

**AN ESSAY ON THE
NATIONAL CHARACTER
OF THE ATHENIANS**

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An Essay on the National Character of the Athenians by John Brown Patterson

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JOHN BROWN PATTERSON

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ON
THE NATIONAL CHARACTER OF
THE ATHENIANS.

BY
JOHN BROWN PATTERSON, M.A.

A New Edition,

WITH LARGE ADDITIONS AND ILLUSTRATIONS PREPARED FOR PUBLICATION
BY THE AUTHOR SOME TIME BEFORE HIS DEATH.

TO WHICH IS PREFIXED

A BIOGRAPHICAL NOTICE.



WILLIAM BLACKWOOD AND SONS,
EDINBURGH AND LONDON.

MDCCCLX.

12-9-37

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTICE.

THE Author of the following Essay was born at Alnwick, the county-town of Northumberland, on the 29th of January 1804. He was the son of Robert Patterson, who possessed a small property in the vicinity, and of Janet Brown, daughter of the Rev. John Brown, of Haddington, an eminent member of what was then called The Associate Synod, and Professor of Divinity to that body for more than a quarter of a century.

In 1810, Mrs Patterson, who had been some time a widow, removed with her family from Croft House, the name of her husband's property, to Edinburgh. Her son John was sent at a very tender age to a private classical school then taught by the late Benjamin Mackay, who was afterwards one of the Masters of the High School, and remained a pupil of his for three successive years. In 1815, Mrs Patterson removed with her family to her native place, Haddington. Its Grammar School, to which John was sent, was not then taught in a way to add much to the elementary training of Mr Mackay, or to bring into action the latent powers of the boy. Excellent as his moral training had been under the maternal roof (for to his mother he was greatly indebted for the gentleness, modesty, and equanimity of his character through life), he had not been so fortunate in his opportunities of public instruction. Accordingly, it was remarked that his physical

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gained more than his mental development during the three years he resided at Haddington.

The intellectual history of John Patterson begins with his becoming a pupil in the Rector's Class of the High School of Edinburgh in 1818. He had nearly completed his 15th year, a time of life at which talent placed in favourable circumstances unfolds itself with singular rapidity. He was launched then into a class of upwards of 200 boys. Not having passed through the drill of the inferior classes, he took his place as the lowest member of the lowest form, and was pitched against boys, most of whom had gone through four, and many through five years of High School training. The system of teaching in the Rector's Class, by which every member of so numerous a body, from the highest to the lowest, was constantly under the influence of a motive to exertion, was then at its highest point of efficiency;* and such was its effect on the mind of Patterson, that in the course of his first year's attendance, he rose to distinction on the highest or dux's Form. In the following year he was *facile princeps* in every branch taught—Latin, Greek, and Ancient Geography; and in August 1820, he gained the Gold Medal, which proclaimed him the Head-boy of a Classical School, numbering considerably upwards of 800 pupils. During the whole of this period of increasing distinction and undisputed pre-eminence, he bore his faculties so meekly, that he was the only one among his schoolfellows who seemed not to be aware of his own vast superiority. There was no feeling of jealous rivalry, no breath of calumny. He was equally beloved and admired. That his teacher should be penetrated with the same sentiments, and could not always conceal them, was not to be wondered at; and yet he never was suspected of

* The nature of this system and the principles on which it was founded, are fully explained in the "Rationale of School Discipline," published in 1852, and will be found in Prof. Pillan's "Contributions to the Cause of Education," published by Longman & Co., 1857.

favouritism, of which schoolmasters are so frequently and in general so unjustly accused.

These two years, 1818-19, and 19-20, were doubtless, not only the most improving, but the happiest that his youth had hitherto passed; and to the feelings with which they had inspired him he gave expression in a paper written on occasion of his leaving the Rector's Class. It was entitled, "Recollections of the High School," and is valuable as a proof that, under the calm, unpretending, and apparently passionless simplicity of his exterior deportment, there lay concealed a warmth of cordiality, an earnestness of purpose, an enthusiasm, an imagination, and a command of eloquent expression, that do equal credit to the head and the heart of a boy of sixteen, and, as such, are not to be omitted in a portraiture of John Patterson. It does not appear to have been addressed to any one, or intended for any specific purpose, other than to put on record what he felt while it was fresh in his memory; for it was found among his papers after his death. It consists mainly of a minute and vivid description of the various processes which the Rector had adopted to keep alive the attention, to stimulate the exertions, and to secure the progress of 250 boys assembled in one class. It has been printed nearly entire in a Memoir prefixed to a posthumous work of the author published in 1837, and some readers may be curious to compare Patterson's narrative as there given, with the account which the Rector gave of the same thing in his "Rationale of School Discipline."*

We have room here only for the opening and closing reflections of this long paper—the composition of a boy of 17, "just let loose from school:"—

"My attendance at the Rector's Class in the High School of Edinburgh is endeared to me by many a delightful recollection. It was

* See "Discourses by the late Rev. J. B. Patterson, with a Memoir of his Life." Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd. 1837.

there that I first had my ambition roused, and my mind cultivated to any good purpose. It was there that I first found myself of importance among my fellow-creatures. It was there that I formed and enjoyed many pleasant companionships; and it was there I obtained the notice and kindness of one who has never ceased to load me with favour, and to whom, I trust, I shall never cease to entertain sentiments of mingled esteem and gratitude. I cannot, then, better employ this leisure hour than in noting down a few remembrances of its admirable mechanism, —in tracing the outlines of a picture which none of the changes and chances of this mortal life shall ever blot from my memory."

