

MACAULAY

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Macaulay by J. Cotter Morison

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J. COTTER MORISON

MACAULAY

English Men of Letters

EDITED BY JOHN MORLEY

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BY

J. COTTER MORISON



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MACAULAY.

CHAPTER I

SKETCH OF MACAULAY'S LIFE UP TO THE FALL OF THE
ADMINISTRATION OF LORD MELBOURNE.

[1800-1841.]

THE prosperity which attended Macaulay all through life may be said to have begun with the moment of his birth. Of all good gifts which it is in the power of fortune to bestow, none can surpass the being born of wise, honourable, and tender parents; and this lot fell to him. He came of a good stock, though not of the kind most recognized by Colleges of Arms. Descended from Scotch Presbyterians—ministers many of them—on his father's side, and from a Quaker family on his mother's, he probably united as many guarantees of "good birth," in the moral sense of the words, as could be found in these islands at the beginning of the century. His mother (*née* Selina Mills) appears to have been a woman of warm-hearted and affectionate temper, yet clear-headed and firm withal, and with a good eye for the influences which go to the formation of character. Though full of a young mother's natural pride at the talent and mental precocity

of her eldest son, the subject of this volume, Thomas Babington Macaulay (born October 25, 1800), she was wise enough to eschew even the semblance of spoiling. The boy found, like many studious children, that he could spend his time with more pleasure, and probably with more profit, in reading at home than in lessons at school, and consequently exerted daily that passive resistance against leaving home which many mothers have not the strength to overcome. Mrs. Macaulay always met appeals grounded on the unfavourableness of the weather with the stoical answer: "No, Tom; if it rains cats and dogs you shall go." As a mere infant, his knowledge, and his power of working it up into literary form, were equally extraordinary. Compositions in prose and verse, histories, epics, odes, and hymns flowed with equal freedom, and correctness in point of language, from his facile pen. He was regarded, as he well deserved to be, as a prodigy, not only by his parents, but by others who might be presumed to be less partial critics. Mrs. Hannah More, who in certain circles almost assumed the character of a female Dr. Johnson, and director of taste, pronounced little Macaulay's hymns "quite extraordinary for such a baby." The wise mother treasured these things in her heart, but carefully shielded her child from the corrupting influences of early flattery. "You will believe," she writes, "that we never appear to regard anything he does as anything more than a school-boy's amusement." Genuine maternal tenderness, without a trace of weak indulgence, seems to have marked this excellent woman's treatment of her children. When once he fell ill at school, she came and nursed him with such affection that years afterwards he referred to the circumstance with vivid emotion: