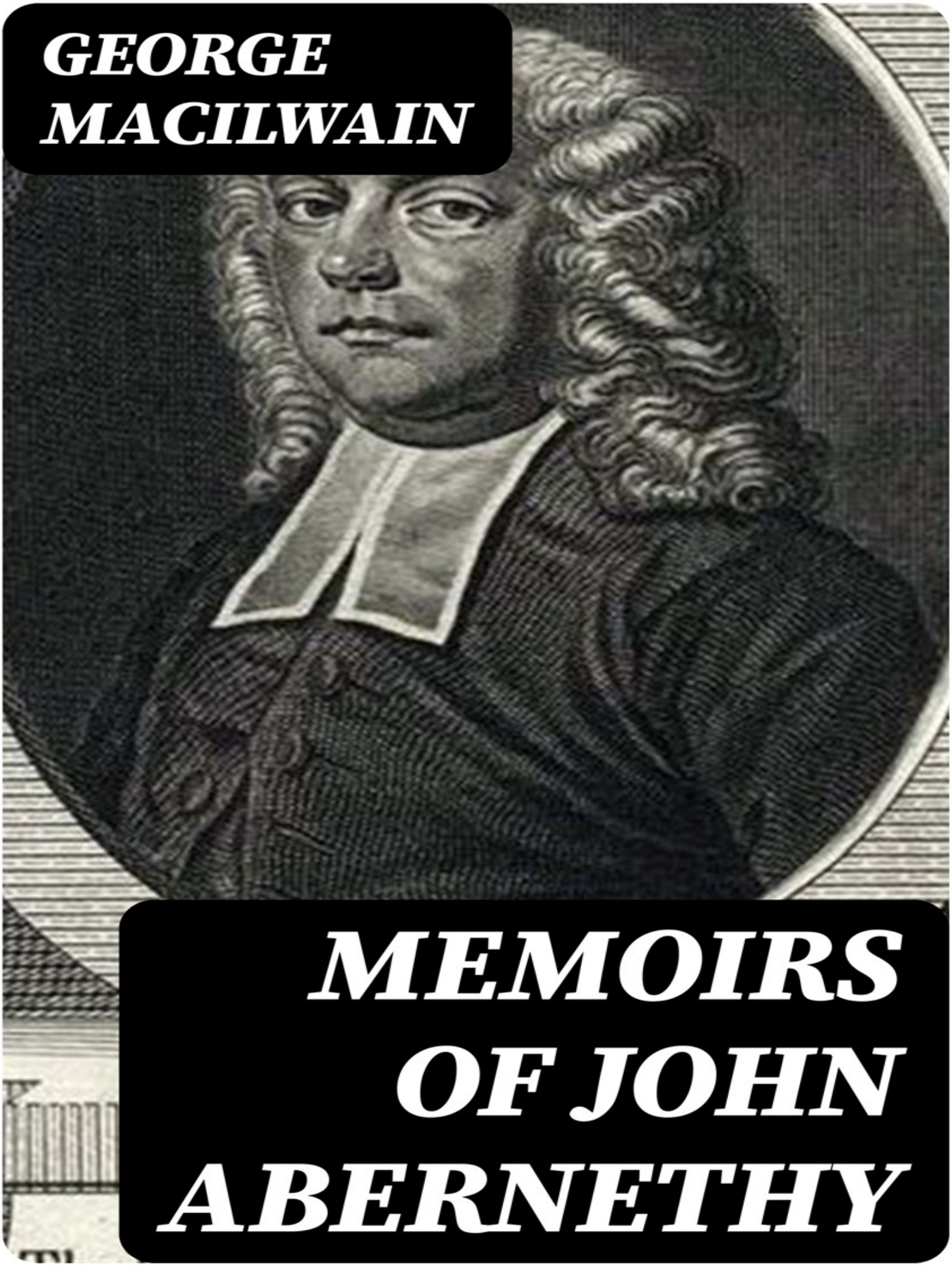
GEORGE MACILWAIN



# MEMOIRS OF JOHN ABERNETHY

George Macilwain

# Memoirs of John Abernethy

## With a View of His Lectures, His Writings, and Character; with Additional Extracts from Original Documents, Now First Published

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THE ILLUSTRATED EDITION OF TUPPER'S PROVERBIAL PHILOSOPHY.

