

BIOGRAPHICAL MEMOIRS.

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BIOGRAPHICAL MEMOIRS.

BY SIR WALTER SCOTT.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.



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NOTICE OF THE PUBLISHERS.

THE contents of the present volumes are selected from various miscellaneous publications, which the illustrious author has occasionally honoured by his contributions, and are now for the first time given to the public in a collected form. The importance justly attached to every production of Sir Walter Scott, would doubtless secure a favourable reception to any republication of this nature—but it is submitted that even a peculiar value may be assigned to Biographical Notices, and opinions on contemporary talent, by so eminent a judge and accurate a delineator of human nature, feeling, and character.

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CHARLOTTE SMITH.

THIS tribute of affection to one of our most distinguished Novelists, was communicated to the Author of the Biographical Sketches, in the most obliging manner, by Mrs Dorset, sister of the subject of the Memoir, and not more nearly allied to her in blood than in genius. The publication which it was intended to accompany being discontinued, the following paper was never before in print. But on collecting the Biographical Sketches in the present form, the author could not abandon the claim, so kindly permitted him, to add this to the number. He is himself responsible for the critical remarks which conclude the article.

MRS CHARLOTTE SMITH was the eldest daughter of Nicholas Turner, Esq., of Stoke House, in Surrey, and of Bignor Park, in Sussex, by Anna Towers, his first wife. She was born in King-street, St James's-square, on the 4th of May, 1749. Before she had accomplished her fourth year, she was deprived of a mother as distinguished by her superior understanding as for her uncommon beauty. The charge of her education devolved on her aunt, who with unwearied zeal devoted the best years of her life to the duty she had undertaken. Accomplishments seemed to have been the objects of her ambition, and no time was lost in their attainment ; for her little charge was attended by an eminent dancing-master, when such a mere infant, that she was taught her first steps on a dining-table. She never recollected the time when she could not read, and was in the habit of reading every book that fell in her way even before she went to school, which was at six years old, when she was placed in a respectable establishment at Chichester.

Her father, desirous of cultivating her talent for drawing, engaged George Smith, a celebrated artist, and a native and inhabitant of that city, to instruct her in the rudiments of his art ; and she was taken, two or three times in a week, to his house to receive lessons.

From Chichester she was removed in her

eighth year to a school at Kensington, at that time in high repute, and where the daughters of the most distinguished families received their education. Of her progress at this time I am tempted to give the following account from the pen of a lady who was her school-fellow:—

« In answer to your inquiry, whether Mrs Smith was during our intimacy at school superior to other young persons of her age, my recollection enables me to tell you, that she excelled most of us in writing and drawing. She was reckoned by far the finest dancer, and was always brought forward for exhibition whenever company was assembled to see our performances; and she would have excelled all her competitors, had her application borne any proportion to her talents; but she was always thought *too great a genius to study*. She had a great taste for music, and a correct ear, but never applied to it with sufficient steadiness to insure success. But however she might be inferior to others in some points, she was far above them in intellect, and the general improvement of the mind. She had read more than any one in the school, and was continually composing verses. She was considered romantic; and though I was not of that turn myself, I neither loved nor admired her the less for it. In my opinion, her ideas were always original, full of wit and imagination, and her conversa-

tion singularly pleasing; and so I have continued to think, since a greater intercourse with society, and a more perfect knowledge of the world, has better qualified me to estimate her character.»

In this seminary it was the custom for the pupils to perform both French and English plays, and on these occasions the talents of Miss Turner were always put in requisition, as she was considered by far the best actress of the little troop; and her theatrical talents were much applauded both at school and at home, where she was frequently called on to exhibit her powers to whatever company happened to be assembled at her father's. I do not think this early, and certainly injudicious display, produced the unfavourable effect on her manners which might have been expected. It induced no boldness or undue confidence, for she was rather of a retiring than of an assuming disposition; yet it probably had an unfavourable influence on her character, and contributed to foster that romantic turn of mind which distinguished her even in childhood.—It was at this school she first began to compose verses: they were shown and praised among the friends of the family as proofs of early genius; but none of them have been preserved. I have an imperfect recollection that the subject of one of these early effusions was the death of General Wolfe, when she must have

been in her tenth year—though she speaks in one of her works of earlier compositions.

At twelve years of age she quitted school, and her father, then residing part of the year in London, engaged masters to attend her at home; but very little advantage could have been derived from their instructions, for she was at that early age introduced into society, frequented all public places with her family: and her appearance and manners were so much beyond her years, that at fourteen her father received proposals for her from a gentleman of suitable station and fortune, which were rejected on account of her extreme youth. Happy would it have been if reasons of such weight had continued in force a few years longer!

With so many objects to engage her attention, and the late hours incident to a life of dissipation, her studies (if they could be so called) were not prosecuted with any degree of diligence or success. As if foreseeing how short would be the period of her youthful pleasures, she pursued them with the avidity natural to her lively character; and though her father was sometimes disposed to check her love of dissipation, he always suffered himself to be disarmed by a few sighs or tears. Her passion for books continued unabated, though her reading was indiscriminate, and chiefly confined to poetry and works of fiction. At

this time she sent several of her compositions to the editors of the *Lady's Magazine*, unknown to her aunt.

It is evident that Mrs Smith's education, though very expensive, was superficial, and not calculated to give her any peculiar advantages. Her father's unbounded indulgence, and that of an aunt who almost idolized her, was ill calculated to prepare her mind to contend with the calamities of her future life ;— she often regretted that her attention had not been directed to more useful reading, and the study of languages. If she had any advantage over other young persons, it must have been in the society of her father, who was himself not only an elegant poet and a scholar, but a man of infinite wit and imagination ; and it was scarce possible to live with him without catching some sparks of that brilliant fire which enlivened his conversation, and rendered him one of the most delightful companions of his time : yet when the short period is considered between the time of her leaving school and her marriage, and that his convivial talents made his company so generally courted, that he had little leisure to bestow on his family, she must rather have inherited than acquired the playful wit and peculiar vein of humour which distinguished her conversation.

In 1764, Mr Turner decided on a second

marriage, and his sister-in-law contemplated this event with the most painful apprehensions for the happiness of that being who was the object of her dearest affections, and who, having hitherto been indulged in every wish, and even every caprice, was ill prepared to submit to the control of a mother-in-law. Without reflecting that the evil she anticipated with such feelings of dread would probably exist only for a short period (for it was unlikely a young lady who was so generally admired would remain long single), she endeavoured, with a precipitation she had afterwards great reason to deplore, to establish her by an advantageous marriage; and her wishes were seconded by some officious and short-sighted relations, by whose means her introduction to Mr Smith was contrived, after having properly prepared him, by their representations and excessive praises, to fall in love at first sight. The event justified their expectations—he did fall in love; care was taken to keep alive the flame by frequent parties of pleasure, and meetings at public places. He was just twenty-one, and she was not quite fifteen, when the acquaintance first took place, and it was no difficult task to talk her into an acquiescence with her aunt's views. Proposals were made, and accepted without much inquiry into the young man's disposition or character. He was the second son of Richard Smith, Esq., a West