

MACAULAY

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Macaulay by James Cotter Morison & John Morley

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JAMES COTTER MORISON & JOHN MORLEY

MACAULAY

English Men of Letters

EDITED BY JOHN MORLEY

Macaulay

by

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"THE LIFE AND TIMES OF ST. BERNARD," ETC.

English Men of Letters

EDITED BY

JOHN MORLEY



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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:

"There is nothing I remember with so much pleasure as the time when you nursed me at Aspenden. How sick and sleepless and weak I was, lying in bed, when I was told that you were come! How well I remember with what an ecstacy of joy I saw that face approaching me! The sound of your voice, the touch of your hand, are present to me now, and will be, I trust in God, to my last hour."

But many a devoted mother could watch by the sick-bed of her son for weeks without sleep, who would not have the courage to keep him up to a high standard of literary performance. When he was not yet thirteen she wrote to him:

"I know you write with great ease to yourself, and would rather write ten poems than prune one. All your pieces are much mended after a little reflection; therefore, take your solitary walks and think over each separate thing. Spare no time or trouble, and render each piece as perfect as you can, and then leave the event without one anxious thought. I have always admired a saying of one of the old heathen philosophers; when a friend was condoling with him that he so well deserved of the gods, and yet they did not shower their favours on him as on some others less worthy, he answered, 'I will continue to deserve well of them.' So do you, my dearest."

Deep, sober, clear-eyed love watched over Macaulay's childhood. His mother lived long enough to see her son on the high-road to honour and fame, and died almost immediately after he had made his first great speech on the Reform Bill in 1831.

His father, Zachary, was a man cast in an heroic mould, who reproduced, one might surmise, the moral features of some stern old Scotch Covenanter among his ancestors, and never quite fitted into the age in which it was his lot to live. There was a latent faculty in him which, in spite of his long and laborious life, he was never able completely to unfold. A silent, austere, earnest, patient, en-

during man, almost wholly without the gift of speech, and the power of uttering the deep, involved thought that was in him—a man after Carlyle's own heart, if he could have seen anything good in an emancipator of negroes. A feeling of respect bordering on reverence is excited by the little we know of Macaulay's father—his piety, his zeal, his self-sacrifice to the cause to which he devoted his mind, body, and estate; even the gloom and moroseness of his latter years, all point to a character of finer fibre and loftier strain, many might be disposed to think, than that of his eloquent and brilliant son. There are parallel cases on record of men endowed with over-abundance of thought and feeling, for which they never find adequate expression, who have had sons in whose case the spell which sealed their own lips to silence is broken—sons who can find ready utterance for the burden of thought which lay imprisoned in their sires, partly because they were not *overflowing*, as their fathers were. Diderot was such a case. He always said that he was not to be compared to his father, the cutler of Langres; and declared he was never so pleased in his life as when a fellow-townsmen said to him, "Ah, M. Diderot, you are a very famous man, but you will never be half the man your father was." Carlyle always spoke of his father in similar language. But the closest analogy to the two Macaulays is that of the two Mirabeaus, the crabbed, old "friend of man," and the erratic genius, the orator Gabrielle Honoré. It is certainly "a likeness in unlikeness" of no common kind; and nothing can be more dissimilar than the two pairs of men; but the similarity of relation of elder to younger in the two cases is all the more remarkable.

In this grave, well-ordered home Macaulay passed a happy childhood. He had three brothers and five sisters,