

**GEORGE BIRKBECK, THE
PIONEER OF
POPULAR EDUCATION. A
MEMOIR AND A REVIEW**

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George Birkbeck, the pioneer of popular education. A memoir and a review by John George Godard

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JOHN GEORGE GODARD

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GEORGE BIRKBECK.



George Birkbeck M.D.

FROM AN ENGRAVING BY HENRY DAWL
AFTER A PAINTING BY SAMUEL LANE.

GEORGE BIRKBECK,

THE PIONEER
OF
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A Memoir and a Review.

BY
JOHN GEORGE GODARD.

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TO MINU
AIRBORNE

PREFACE.

ALTHOUGH the popular education movement is one of the most important outgrowths of a most progressive era, probably little is known at the present time concerning him who was its pioneer.

No biographer has, I believe, narrated the career of the founder of Mechanics' Institutions. Repeated reference to his work is made in the publications of his own time; encyclopædias accord him an honoured place amongst the names of Britain's worthies; essayists on education bestow upon him their meed of praise; but a volume devoted to him alone does not appear to have been ever written: by the modern world he is appreciated to a very limited degree—a new generation has arisen which knows him not.

And yet merit and materials for a biography are not wanting, and many who have found a Boswell to chronicle their thoughts and deeds accomplished less than did George Birkbeck. In earliest manhood, in advancing years, the education of the hitherto neglected classes was

made his earnest and anxious care ; and the noble title he has justly earned is that of the people's friend. To his bright conception and assiduous labours—much more even than to the philanthropic exertions of Andrew Bell and Joseph Lancaster, the promoters of National Schools—can without doubt be largely traced the stupendous change the present century has witnessed in the mental condition of the toiling multitude.

In truth, the movement which Dr. Birkbeck inaugurated has spread so rapidly and far, and has evoked the co-operation of so many able and gifted workers, at the time already known to fame, that there is a possibility of his being obscured by the very light he diffused throughout the land—a danger that his national services should be forgotten, and the honours due to him awarded to others. His name moreover has become associated with various enterprises of a commercial character, organised after his death ; and in these his special mission has to a large extent been merged in the public mind. A combination of circumstances has, in the absence of any chronicle of his life, save such fragmentary sketches as have appeared in years gone by, caused the interest in him to gradually diminish until it is chiefly local.

To show then that George Birkbeck is worthy

of a more extended fame, to exhibit him as a benefactor to his country and the world, and to indicate when and under what circumstances knowledge was first offered to the working classes, and the manner in which its influence has spread, is the object of the present memoir.

Twelve years' participation in the benefits of the Birkbeck Literary and Scientific Institution—the most important organisation of its kind—has afforded me opportunities for acquiring some amount of practical knowledge of the subject. For the main facts of the narrative, the principal authorities are alluded to in the text. To obtain, however, the requisite information it has been necessary to peruse or consult about three hundred volumes, many of them by this time musty and decayed; and to have appended references, therefore, to every statement made would have been more embarrassing than serviceable. Upon some points research has failed, at this distance of time, to throw any light whatever; but these, fortunately, are not very material.

For some of the details of Dr. Birkbeck's private life and incidents in the career of the Institution after his death, I am indebted to his son and successor in the presidentship, Mr. W. Lloyd Birkbeck, M.A., who has kindly perused