

**MEMORIALS OF
THOMAS DAVIDSON, THE
WANDERING SCHOLAR**

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Memorials of Thomas Davidson, the wandering scholar by William Knight

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WILLIAM KNIGHT

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THE WANDERING SCHOLAR

COLLECTED AND EDITED

BY

WILLIAM KNIGHT

BOSTON AND LONDON
GINN AND COMPANY, PUBLISHERS
1907

TO
THE MANY FRIENDS OF
THOMAS DAVIDSON
WHOM HE INFLUENCED FOR GOOD
THESE PAGES ARE
INSCRIBED

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PREFACE

Since the following pages were written a book entitled *The Education of the Wage-Earners, a Contribution toward the Solution of the Educational Problem of Democracy*, by Thomas Davidson, has been edited by his student-friend, Professor Charles M. Bakewell of Yale University, and published by Messrs. Ginn & Company. It is a distinctive memorial of Davidson's work, especially in the closing years of his life; but it does not render the present volume inopportune, nor does it in any way supersede it. Both have the same end in view, namely, the memorialization of the life and work of a very remarkable man, — rare at any time, and more especially rare as the years advance, — a unique teacher of the nineteenth century, who sowed seed which is even now yielding a rich harvest.

It may be well to state in a paragraph what Mr. Bakewell has done in his little book for the memory of our common friend. He first gives a comprehensive introductory sketch of Davidson and his philosophy. He then inserts an address on "The Task of the Nineteenth Century," given by Mr. Davidson before the Educational Alliance of New York in 1898, and first published in the *International Journal of Ethics* in October, 1901. His third chapter contains a very interesting statement, also by Mr. Davidson, on "The Educational Problem which the Nineteenth Century hands over to the Twentieth"; while the fourth contains "The History of the Experiment." His fifth chapter is, however, by far the most valuable in the volume. It is entitled "The Underlying Spirit (of the experiment) as shown by the Weekly Letters to the Class." From

May, 1899, to August, 1900, the teacher wrote to this class, from his temporary home at Hurricane in Essex County, some thirty letters, in which he discussed many a problem in the philosophy of Ethics, Sociology, and kindred subjects with almost conversational ease, full of genuine insight and instructiveness. They are remarkable letters, many of them composed when the writer was a great sufferer.

I have prepared this volume on lines somewhat parallel to the biographies or memoirs of others with whose lives it has fallen to me in past years to deal; namely, Wordsworth, Principal Shairp of St. Andrews, Professor Nichol of Glasgow, and Minto of Aberdeen, as well as other nineteenth-century Scotsmen. The method adopted in the volumes devoted to these men is even more necessary in the case of this wandering scholar and peripatetic teacher. I think it is impossible for any one man to deal adequately with a character so complex, an individuality made up of many various elements, if he merely collects estimates, and mingles them together into an *olla-podrida* of his own. I have, therefore, given a number of estimates, or characterizations, by friends from opposite points of view — a series of mental photographs or appraisals of the man — and have allowed these, in their separateness, to tell the story of his life and work.

As I have had occasion to remark elsewhere, critical biographies — in which the biographer obtrudes — are objectionable, while those in which he dominates are unnecessary; and so in this volume the letters of the author, his essays and papers, with the estimates of those who knew him in various relationships — in many cases curtailed, and their superfluities removed — are left to speak for themselves. It is my belief that this plan will be more useful than a formal biography would be, and quite as interesting to those who read it. The reminiscences of various friends, and estimates taken from

different points of view, often give a much more vivid idea of a man and his life work than a continuous narrative of events could do; and, although there may be a few repetitions in these sketches as they refer to different periods and occasions, a substantial unity will be discernible underneath the variety that is inevitable.

Many have wondered why Thomas Davidson remained so long a wanderer, the travelling teacher-friend, instead of settling down within university precincts as the honored instructor of an existing school. I believe that in this he followed the guidance of an inward instinct, which directed him from his earliest years. There was a curiously independent element in him, which found its symbol in the national Scottish thistle, *Nemo me impune lacessit*. He could not work in the prescribed rule or routine of other minds; and so, perhaps, he could never have submitted to academic fetters which were not of his own creation. With superabundant energy ever welling up within him, he preferred to be not exactly a free lance, but a ubiquitous inspirer of the lives of other people in many various directions; and so he became a puzzle alike to his liberal and to his conservative friends. He was not more of a mystery to those he occasionally met in his travels than he was to his coadjutors in public social work, whom he could not bring into complete sympathy with his own ideals. A curious story is told of his once being at Domodossola in the company of three men, a Frenchman, a German, and an Italian, and of his speaking all three languages so fluently and easily that each man mistook him for a fellow-countryman. If this was a sign of wide culture, it did not imply any lack of concentration in thought. Davidson saw the best things in all the systems that had been evolved, but indiscriminate mental wandering was distasteful to him.

In a brief preface I can say little more of the man whom I had long ago to address in the old pathetic words, *Frater ave, atque vale*; it is enough to leave this memorial volume as it now stands to tell its own tale as best it may.¹

W. K.

¹ As originally written this book contained chapters giving a full analytic synopsis of Thomas Davidson's books on *The Parthenon Frieze* and *Prolegomena to Tennyson's "In Memoriam,"* his letters to the Breadwinners' College in New York, a detailed account of his teaching at Glenmore, and extracts from some of his forgotten contributions to newspapers and magazines. In deference to the opinion of my publishers that it was inexpedient "to include abstracts of works which were in print and might be consulted by those interested," I have agreed to suppress the greater part of these chapters, although my judgment was in favor of their appearance. They have been preserved, however, in their original form, and I shall be glad to send them to any readers who may wish to know more of the life and work of the "Wandering Scholar."—W. K.