# CHAPTER I.

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> "The Author of Nature appears deliberate throughout His operations, accomplishing His natural ends by slow successive steps. And there is a plan of things beforehand laid out, which, from the nature of it, requires various systems of means, as well as length of time, in order to the carrying on its several parts into execution."—BUTLER'S ANALOGY.

A retrospect of the history of human knowledge offers to our contemplation few things of deeper interest than the evidence it so repeatedly affords of some great law which regulates the gradual development of truth, and determines the Progress of Discovery.

Although knowledge has, at times, appeared to exhibit something of uniformity in its advances, yet it cannot have escaped the least observant that, as a whole, the Progress of Science has been marked by very variable activity—at one time, marvellously rapid; at another, indefinitely slow; now merged in darkness or obscurity; and now blazing forth with meridian splendour.

We observe a series of epochs divided by intervals of great apparent irregularity—intervals which we can neither calculate nor explain; but which, nevertheless, exhibit a periodicity, which the very irregularity serves to render striking and impressive.

We may remark, also, a peculiar fitness in the minds of those to whom the enunciation of truth has been successively entrusted: a fitness, not merely for the tasks which have been assigned to each, as the special mission of the individual, but also in the relations of different minds to each other. This adaptation to ends which individual minds have unconsciously combined to accomplish, might be illustrated by many examples, from the earliest records of antiquity, down to our own times. This would be incompatible with our present purpose. We will therefore only refer to one or two illustrations, which, as being familiar, will serve to show what we mean, and to lead us, not unnaturally, to our more immediate object.

We cannot contemplate men like Bacon, Galileo, and Kepler, for example, without feeling how auspicious the precession of such minds must have been to the development of the genius of Newton[1]. Newton was born the same year that Galileo died. There is something very interesting and significant too in the peculiar powers of Kepler. Prolific in suggestion, great in mathematical ability, elaborate in analysis, and singularly truthful in spirit, Kepler exemplified two things. These, though very distinct from each other, were both equally instructive; both alike suggestive of the link he represented in the chain of progress. In the laws he discovered, he showed the harvest seldom withheld from the earnest search for truth; but the enormous labour of the mode in which he conducted his researches, as well as the limits prescribed to his discoveries, exemplify the evils which, even in a man of the greatest power, result from proceeding too much on

hypothesis. Now it is interesting to remember that this was coincident with the dawning of that glorious light, the Inductive philosophy of Bacon, and shortly succeeded by the splendid generalization of Newton.

In like manner, if we think of the discoveries of Sir Humphrey Davy—their nature and relations to physiology as well as chemistry,—we see how much there might have been that was preparatory, and, to a mind like Davy's, suggestive, in the investigations of preceding and contemporaneous philosophers. Priestly had discovered oxygen gas; Galvani and Volta had shown those remarkable phenomena which constitute that important branch of knowledge, "Voltaic electricity;" Berzelius had effected the decomposition of certain salts by the Voltaic pile; and Lavoisier had even predicted as *probable* what Davy was destined to demonstrate[3]

In medical science, few things have been more talked of than the discovery of the circulation of the blood. Now it is curious to observe that every fact essential to the demonstration of it had been made out by previous investigators[4] but no one had deduced from them the discovery of the circulation until Harvey, although it was a conclusion scarcely more important than obvious.

There is surely something very encouraging in the reflection, that the advance of knowledge thus results from the accumulated labours of successive minds. It suggests, that however unequally the honours may appear to be distributed—however humble, in our eyes, the function of those who unconsciously prepare the way to great discoveries,—still it may involve a duty no less important

than the more lofty mission of enunciating them. The importance of a man's mission can never be estimated by human judgment. We can never know the mission; still less its relations to the power, or the temptations by which that power has been assailed. The most humble may here often approach as nearly to his duty, as the most gifted may have fallen short of it. Our faculties cannot penetrate the matter. We often see men placed in positions for which they appear wholly unfitted—men who seem to be bars to that progress which we should fancy it their duty to promote. Again, we observe that almost all great discoveries have to encounter opposition, persecution, obloquy, or derision; and when they are established, a host of claimants rise up to dispute the property with the rightful owner. A man who is in earnest cares little for these things. They may at times discourage and disappoint him; but they only strengthen his faith, that a day will come when an unerring justice will accord to every useful improvement its proper place and distinction.

