

**BRIEF MEMOIR OF
ALEXANDER
MACMILLAN**

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Brief Memoir of Alexander Macmillan by George A. Macmillan

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GEORGE A. MACMILLAN

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Alex. Macmillan

*from a portrait painted in 1889
by Sir Hubert von Herkomer R.A.*

Brief Memoir of
Alexander Macmillan

By his Son
George A. Macmillan

*Being the Introduction to a Selection of
Alexander Macmillan's Letters*

With Portraits

Printed for Private Circulation
1908

INTRODUCTION

AFTER my father's death in January 1896, our old friend Mr. John Morley encouraged me in making a selection of his letters, and held out some hope that if such a selection were made he might himself write an appreciation by way of preface. Unfortunately, the pressure of other occupations and the mass of letters to be read prevented my making much progress with the matter, and although now and again I found time to read through some of the early letter-books of the firm, it was not until 1905 that I found an efficient helper in Mr. A. Tilney Bassett, who, under my general supervision, went through the remainder of the books and made type-written copies of the letters which seemed worth preserving. These were then carefully sifted with the help of various members of the family, and especially of my sister Mrs. Dyer, and were eventually put into type. My idea at that time was to publish a selection from the Letters with a thread of biographical narrative sufficient to explain them and to hold them together. The Letters were submitted in proof to Mr. Morley in the summer of 1906, and he then strongly advised that, instead of publishing them as they stood with an explanatory narrative, they should be used as material for a regular biography which should present as vivid a picture as possible of the man and his work. We naturally felt that Mr. Morley himself, a master of the craft, and one who had been closely associated

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with my father for nearly thirty years, was the ideal biographer. But unfortunately the cares of his important office, and other literary work to which he was committed, made it impossible for him to accept our invitation, and in the end the work was undertaken by Mr. C. L. Graves, who had already written for the firm an admirable biography of my father's old friend Sir George Grove.

As, however, so many Letters were already in type, of which only a small proportion could be used in the biography, it was thought that the collection as it stood, with a brief introduction, might be privately issued for the family and personal friends.

The following narrative may serve to make the letters more intelligible, and it seems well to preface it by the following delightful autobiographical letter to an old Irvine schoolfellow, which was sent to us by its recipient after my father's death:

STREATHAM LANE,
UPPER TOOTING, S.W.,
October 17, 1870.

MY DEAR SPEIRS:

When I came home to-night from business, I gave your most welcome letter to my wife to read, and she being a wifely-minded woman was vastly pleased therewith, and vowed that it should forthwith be placed in the family archives.

Indeed, my dear friend, your letter was very pleasant to me. It may seem strange to other people, that I who really care intensely for the simple human being and his individual worth, and not very much for what is known as "position in society," "rank," "birth," and the like, have yet the most intense interest in, and love for old memories, old associations, old friends. You have been among the old and dearly cherished memories of my very chequered boyhood. I don't think we were very long schoolfellows together, for you will remember, at least I do, how very poor our family was, so that even the very moderate school-fee that was charged at the Academy was a matter of consideration to us. But I remember very vividly some "stirring incidents" in our common school life, and your prominence in the actions,

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small in the world's history, but curiously important in one's own personal life. I remember a great "stane-battle" with Scott's School (of which, oddly enough, I was *Head-Master* afterwards, for three months, when I was of the mature years of fifteen or sixteen) in which I think you were one of the leaders. I remember, too, great snowball fights, in which you and David and John Watt were among our champions, with the town-end weavers. I remember, also, one somewhat riotous and irregular affair, when you and David Watt and I went down to the shore to "dook," and varied our walk along the Halfway by shutting all the "window-brodds" as we went along, to the disturbance of the auld wives who rushed out to see what was up. I was reminding David Watt whom I see now and then here, of this affair, and charging him with being the leader, which with his native modesty, he repudiated, so it may have been *you* after all.

Poor Danie Stewart! You are quite right. He was an assiduous teacher, tho' wholly lacking as I believe in skill or manliness to draw out the gifts and strengthen the moral tone of his pupils. On the whole, I am afraid my feeling towards him, then and since, was hardly one of respect or reverence. I call to mind a great scene when John Watt took up his bag and bonnet, and rushed out of the School, flinging back some saucy taunt as he left the room. And do you remember the fines, a "bawbee" I think, imposed on us for being late, and a great conspiracy when all the bigger boys deliberately stayed some quarter of an hour late, and went in in a body gravely and quietly as if it was all right? Poor old Danie! But what a different man Connel was, the master of the Commercial Department. He stands clear and wholesome before me now, with his small well-knit figure, giving out with rare lucid skill the rules of arithmetic—not a very high region perhaps, but high enough to exhibit what I cannot doubt was as fine an intellect, and as true a skill in imparting its ascertainment, as I ever saw. And how simple and noble his whole moral tone was. Discipline was maintained in a way that commended itself at once to the conscience and judgment of every boy to whom God had given a reasonable share of either. I think I was only three months with him, and the impression he made on me was such that even now, when I know most of the head-masters of the great public schools of England, as personal friends more or less, I am constantly thinking and comparing them with Connel. You

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remember he went to the High School at Glasgow afterwards. What a lesson it is in his life to think how great is the influence unseen and unnoted at the time, a man intent on doing his work simply, unselfishly, manfully, may have on the future of any man's life. I owe much to his memory. I think he was a common hand-loom weaver in early life, and taught himself most of what he knew. And yet he was a perfect gentleman, courteous, high-toned, simple, really noble, and with what keen intellect! That was my impression then, and it was singularly confirmed to me after we went to Cambridge, and had already become publishers of some of the best educational books in Higher Mathematics. After Connel's death, some one in Glasgow wrote to our house (my dear brother Daniel was then alive) sending us a copy of a work on Differential Calculus, which he had written and published in Glasgow or Edinburgh, I forget which, and asking if we would publish a new edition of it. We had just published Todhunter's book on the subject, which then was at once accepted as the best that could well be done, and which still after twenty years holds its place undisputed. But, remembering Connel, I asked several very able men to look at it, and tell me what they thought of it. While saying it would not stand before Todhunter, they, one and all, expressed great admiration of it, and thought that, considering that the author had not had a Cambridge or Oxford training, it was really a masterly work. Todhunter is a man of the very highest powers and acquirements: he was Senior Wrangler, that is, the best mathematician in his year; an accomplished tutor of his college besides, and a man far above the average even of Senior Wranglers, so that for Connel's book to be thought of at all in comparison with his, was a very high honour indeed. I can assure you that I was not a little proud of dear old Irvine and its Academy, when I got this opinion.

I am rather sorry in looking over the list of names you give as our class-fellows that I can remember distinctly only two—John Watt and William Johnston. David Watt told me in a letter I had from him the other day, that on his recent visit to America, he had seen and spent a long evening with Johnston. He is in very bad health, paralysed, I think he said. But he has been prosperous, and is wealthy and comfortable. I met him—Butterfly we used to call him—but he was then a big burly man far removed from the slight figure that led to his name—I think twenty years ago, on the top