

**AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF GEORGE
TAIT, A DEAF MUTE: WHO FIRST
GAVE
INSTRUCTIONS TO THE DEAF AND
DUMB IN THE CITY OF HALIFAX**

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Autobiography of George Tait, a Deaf Mute: Who First Gave Instructions to the Deaf and Dumb in the city of halifax by George Tait

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GEORGE TAIT

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DONALDSON HOSPITAL, FOR THE DEAF AND DUMB AND OTHERS.
EDINBURGH, SCOTLAND.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY
OF
GEORGE TAIT,

A DEAF MUTE,

Who first gave Instructions to the Deaf and
Dumb in the

CITY OF HALIFAX.

Also an Extract from an American Paper on Teachers and
Modes of Teaching the Deaf and Dumb.

ELEVENTH EDITION.

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PREFACE.

1889

WHEN first I commenced to write this little book I did so without the slightest intention of selling it; I wrote it merely for my own amusement and the pleasure of giving it to some of my friends who had desired me to do so. But when times became so hard I was thrown completely out of employment and finding it impossible to procure work, I very unwillingly made up my mind to SELL my book instead of GIVING it away as I intended doing. I had no idea, however, that I would have been favoured with such success, but owing to the kind patronage of both strangers and friends, I have been enabled to sell a large number.

In this, my eleventh edition, I have made a few slight alterations, by inserting a few incidents of my life omitted in the former editions, and adding a brief account of my travels since commencing to sell the book. I have also procured a few references, and as some doubt the validity of my statement concerning my first starting the Deaf and Dumb School in Halifax, I have obtained a passage from an old paper in connection with that fact printed upon the event of the school first being started.*

And here allow me to tender my most sincere thanks to all those who have so kindly and benevolently assisted me by purchasing my book.

GEORGE TAIT.

*GOOD AGAIN.—Mr. Tait, the deaf mute young carpenter, who has been mainly instrumental in getting up the Deaf and Dumb School, Argyle Street, informs us that he collected from the benevolent in this City, during ten days, the handsome sum of £40, to aid him in the good cause.

—Halifax, (N. S.) Chronicle, September 18th, 1856.

Autobiography of George Tait.

I, GEORGE TAIT, in accordance with the wishes of some of my friends, proceed to write a brief history of my past life; and my sincere desire is to make the book sufficiently interesting to awaken within the bosoms of any who may read it, an interest in the child of silence.

To begin my history where my life began, I shall invite my reader to travel in imagination far across the broad Atlantic, to the heathery hills of "Auld Scotland" "where the kilted lads are born," and visit the haunts of my early childhood.

I was born in Caithness Shire, Scotland, in the year 1828. My father was a farmer, and consequently a thatched cottage and broad green fields form the associations of my earliest remembrance. As there were no fences inclosing my father's farm, it was necessary that the cows and sheep should be herded, and as I was the eldest son and at that time the only one old enough to perform such a task, I was installed as herdsman; a position which I, however, looked upon with no favourable eye. Ah! I can well remember the horror with which I looked upon those long wearisome hours of dreary watching and herding. How I used to long for the sun to go down, which was the welcome signal for me to return home with my charge. Had I been able to read and thus amuse myself and beguile those uncommonly long hours, herding cattle might not have grown such an inglorious occupation in my estimation. However, as it was, I had to amuse myself by imagining things in my own untaught uncultivated mind without the aid of books whereon to meditate. For instance I used to think the moon was a hugh cheese, and as it decreased in size, I supposed without doubt that some invisible person was cutting pieces of this imaginary cheese, and slowly devouring it; while the Northern Lights I supposed to be creatures dancing in the heavens. Indeed the heavenly hosts used to furnish a source of unfailing amusement for me, for I was never tired of gazing at the myriads of twinkling sparkling stars, the great blazing sun, and the pale majestic moon. But it must not for one moment be supposed that it was in my wicked nature to quietly and uncomplainingly do my duty. No, on the contrary, I used to be continually devising all manner of plans to get clear of it. My favourite one was to run off to my grandfather's a distance of about two miles. And my grandfather, who was very fond of me, was always ready with a smile of welcome. I loved him dearly, and he and I were strongly attached.

But while speaking of my grandfather, I must not forget to mention my grandmother, and how she used to try to teach me to read, and to honour the Sabbath day. Ah! how well I remember the large old-fashioned Bible she used to love so much to read, and how she used to endeavour to teach me to love it too. I used to look with reverence upon that book, not because I knew its inestimable value, but because she placed such store by it. I remember too that the word "God" was printed in large capital letters. She would show me this, and with deep devotion glowing in her faded eyes, point upwards—thus I was at first lead to understand that God was one far above this earth, a being whom we are to regard with reverence and awe and then the look of despair that would come into her eyes when she saw how utterly useless it was for her to try to teach me to read I can well recollect, although at that time I do not think the thought troubled me much, for I could not see any particular use in my learning to read. I had also a vague idea that I was the only deaf and dumb person in the world. I sigh when I remember those days of blissful ignorance when I knew nothing of this hard, cruel world. But although I cared so much for grandfather, it did not prevent me from often being very mischievous and thoughtless at his expense. And by way of illustrating how wicked are the thoughts and feelings of even the most ignorant of the depraved and fallen race of Adam, I will relate one or two of the schemes which my mind suggested, as excellent means whereby to torment my grandfather, and thereby create amusement for my own benefit.