Humanly speaking, we naturally ascribe discoveries to those who have practically demonstrated them; but when we examine all the clues which have been furnished by previous observers, we frequently have misgivings as to the justice of our decisions. In our admiration of the successful labour of the recent inquirer, we sometimes forget the patient industry of the early pioneer. With regard to those laws which govern the human body, we cannot suppose that the development of them can be destined to progress on any plan less determined than other branches of human inquiry. But in all laws of nature we know that there are

interferences which, until explained, serve to obscure or altogether to conceal the law from our view.

In relation to the Physiological laws, these interferences are very numerous. 1st. Many are furnished by the physical laws; many more arise from the connection of the physiological with the moral laws, and especially from the abuse of (a responsible) volition. These interferences, however, when their nature is clearly developed, beautifully illustrate the laws they at first obscured; for the common characters of subjects, in which the law is usually exemplified, are brought out into higher relief by the very diversities in the midst of which they occur. The progress of mankind towards a popular familiarity with this fact, is necessarily slow; but still we think it plainly perceptible. An individual life, indeed, however distinguished, represents a mere point in time; it affords little scope for considering, much less for estimating, as they occur, the true meaning of various events, which nevertheless ultimately prove to have had important influence on the progress of knowledge.

These are world-wide things, which we must survey as the geologist does the facts concerning which he inquires. We must endeavour to combine, in one view, facts over which long periods of time may have rolled away, with such as are still passing around us. This will frequently suggest designs and relations altogether unobservable by the mere abstract inquirer. In the course of the following pages, a further opportunity may occur for a few remarks on such views; the elaborate discussion of the subject would be altogether beyond our present objects.

It will be our endeavour to point out the position occupied by Abernethy, in that (as we trust) gradually dawning science, to a particular phase of which our object and our limits will alike restrict our attention. We mean that period when Surgery, having approached to something like a zenith as a mere practical *art*, began to exhibit, by slow and almost imperceptible degrees, some faint characters of science—a shadowy commencement of a metamorphose, which we believe promises to convert (though we fear at a period yet distant) a monstrous hybrid of mystery and conjecture into the symmetrical beauty of an Inductive science—a science based on axioms and laws which are constantly exerting a powerful influence on the social progress and the health of nations.

In considering Hunter and Abernethy, we shall see not only a remarkable adaptation for the tasks in which they were respectively engaged, but also how the peculiar defects of the one were supplied by the characteristic excellences of the other. We shall see that they cooperated in laying open clear and definite objects; and that, though their modes of inquiry were far from fulfilling the requisitions of an Inductive science, they were eminently calculated to suggest the convenience, and impress the necessity of it.

We no sooner begin to inquire with clear and definite purpose, than we are led to the means necessary for the attainment of it.

Abernethy himself, in speaking of the ordinary resources of daily practice, used to say: "If a man has a clear idea of

what he desires to do, he will seldom fail in selecting the proper means of accomplishing it."

So, in gathering the materials for building up a science, the first thing is, to be clear as to those things in which it is deficient. This once determined, all may lend assistance; and this very division of labour, when directed with definite purpose, may render even men most addicted to narrow and partial inquiries, contributors to a great and common object.

In this way, those blows and discouragements so common in the infancy of science, which test our motives and try our patience, may prove tolerable when distributed over the many, instead of proving, as is too common, depressing or destructive when bearing only on the efforts of the few.

If we desire to shorten this labour, we need scarcely say there is no way of doing it but by the adoption of that mode of proceeding to which every other branch of science owes its present position.

