

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-06782-9 - The Rev. J.G. Wood: His Life and Work

Theodore Wood

Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE REV. J. G. WOOD.

CHAPTER I.

BIRTH AND EARLY LIFE.

Birth—Parentage—Youthful Delicacy of Constitution—Juvenile Precocity—Spelling and Art—Lack of Mathematical Talent—First Attendance at Church—Removal of the Family to Oxford—Outdoor Life and its Results—Aquatic Gambols—How to catch Crayfish—Boyish Escapades—A Juvenile Naturalist and his Ways—Pets—First Visit to the Ashmolean Museum—School Life—A Stern Discipline—Natural History again—Snake-racing—Outdoor Sports—An Accident in the Cricket Field—Painful Experiences—Subsequent Accidents—Matriculation at Merton College, Oxford—College Pets—Caterpillar Breeding on a Large Scale—Snakes again—Recreations—An Unexplained Mystery—Whose was the Poker?—A Night Assault—Repulse of the Assailants—B.A. Degree—Love for Classics—“Horace” Reviewed—Classical Proprieties *versus* Scientific Nomenclature—Tutorship at Little Hinton—Return to Oxford—Anatomical Studies—Work with the Microscope—Ordination.

THE REVEREND JOHN GEORGE WOOD, clergyman, author, and lecturer upon Natural History, father of the writer of this memoir, was born on the 21st of July, 1827, in Howland Street, London. His father, John Freeman Wood, a surgeon, and for some years Chemical Lecturer at the Middlesex Hospital, had three years previously married Miss Juliana Lisetta Arntz, a young lady of German parentage upon the father's side, who, having passed the first fourteen years of her life at Dusseldorf, had then completed her education, and finally settled in

B

England. The first child of the marriage was still-born; and my father, who came next, was thus practically the eldest of a family of fourteen. Of these, however, several died in infancy, and two more only lived to early womanhood.

My father himself was a weak and sickly child from his birth, and for several years, indeed, it was never thought that he could possibly live to reach maturity. He suffered principally from violent attacks of croup, which recurred at frequent intervals, and, until he was eleven years of age, obliged him to be kept under constant supervision at home. Yet the child managed to pick up a wonderful stock of knowledge in spite of his delicate state of health, and was always occupied in learning something, in some of the thousand and one ways which presented themselves to his ever-active mind. Partly by instruction of the ordinary character, and partly by a species of self-tuition peculiar to himself, he learnt to read with wonderful rapidity and facility, and at four years of age was thoroughly familiar with the historical portions of the New Testament, and was manifesting the first signs of the extreme fondness for books which afterwards characterised the whole of his life. He could not be kept from them. A book, merely *as* a book, had an intense fascination for him, and he read with avidity almost everything that came in his way, and not only read, but remembered it. Indeed, he always had a most wonderful memory, except for dates and names, which he could seldom recollect at all. To the end of his

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-06782-9 - The Rev. J.G. Wood: His Life and Work

Theodore Wood

Excerpt

[More information](#)

EARLY EDUCATION.

3

life he could cite *verbatim* long passages from books or poems which he had not read for many years, and apt quotations from all sorts of sources seemed to come to his lips without any effort of recollection whatever. And much of his success in literature was no doubt due to his marvellous power of extracting, as it were, at a single reading, the pith from the numberless books which he perused, and storing it up in some pigeon-hole of his mind until required for use.

Spelling, too, like reading, came naturally to him, for he possessed that curious side-shoot of artistic talent which enables one to *see* any required word in the mind's eye, without depending for the letters which compose it upon any mere effort of memory. Strangely enough, however, there were two words which always puzzled him, and to the end of his days he could never spell "cheque" without the addition of an unnecessary c, or "niece" without transposing the second and third letters. And, with regard to these two words, no amount of correction ever made the smallest difference.

Arithmetic, even in its simpler forms, was always beyond him. He did, no doubt, know that two and two make four, but I very much question whether he ever mastered the multiplication table. And certainly a piece of mere ordinary calculation was utterly outside his powers. Possibly this was in great measure due to the character of his early training. Mathematics, in the days of his youth, were little regarded, and sound classical knowledge was generally considered as the one

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-06782-9 - The Rev. J.G. Wood: His Life and Work

Theodore Wood

Excerpt

[More information](#)

end and aim of education ; and the arithmetical talent, if not cultivated in childhood, seldom attains to any degree of perfection afterwards. So that when my father had any sums to do, he always did them by deputy. Euclid, however, he liked, and often worked at it merely for the interest that he managed to extract from it. But that was the only branch of mathematical science of which he ever picked up more than the merest rudiments ; and I have always had a shrewd suspicion that he kept no account of receipts and expenditure for the simple reason that he distrusted his own power of adding up his columns.

