many of his succeeding partners, from the able and distinguished men in their several callings who were connected with him in railway enterprises, Mr. Brassey received the greatest assistance. The business of a contractor is not by any means of an isolated character, and, in the course of Mr. Brassey's life, as will be seen by reference to the Table of Contracts in Chapter XII., he had at least twenty-seven partners. To narrate adequately the work that these gentlemen did in Great Britain and in Foreign countries would require many biographies to be written. I feel justified, however, in claiming Mr. Brassey as a representative man from whose career the great exertions and the skill manifested in railway enterprise by British engineers, contractors, agents, and workmen of all kinds, may be adequately appreciated.

Not the least valuable and interesting part of the book, if I may presume to speak of any part as valuable or interesting, is that which gives, incidentally, an account of national characteristics. Lavater said that you could not

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thoroughly understand a man until you had divided an inheritance with him. Without going so far, I would venture to say that you cannot thoroughly understand a man's nature until you have done business with him, for it is in the transaction of business that all the qualities of a man come forth and are developed. Mr. Brassey himself, and his agents, all of them very shrewd and capable persons, had to deal with men of every class in the countries where they were constructing railways. It was a necessary part of their business to understand the characters of the foreigners they dealt with; and the remarks of these agents show that they did not fail to accomplish that primary portion of their labours. Frenchmen, Belgians, Germans, Italians, Russians, Spaniards, and Danes came under the close observation of Mr. Brassey and his agents; and we are told how the men of these various nationalities acquitted themselves in their respective employments. Sometimes we find that our preconceived notions of the characteristics of certain peoples are confirmed: sometimes we find that these preconceived notions require modification. But whatever we learn upon this subject from persons who had such remarkable opportunities of observation, is pure gain, and tends to remove our notions from the region of prejudice to that of fact.

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