"Such is a meagre outline of the picture which yet lives in all its freshness in my mind. But how shall I transfer to paper the rainbow-hues of delight, and the active and vigorous spirit with which the original was clothed and animated, and which made the hours of school and of study—usually the most irksome of a boy's existence—those which I enjoyed most when present, and looked back upon with most complacency when past? Shall I attempt to describe the companions who made what was delightful in school and on Arthur's Seat* more pleasant, and what was laborious and mortifying more tolerable? Shall I sketch the creator and genius of the whole admirable mechanism, of which I have drawn the greater wheels and springs, moulding and directing it all to its destined end? Shall I tell how he added new grace to the breathing thoughts and burning words of inspired antiquity, by accumulating on them the selected beauties of succeeding ages, and the native flowers of his own exquisite and cultivated taste? How his words would take fire at some of those

* *Starry lights of genius, that diffuse
Through the dark depths of time their vivid flame,*

and kindle into eloquence in the cause of the muses and of virtue? How he lighted up a portion of his own enthusiasm in the breasts of his pupils? How he united with his reverence for antiquity due sentiments of honour to the present? How he could soar on Mæonian wing, and yet grapple patiently and successfully with the elemental difficulties of the humblest intellect committed to his care? How he maintained such absolute self-command, that I never saw him discomposed in temper? How his universal kindness softened the repelling lustre of his talents and his learning? No! the pen cannot describe them;

* The name of a well-known hill in the immediate neighbourhood of Edinburgh.

but they are treasured up in my heart's core. Would that they may produce their legitimate effect, in leading me to pay my master, patron, and friend, the best homage I can yield him,—the homage of a life regulated according to his desires, and of a mind cultivated according to his expectations!

“The just fame which the class acquired attracted to view it most of the natives and foreigners of distinction who spent any time in Edinburgh during its session. In the beginning of every quarter there was an examination of the class in the presence of the friends of the master and the pupils, in which the usual routine of the class was as much as possible observed, where it was our master's pride to exhibit our trifling feats of intellect, and ours to justify his praise, and not disgrace the fame of our school. Last came ‘the great, the important day,’ when the anniversary public examination took place. A few days before, the master, from the records of the class and his own recollections, fixed the places, accompanying the arrangement with a few words of congratulation to the successful, and of comfort to the disappointed. And it was wonderful to observe with what good-humour all acquiesced in his decision, and how complete an absence there was among them of any thing like bad feeling. The near approach of the separation, after which they should *all* meet no more for ever, seemed to diffuse a melancholy feeling over the most thoughtless, and to melt down the affections of all to the same temperament of mutual regard. For days before, the voice of their sports was silent in the play ground, and they were seen sauntering through it either in solitary reflection, or in groups of farewell conversation. On the day before the last day we should all meet in private, our beloved master took leave of us by addressing to us a few sentences of recollection, reflection, and advice, and commending us to the great Father of all. Next forenoon the class assembled at an early hour, and sat in anxious and silent expectation until the arrival of the presiding Magistrates was announced, and the doors thrown open to the overflowing public. The examination commences; a few shots are fired in the lower parts of the class, but the discharge mounts rapidly to the higher regions of the line; and before an hour or two is past, the whole is confined to a rapid and red-hot interchange of interrogations and answers between the examiner's bench and the dux's form. The sun is descending rapidly to his goal,—the final question is put, and it is mute expectation all; the master announces the names and merits of the successful competitors for prizes,—the tumult of applause begins, and, amidst its reverberated

thunders, the prizes are delivered, the parting-speeches are made, and all is over!

"All to me is over! I now enter the play-ground, but am greeted by no smile of recognition, save from the hoary janitor. I tread where once 'my name was rife,' but there it lives no longer, save on the perishable canvass. But if I forget you, scenes of my youthful ambition and delight,—if I forget thee, my master and benefactor,—if I forget you, once loved companions of my studious hours,—may the strings of my mind be dissolved! may 'my right hand forget her cunning!' Many of you still meet me in the academic walks; but soon this intercourse also will have passed away. Many of you are now in distant regions, and one of you is gone, and another is fast going, to that remotest and most

—— 'Undiscovered country, from whose bourne
No traveller returns.'

"Perhaps we shall meet again!

J. P."

Patterson had entered the Rector's Class utterly ignorant of Latin versification, and with very little knowledge of prosody; yet in the course of his two years' attendance he acquired facility in the practice, and produced many exercises in different measures, not inferior to the following specimen of Hexameters. No exercise of this kind was ever received which the Rector did not ascertain to be the genuine unassisted production of the writer;—a precaution taken even in the case of John Patterson; though, from his high moral character and unimpeachable veracity, such precaution might well have been dispensed with. The specimen is part of an exercise written on the prescribed theme, *Sideribus novere vias*, (Lucan. x. 495), containing the description of a traveller left alone in the sandy deserts of Africa, amidst the phenomena of the Mirage and the Simoom.

* * * * *

"Dum peragrat lassus sine tramite regna viator
Immotum frustra simul auribus aëra captans
Atque oculis quærens flaventis littora ponti,
Nil cernit præter cælum undique, et undique arenas