

BIOGRAPHY OF SELF TAUGHT MEN

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Biography of self taught men by B. B. Edwards

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B. B. EDWARDS

**BIOGRAPHY OF
SELF TAUGHT MEN**



BIOGRAPHY

OF

SELF-TAUGHT MEN.

"They do most by books who could do most without them : and he that chiefly owes himself unto himself is the substantial man."

Sir THOMAS BROWNE.

T. NELSON AND SONS, LONDON: EDINBURGH:
AND NEW YORK.

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1855

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MANUSCRIPT FROM C. G. 1937

INTRODUCTORY ESSAY.

IN the history of this, as of other countries, previous to the great discovery of printing, learning, and all the refined and useful arts, were exclusively confined to a distinct class, and beyond its exclusive pale, all efforts at knowledge or intellectual elevation were absolutely impossible. The gradual extension of learning by the printing press, and its perfect enfranchisement by means of our free, religious, and political institutions, have produced a total change in the means of access to knowledge. Intelligent perseverance and industry may now surmount almost every obstacle arising from humble birth and limited opportunities, and we are accordingly familiar, in the history of our most distinguished men, with instances of the greatest difficulties overcome, and the highest ranks of learning, genius, and social position, achieved by those who started surrounded by all the disadvantages of a humble sphere.

It is not surprising that, among such self-taught men, originality of thought, and indomitable energy of purpose should more frequently appear, than among those who, surrounded by all the luxuries and facilities which wealth secures, are indoctrinated from childhood into the habits and received opinions of a class, and are scarcely aware, till they enter on the great arena of life, of the precise character of their own mental faculties, or the relative

power of their will, and self-endurance. With all their disadvantages, therefore, we may justly affirm that those who by their own innate energy have to force their way upward, from lowly rank and disadvantages, to the positions for which their capacities fit them, possess some peculiar advantages over all other classes of men. They have confidence in their own power. Whatever of character they possess has been tried in the school of severe discipline. They have breasted the billows, in a great measure, alone. Others have had their doubts resolved by teachers. In the final resort, they have depended on foreign and auxiliary aid. Their own powers have been tasked for a while, but the last weight has been lifted up by the shoulders of others. A clearer eye has penetrated the dark cloud for them. It is sometimes the fact, that an individual who has been taught by others, has more confidence in the opinion of every one else, than in his own. As a direct consequence, he is wavering, timid, pliable. His character is not compacted and assimilated, but yielding and capricious. His usefulness is of course greatly diminished. But the men of whom I speak have measured their powers. They have depended very little on extraneous aid.

Another attribute of this class of individuals, is independence of purpose. They are accustomed to form opinions according to the decisions of their own judgments. They are like that description of lawyers, who have deeply studied the elementary principles of their profession, who have followed out these principles into all their ramifications, and who come to conclusions, which are, in a great measure, irrespective of particular facts—facts which may coincide, or may not, with an original principle. Such lawyers are independent, in a