At four years of age the boy was taken to church for the first time ; and there an amusing incident happened. He does not seem to have received any preliminary instruction in the Liturgy, and did not at all know what to expect when he entered the building. He behaved very well, however, and joined in the Lord's Prayer, which, of course, he knew by heart, with much reverence and devotion. By-and-by, however, the Lord's Prayer was repeated again, and this time he seemed a little bored, and took his part in it only under protest. But when the Litany drew near to its close, and the same Prayer was said for the *third* time, his patience came altogether to an end, and, rising from his knees, he sat down with an air of great determination, and a very audible remark to the effect that he "couldn't stand this no more !"

In 1830 it was deemed advisable, for more reasons than one, that the Chemical Lectureship at the Middlesex

CHILDHOOD.

5

Hospital should be given up, in order that the family might remove to Oxford. And there a house was taken in the High Street, which was subsequently vacated for another in Holywell Street, and that again in its turn for a third in Broad Street.

As the boy still continued very delicate, his father saw that the only chance for him was to keep him at home for the present, and to allow him to live as healthy and natural a life as possible. Outdoor exercise and amusements, therefore, were strongly encouraged, and the child learned to run and swim and climb with a facility which few boys of his own age could equal. In the water, more especially, he was always perfectly at home, and would tumble in backwards, or head foremost, and dive for eggs and three-penny pieces, and even play a sort of aquatic leap-frog, as readily as though the river were his natural home. Indeed, he spent much of his time on its banks or in its waters. There were trout to be tickled, crayfish to be caught, and creatures innumerable to be watched, and perhaps brought home for the aquarium. The spirit of emulation was rife, and every boy tried to do better than his fellows. And so each and all came to be as familiar with the water as with the dry land, never from the first having learned to consider it as an element to be dreaded.

The crayfish were caught in rather a primitive fashion. Paddling along in the water by the banks, the boys would carefully investigate every hole, until the long antennæ of the crayfish were felt projecting.

Then a sudden "grab" was made, the creature seized behind the great claws, so as to deprive it of the power of employing those formidable weapons upon the unprotected hand, and forthwith *transferred to the cap*, which in those days was a roomy article of attire, capable of holding several crayfishes without danger of overcrowding. The presence of half a dozen of these creatures moving about upon the head, and occasionally giving a sharp pull to the hair, does not seem to have been regarded in the least, the great beauty of the arrangement being, of course, that it left the hands free, while there was little or no danger of the captives escaping.

My father had many amusing stories to tell of his early boyhood. One of an organised attempt to excavate a subterranean passage from the garden to the river-bank (half a mile away), which resulted in the removal of huge quantities of earth, and the discovery of the scheme by the higher powers just in time to prevent the probable burial alive of the whole enthusiastic party. Another of a great plan for the purchase of a donkey by means of the gradual accumulation of halfpence; which plan seemed so feasible, and so certain of fruition, that a big pair of scissors were surreptitiously removed from the maternal workbox, and the lawn diligently cropped, in order that a store of hay might be laid up for the prospective animal's requirements. And a third of the queer code of honour which forbade the plucking of apples from the trees in the orchard (where windfalls were

recognised as common property), but did not militate against the employment of boys from outside to pelt the fruit with stones, by the bribe of a commission on the profits. "*Quod facit per alium, facit per se*" was a motto clearly unregarded by the youthful moralists.

Very early in the boy's life the bent of his mind manifested itself; and he himself could never recollect the time when he was not constantly poking, and probing, and prying, here, there, and everywhere, in the endeavour to discover some of the manifold secrets of Nature, and to learn the ways and doings of the multitudinous living creatures that garden and river and woodland afforded.

