

**THE LIFE OF THOMAS
CHATTERTON; INCLUDING HIS
UNPUBLISHED POEMS AND
CORRESPONDENCE, PP. 15-213**

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by John Dix

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THOMAS CHATTERTON;
INCLUDING HIS
UNPUBLISHED POEMS AND CORRESPONDENCE.

BY JOHN DIX,

AUTHOR OF "TEN PICTURES OF POPULAR ENGLISH PREACHERS,"
"PEN AND INK SKETCHES," ETC.

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P R E F A C E.

Eighty-one years have elapsed since the death of Thomas Chatterton; and his memoirs, which have appeared from several pens, seemed to the author of this biography to have held up the shadowed side of his brief life to public observation, and to have studiously concealed those traits in his character, which should have rescued him from the ill nature of those who neglected him whilst living, and traduced him when dead. Much new information respecting "the marvellous boy" having fallen into the author's hands, he has with pleasure performed a task which has not been altogether devoid of difficulties. These, however, have been considerably lessened by the kind offices

of friends, and it is his pleasing duty to acknowledge the assistance he has received.

To John Matthew Gutch, Esq., the author is especially indebted for the use of his unrivalled "Haslewood" collection of Chatterton papers. To Dr. Southey, and to Joseph Cottle, Esq., for valuable assistance. To George Cumberland, Esq., for his appendix. To W. Tyson, Esq., for his most interesting communication respecting Chatterton's early poems; and to Dr. Dalton for the loan of works connected with the subject.

THE LIFE
OF
THOMAS CHATTERTON.

THOMAS CHATTERTON, the son of Thomas and Sarah Chatterton, was born on the 20th of November, in the year 1752, in a house situated on Redcliff Hill, behind the shop now occupied by Mr. Self, Chemist. Of his family comparatively little is known; indeed, until after his death, from their humble station, few or no inquiries were made respecting them, and after that occurrence, intense grief, or perhaps a feeling of indignation against those who neglected him whilst living, but who sought to spread his fame, from interested motives, when fame was no longer an object of pursuit to its young aspirant, may have deterred them from satisfying the numerous inquiries which poured upon them from various quarters; especially when in some instances the request assumed the character of a menace, and a threat that the name of their gifted relative should be transmitted to posterity with the brand of infamy upon it, unless they gave up all his papers and letters in their possession.

The father of Chatterton was, in the early part of his life, a writing master to a classical school; he afterwards became sub-chaunter of the Cathedral of Bristol, which office he held, together with that of master of the free school in Pyle Street, at the time of his death.

The edition of the works of Chatterton, published in 1803, contains an anecdote of the method the father took, when he was sexton of Redcliff Church, to obtain money from some ladies. This anecdote, it was said, was communicated by a gentleman of Bristol, who was present at the transaction. But it happens, unfortunately for the veracity of the gentleman in question, that Chatterton's father never was sexton of Redcliff Church; his uncle, John Chatterton, having been the last of the family who held that office: he was elected to it, March, 1725, and continued in it till his death, which happened in the year 1748. A catch for three voices is also inserted in the work referred to, communicated by Edward Williams, the Welsh bard; the words and music of which are said to be Mr. Chatterton's, and where he is also perversely called the sexton of St. Mary Redcliff.

If the catch was really composed by him, it ill accords with the character which Mr. Gardner gives of him—"a complete master of the theory and practice of music." That he had made some proficiency in the science is certain, from the situation he held in the choir of the Cathedral.

That he was a man of some talent and shrewdness is evident, from the various testimonials of those who knew him well, but he was inclined to dissipated habits and was of a "brutal disposition."* The house in which he lived had only two sitting

* Mrs. Edkins. Vide Appendix, for which I am indebted to G. Cumberland, Esq.

rooms, and he often passed the whole night roaring out catches in one of them, with some of the lowest rabble of the parish. His wife he always treated with the greatest indifference, and once, upon being asked why he married her, he coolly replied, "*solely for a housekeeper.*" Mrs. Chatterton has been described as a plain, worthy woman, without any extraordinary qualities; and as having been most devotedly attached to her son. Her husband died on the 7th of August, 1752, and his posthumous son was born in the November following. "By the premature loss of his father," says Dr. Gregory, "he was deprived of that careful attention, which would probably have conducted his early years through all the difficulties, that circumstances or disposition might oppose to the attainment of knowledge." That he was not likely to experience much "careful attention" from his father, may be inferred from the fact of the ill usage Mrs. Chatterton received from him; and few will doubt, that as the *wife* was treated with harshness and neglect, the *son* would have experienced similar treatment.

At the age of five years Chatterton was placed under the care of a Mr. Love, who succeeded to the office of schoolmaster on the death of his father; but such was his apparent dulness or incapacity, that, after exhausting the patience of his schoolmaster, he was sent back to his mother with the character of a stupid boy, and one who was absolutely incapable of receiving instruction. Chatterton, however, is not the only instance of this kind; many of those, whose names stand high in the various departments of science and literature, gave no intimation in the dawning of their days, of that splendour, which afterwards eclipsed the lesser light of some whose morning was full of promise.

On his removal from the Pyle Street school, his widowed mother, who was rendered extremely unhappy by what appeared a most untoward circumstance, herself commenced teaching her son, but her efforts were all in vain, and she almost despaired of ever even teaching him his letters. "Many," says Mrs. Edkins, "were the uncasinesses that his singularities caused his mother, and until he was six years and a half old she thought him to be an absolute fool, and often, when correcting him, told him so." But, on her one day showing him an old musical manuscript, in French, with illuminated capitals, with it, to use her own words, *he fell in love*. From this manuscript he learned the alphabet, and he soon afterwards was able to read in an old black lettered Bible. This circumstance, it is possible, may have caused in some degree his inclination for antiquarian research. His progress was now as rapid as it had formerly been tardy, and we learn, from the authority just quoted, that "at seven he visibly improved, to his mother's joy and surprise; and at eight years of age he was so eager for books, that he read from the moment he waked, which was early, until he went to bed, if they would let him." He now began to borrow books of all his acquaintance; and he would frequently assure his mother and sister, that when he grew up he would repay them for their trouble in teaching him, promising them plenty of finery as a reward for their care.

His thirst for fame discovered itself at a very early age; before he was five years old he was the master of his playmates, "and they his hired servants."* And on one occasion, when a friend promised to make Mrs. Chatterton's children a present of some earthenware, on asking young Chat-

* Mr. Newton's Letter.