

# **BOOKS AND MEN**

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Books and Men by Agnes Repplier

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### CHILDREN, PAST AND PRESENT.

As a result of the modern tendency to desert the broad beaten roads of history for the bridle-paths of biography and memoir, we find a great many side lights thrown upon matters that the historian was wont to treat as altogether beneath his consideration. It is by their help that we study the minute changes of social life that little by little alter the whole aspect of a people, and it is by their help that we look straight into the ordinary every-day workings of the past, and measure the space between its existence and our own. When we read, for instance, of Lady Cathcart being kept a close prisoner by her husband for over twenty years, we look with some complacency on the roving wives of the nineteenth century. When we reflect on the dismal fate of Uriel Freudenberger, condemned by the Canton of Uri to be



burnt alive in 1760, for rashly proclaiming his disbelief in the legend of William Tell's apple, we realize the inconveniences attendant on a too early development of the critical faculty. We listen entranced while the learned pastor Dr. Johann Geiler von Keyersperg gravely enlightens his congregation as to the nature and properties of were-wolves; and we turn aside to see the half-starved boys at Westminster boiling their own batter-pudding in a stocking foot, or to hear the little John Wesley crying softly when he is whipped, not being permitted even then the luxury of a hearty bellow.

Perhaps the last incident will strike us as the most pathetic of all, this being essentially the children's age. Women, workmen, and skeptics all have reason enough to be grateful they were not born a few generations earlier; but the children of to-day are favored beyond their knowledge, and certainly far beyond their deserts. Compare the modern schoolboy with any of his ill-fated predecessors, from the days of Spartan discipline down to our grandfathers' time. Turn from the free-and-easy school-girl of the period to the

miseries of Mrs. Sherwood's youth, with its steel collars, its backboards, its submissive silence and rigorous decorum. Think of the turbulent and uproarious nurseries we all know, and then go back in spirit to that severe and occult shrine where Mrs. Wesley ruled over her infant brood with a code of disciplinary laws as awful and inviolable as those of the Medes and Persians. Of their supreme efficacy she plainly felt no doubts, for she has left them carefully written down for the benefit of succeeding generations, though we fear that few mothers of to-day would be tempted by their stringent austerity. They are to modern nursery rules what the Blue Laws of Connecticut are to our more languid legislation. Each child was expected and required to commemorate its fifth birthday by learning the entire alphabet by heart. To insure this all-important matter, the whole house was impressively set in order the day before; every one's task was assigned to him; and Mrs. Wesley, issuing strict commands that no one should penetrate into the sanctuary while the solemn ordeal was in process, shut herself up for six hours with the unhappy morsel of a

child, and unflinchingly drove the letters into its bewildered brain. On two occasions only was she unsuccessful. "Molly and Nancy," we are told, failed to learn in the given time, and their mother comforts herself for their tardiness by reflecting on the still greater incapacity of other people's bairns.

"When the will of a child is totally subdued, and it is brought to revere and stand in awe of its parents," then, and then only, their rigid judge considers that some little inadvertences and follies may be safely passed over. Nor would she permit one of them to "be chid or beaten twice for the same fault,"—a stately assumption of justice that speaks volumes for the iron-bound code by which they were brought into subjection. Most children nowadays are sufficiently amazed if a tardy vengeance overtake them once, and a second penalty for the same offense is something we should hardly deem it necessary to proscribe. Yet nothing is more evident than that Mrs. Wesley was neither a cruel nor an unloving mother. It is plain that she labored hard for her little flock, and had their welfare and happiness greatly at heart. In after years they