One day he was working in his barn, and supposing that I was in the field he carelessly threw his pea-jacket aside and went on with his work, but I was in the barn, and not as he supposed in the field, and at the sight of the jacket came the thought "what a jolly chance for a lark." I always wore a short kilt, and I thought it would be splendid to have a pair of pants, so I took the jacket and forcing my legs into the sleeves of it prepared to have some fun, but alas! to my grief at that moment my grandfather caught a glimpse of me just as I was preparing to leave the barn, and started to take the jacket from me, but I had no intention of standing still and quietly letting him deprive me of all the pleasure which I had determined to have. No, I would make one last bold effort for the sake of the said lark, so as quick as thought I set off at as great a speed as possible, considering I had my legs through the sleeves of a jacket. My grandfather engaged in hot pursuit after me, and I venture to say there never was a more laughable sight. He caught me, however, and took my new fashioned pants from me, but not before we had a most delightful and invigorating run, in which run I was rather surprised to see my grandfather engage with the utmost suppleness, and seem to loose for the time all the stiffness of old age.

My grandfather was also a most notorious snuff-user. Now this black stuff always reminded me of soot, and supposing soot to be

just as good (indeed I have not yet had cause to alter my opinion), I one day took a little box and filled it from the chimney. My grandfather seeing me with it, and supposing it to be some of his beloved snuff, took the box from me with a sharp reproof for being so mischievous, and (without the slightest attempt on my part to prevent him) emptied the contents of it into his own box, while I, all the time this was taking place, could hardly restrain my intense amusement, and I went off laughing to myself when I thought of how my good grandfather would look when he should discover his mistake. But it must not be supposed that I made my venerable old grandfather the subject of all my wicked pranks, for I was a nuisance to those around me in general.

Thus I lived on, sometimes staying at my grandfather's at other times returning home and staying there awhile, until I reached the age of twelve years, when my father left the country with its green fields and pleasant shady lanes, and moved into the crowded smoky city of Wick, where he kept a grocery store. Not long after we went there the minister of the church which we attended called upon us, and seeing that I was deaf told my parents of an institution established for the education of the deaf and dumb. They were much gratified on receiving this piece of intelligence, as they had never before heard of such an institution, but had hitherto looked upon me with a sort of despair, supposing that there was no means whereby I might gain an education; and it was at once settled that I should go to school. My mother was soon busily engaged in supplying every comfort that her mind could suggest to make me comfortable while at school.

Soon all was ready and I was to start on my new career, little thinking that this was to be a turning point in my life, that thenceforth the current of my existence should run in entirely another direction, and would no longer flow on as it had hitherto done, in quiet and undisturbed tranquility.

Upon starting for school I was placed under the care of a gentleman whose name I do not remember, and conveyed safely to Edinburgh, (about 200 miles from my home) where the school stood—tall and imposing. It was well built of gray sandstone, and situated near the Donaldson Charity Institution, a splendid edifice of white sandstone and capable of accommodating about 500 persons, erected by a rich bachelor, named Donaldson.

When I reached the school I was kindly received by the Principal, a man who despite his 78 years, was still hearty and cheerful. His name was Mr. Kinneburg, and he was at one time, I believe a minister of the Church of England.

He was a very tall, stout gentleman with a certain air of importance about him which at once deeply impressed my young mind. He wore a very long-tailed black coat, knee breeches and gaiters, some large old-fashioned gold seals suspended on a black ribbon,

dangled from his vest, and two or three gold rings glittered on his fingers. Another thing I also noticed was that one of his little fingers was missing. I afterwards learned that this was due to some of his own mischief, and it seemed strange to me that this strict, important looking gentleman should ever have been a mischievous little urchin like myself, although his appearance was such as would undoubtedly excite the hearty laughter of any school-boy of the present day. After I had finished gazing at him, I took a survey of the school-room and its occupants, when to my delight I saw a large number of boys and girls, some of whom were near my own age and size, and some too, my quick eye readily detected were like myself, brimful of mischief.

I was perfectly charmed; never before had I seen such a collection of boys and girls ranging from the tender age of 5 and 6, to manhood and womanhood.

But despite the disparity of age, size, and temperament, they were all alike in one respect—like myself not one could hear a sound, either pleasant or harsh.—not one could utter a word of either love or hatred—a sad state dear reader you will say, but not so sad as you may imagine. While the deaf mute is deprived of two great senses, double power seems to have been given to the remaining. The “eye” is quick and sharp, the “feelings” acute and sensitive to a degree, at times almost painful, and although he cannot easily converse with those around him, a deaf man can almost read the thoughts of others in the various expressions of the face with that eye.

“An eye that seems to hear
E'en by observing, and that gathers more
From flickering lights and shadows of a face,
Than duller minds can gain from spoken words.”

But I am wandering from my subject, to return to the school-room and its occupants, there were about 85 scholars attending at that time and besides the Principal there were four male and two female teachers employed.

In a short time I was duly established in the class for which my intellectual attainments qualified me and soon becoming acquainted with the rest of the scholars, I was as happy as the day was long. On going to school I could only make known my thoughts by signs, but I quickly learned to talk with my fingers, thus being enabled to talk more freely and with much less difficulty.

So things went on in the usual routine of school life. Sometimes I would become tired of learning my lessons and try to get clear of them, but I soon learned that there was no mercy shown to lazy boys in that well-regulated school, so I resorted to another plan, that of feigning to be ill, but I was immediately sent to bed and a most shocking dose of salts was brought to me and I was forced to drink it. Ugh! I have hated the sight of salts ever since, and you may be sure that I did not pretend to be sick again.