

**AN ACCOUNT OF THE LIFE
AND WORKS OF DR. ROBERT
WATT: AUTHOR OF THE
BIBLIOTHECA BRITANNICA**

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An Account of the Life and Works of Dr. Robert Watt: Author of the bibliotheca britannica by James Finlayson

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JAMES FINLAYSON

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AN ACCOUNT OF THE
LIFE AND WORKS
OF
DR ROBERT WATT

AUTHOR OF THE 'BIBLIOTHECA BRITANNICA'

BY

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PHYSICIANS AND SURGEONS, GLASGOW; ETC.



WITH A PORTRAIT

LONDON
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1897

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LIFE AND WORKS

OF

DR. ROBERT WATT

WATT's 'Bibliotheca Britannica' is known wherever English bibliography is cultivated, whether in this country or abroad; but there is often a singular absence of any knowledge of its author. Even in Glasgow, and within his own profession, he is but little known, while some of those familiar with his book are scarcely aware that he was a Doctor of Medicine, and still less that he was a practising physician in Glasgow. The final title page, and preface alike fail to reveal his place of residence and work, or even that he had been engaged in actual medical practice. A short memoir submitted by Mr. Mason to the Conference of Librarians in Glasgow in 1888 gave information which led, no doubt, to his being better known both to the Glasgow public and to the librarians of the country.

When a man obtains a world-wide celebrity in one direction, there is a natural curiosity as to his

work in other departments and as to his general character. Watt's death at the age of forty-five was no doubt hastened by his stupendous labours at the 'Bibliotheca,' and this early death and the previous bad health necessarily lessened his chance of distinction in the medical profession, in which time is generally needed for acquiring any wide reputation. There is some difficulty in obtaining accurate information about his life and his professional work, but enough is known to show that he was a man who made his mark even apart from the four monumental volumes of the 'Bibliotheca.'

The best account of Dr. Robert Watt appeared in Chambers' 'Biographical Dictionary of Eminent Scotsmen.' The last edition of this work was edited by Thomson, in three volumes, and published by Blackie & Son, Glasgow and London, in 1870; the first edition of the 'Dictionary,' however, published in Glasgow in 1835, contains an interesting autobiographical letter, omitted in the later edition, which describes Watt's early days; in the index to the volume we find that the writer had 'family information.' In preparing this present notice every effort has been made to get data from original sources, but in some details the authority of Chambers—as indicated from time to time—has been accepted; as he states that he had 'family

information,' this may be regarded as sufficient on these matters.¹

The bibliographer's father, John Watt, was a small farmer in the parish of Stewarton, in Ayrshire, about eighteen miles south-west of Glasgow, and Robert was the youngest of three sons; he was born there on May 1, 1774.

The autobiographical letter which follows is stated to have been written a short time before his death. Watt gave these details in response to the request of a friend for some information regarding his early days. The indomitable perseverance there indicated, throws some light on his subsequent achievements. The meeting at Dumfries of the Scottish bibliographer and the great Scottish poet, both from Ayrshire, is interesting as a fact, although the reminiscence is too shadowy to be of much value. It shows, however, the poet's kindness in encouraging a youth in his eager desire for literary improvement.

The following is the letter in full:—

'Among the first things I remember very distinctly was being sent to school, about the age, I

¹ In a newspaper notice of Mr. Alexander Whitelaw's death (cutting dated Glasgow, 1846) it is stated that besides editing the *Literary Casket*, he worked at many books issued by the Messrs. Blackie, and, amongst them, at Chambers' *Dictionary of Eminent Scotemen*. As Whitelaw was associated with Watt in preparing the *Bibliotheca Britannica*, as explained later on, we may presume that he supervised the notice of his friend's life in Chambers' *Dictionary*.

suppose, of five or six. I was only a short time with my first teacher, and remember little of what was done. With two or three masters, I learned to read English, write, and count. At this time I recollect being rather a favourite with the teacher, and suffering from the envy of my school-fellows on that account. From the difficulties I had to encounter in every branch of learning afterwards, I think my proficiency at that time must have been very small.

'About the age of thirteen, I became a plough-boy to a farmer in a neighbouring parish. After this, I was sometimes at home, and sometimes in the service of other people, till the age of seventeen. Before this age, I had begun to acquire a taste for reading, and spent a good deal of my time in that way. The books I read were such as I found about my father's house; among which I remember the "Pilgrim's Progress," "The Lives of Scotch Worthies," &c. A spirit for extending my knowledge of the country, and other things, had manifested itself early, in various forms. When very young, my great ambition was to be a chapman; and it was long before the sneers of my friends could drive me from this favourite project. It was the same spirit, and a wish of doing something for myself, that made me go into the service of other farmers. I saw more than I did

at home, and I got money which I could call my own. My father's circumstances were very limited ; but they were equal, with his own industry, to the bringing up of his family, and putting them to trades. This was his great wish. I remember he preferred a trade greatly to being farmers' servants.

'With a view to extend my knowledge of the country, I went with a party into Galloway, to build stone dykes. On getting there, however, the job which we had expected was abandoned, on account of some difference taking place between the proprietor of the land and the cultivator ; and we went to the neighbourhood of Dumfries, where our employer had a contract for making part of the line of road from Sanquhar to Dumfries. During my short stay in Galloway, which was at Loch Fergus, in the vicinity of Kirkeudbright, I lodged in a house where I had an opportunity of reading some books, and saw occasionally a newspaper. This enlarged my views, increased the desire to see and learn more, and made me regret exceedingly my short stay in the place.

'On our arrival at Dumfries, we were boarded on the farm of Ellisland, in the possession of Robert Burns. The old house which he and his family had recently occupied became our temporary abode. This was only for a few days. I was