In this he was much encouraged by his father, who, on Sunday afternoons, would lend a microscope and a pocket magnifying-glass to the children, and join eagerly with them in examining the numerous wonders which a few minutes' search in the garden would always turn up. Pets, of course, were numerous and varied. Bats, toads, lizards, snakes, blindworms, hedgehogs, newts, dormice, insects even of various kinds, all were kept in turn. And so the boy laid the foundation of that store of knowledge which afterwards served the man so well. He learned to love animals of all kinds, and to study with the deepest interest and minutest care every detail of their life-history. And at the same time he was unconsciously teaching himself how to observe, and learning the lessons, myriad and diverse, which Nature is always ready to impart to those who strive to search out her secrets.

Soon followed another step, and a most important one, in the pursuit after knowledge, for at a very early age the young naturalist found his way to the Ashmolean Museum, and almost immediately succeeded in getting upon unusually friendly terms with the kind-hearted old curator, who sympathised most heartily with the boy's keenness and wonderful thirst for information. Any help that he could give was freely given, and soon "Johnny Wood" was a constant visitor to the Museum, and as constant an enquirer of the curator, who, so far from being annoyed by his persistence, said that his questions were so apt and sensible that it was a real pleasure to answer them. For several years these visits were kept up, and even after school-days had begun the boy's first visit at the beginning of every holiday season was always to the Museum, in order that he might discover all the new specimens, carefully examine them, and find out whatever there was to be learnt concerning them.

So passed the time until 1838, by which time eight years of active, outdoor life, with unlimited exercise in the way of running, swimming, climbing, and exploring woodland, hill, and dell, had so strengthened the boy's constitution that it was deemed that home study might profitably be exchanged for the severer discipline of a school. He was therefore sent to Ashbourne Grammar School, in Derbyshire, over which his uncle, the Rev. G. E. Gepp, presided as head-master; and there he remained for the next half-dozen years.

The school was conducted on old-fashioned principles,

SCHOOL-LIFE.

9

all offences, great and small, being impartially visited with the rod, while the daily routine would now be considered as stern and rigorous to a degree. And the head-master, dreading to be accused of favouring his own nephew, was far more strict, and even merciless with him than with any of his fellow-pupils. Yet the six years which were spent there appear to have been by no means unhappy on the whole. There was plenty of time for outdoor exercise; the neighbouring country afforded every opportunity for the manifold forms of recreation in which the souls of boys delight; and, pleasantest of all, the natural history studies could be carried on almost as freely as at Oxford. Soon the boy collected about himself a band of kindred spirits, who used to scour the neighbourhood in search of specimens and trophies, and come home laden with spoil, both living and dead. Grass snakes more especially were in great request by way of pets. Almost every boy had quite a number of them, and would carry them about in his pockets, tie them round his wrists and neck, or cause them to run, or rather glide, races with those of his companions. A very favourite amusement, too, was to visit certain deserted stone quarries in the neighbourhood where standing water was always to be found, and there to make the snakes swim by the simple expedient of throwing them into the middle of a pool, and leaving them to find their way to land. Sometimes a snake would become obstinate, and lie sullenly at the bottom without attempting to swim; and then stones had to be thrown in such a manner as

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-06782-9 - The Rev. J.G. Wood: His Life and Work

Theodore Wood

Excerpt

[More information](#)

to fall close to it without injuring it. Sometimes even this plan would fail, and then there was nothing for it but to leave the snake master of the situation, and to go home without it. But generally there was little or no trouble of this kind, and snake-races could be conducted in the water almost as easily as upon dry land. The snakes very soon learned to recognise their masters, and to refrain from making use of the highly disagreeable odour with which Nature has gifted them as a means of protection against their foes. And, even when illicitly taken into school, they would lie quite quietly in the pocket without attempting to escape, or in any way giving notification of their presence.

I do not know that my father ever joined with any degree of enthusiasm in the ordinary out-door games of a schoolboy's life. He was something of a cricketer at one time, but, after his usual unlucky manner, contrived one day to catch his foot in a hole only a few inches deep, and, in the fall which resulted, to break his right leg rather badly and to dislocate his ankle. This involved confinement to bed for several weeks under peculiarly disagreeable circumstances, of which he gives a graphic account in his "Insects at Home," when speaking of that unpleasant creature, the common flea:—

When I was at school (he says), I had the misfortune to suffer a simultaneous dislocation and fracture of the ankle, and was conveyed to the infirmary, a large room at the top of the house. Now, this room had been without tenants ever since I remembered it, and I believe that for at least seven years no human being had entered the room, except to open the windows in the morning