I mean the rigid suspension of all hypotheses, setting to work by collecting *all* the facts in relation to the subject, and dealing with them in strict compliance with the precepts of common sense—or, what is the same thing, Inductive philosophy.

This will soon show us the just amount of the debt we owe to Hunter and Abernethy; and, in leading us onwards, instructively point out why these great men did not farther increase our obligations.

We shall see how the industry and circumspection of the Argus-eyed Hunter, as Abernethy used to call him, enabled

him to unfold a legend in nature, which he had neither length of days, sufficient opportunity, nor perhaps aptitude, wholly to decipher; and how far it was developed into practical usefulness by the penetrative sagacity and happy genius of Abernethy; which, like light in darkness, guides and sustains immediate research, and animates and encourages onward inquiry. To appreciate Abernethy, however, it is necessary that the public should have correct views at *least* of the *general* nature and objects of Medical Science.

The public have not only a very real interest in acquiring a sound common-sense view of the objects of medicine and surgery, but a far deeper interest than it is possible for any one medical man to have, merely as such, or all medical men put together. This may, for the moment, appear startling to those who have not been compelled to consider the subject; but the reader may glean even from this volume, that so long as life or health, or even money, has value, the remark is strictly true. From all sides mankind have hitherto imbibed little but error. They have been taught or induced to believe that the only objects of medicine and surgery are to prevent or relieve diseases and accidents by the astute employment of drugs, or by certain adroit manipulatory or mechanical proceedings, and *par excellence* by "operations." Now here is a great mistake—an idea so far from true, that nothing can more delusively define, or more entirely conceal, the higher objects of the science.

The direct contrary of the proposition would be nearer the truth. It would be *more* correct to say that the object

was to relieve diseases and accidents by removing all interferences with the reparative powers of nature; and that this was accomplished more perfectly in proportion as we were enabled to *dispense* with the employment of drugs, or the performance of operations.

The making the lame to walk, the blind to see, and the deaf to hear, were chosen amongst the appropriate symbols of a Divine Mission; and we need scarcely observe, that, in the restricted sphere of human capacity, this is a portion of the mission of every conscientious surgeon.

We may well, therefore, be dissatisfied with the narrow, not to say degrading, definition of our duties too generally entertained; but, on the other hand, if we would realize our claims to these higher views of our calling, and enlarge the sphere of its practical usefulness, we should recollect there is only one way of attaining that object; and that is, by the applied interpretation of those symbols, no less miraculous, no less certain manifestations of Divine Power, the "Laws of Nature." To name a science from something not essential to it, is like naming a class of animals from some exceptional peculiarity in an individual. It is as if we would infer the mission of the ocean wave from the scum sometimes seen on its surface; or the purposes served by a feather, from the use we make of it in writing, rather than from its common character of levity and toughness; as if we treated an exception as a rule, or any other manifest absurdity.

We have no opportunity of entering more fully into this important distinction of the more lofty objects of our profession, as contrasted with those usually assigned to it; we must therefore rest satisfied in having awakened the

reader's attention to the subject, and proceed to the more ordinary objects of Biographical Memoir.

John Abernethy was born in London, in the parish of St. Stephen's, Coleman Street, on the 3rd of April, 1764, exactly one year after John Hunter settled in London. It is also interesting to remark, that Abernethy's first work, his "Surgical and Physiological Essays"—Part I—was published the same year that Hunter died, 1793; so that, whilst his birth occurred nearly at the same time as the commencement of the more sustained investigations of Hunter, his opening contribution to science was coincident with the close of the labours of his illustrious friend and predecessor.

The Abernethy family in their origin were possibly Scotch, and formed one of those numerous inter-migrations between Scotland and the north of Ireland, which, after lapse of time, frequently render it difficult to trace the original stock. There seems little doubt they had resided for some generations in Ireland. John Abernethy, who was the pastor of a Coleraine congregation, in 1688, was an eminent Protestant dissenting minister, and the father of one still more distinguished. The son (also named John) had been for some time pastor of the old congregation of Antrim, whence he removed to Dublin about the year 1733, to take charge of the Wood Street, now Strand Street, Dublin. He is the author of several volumes of sermons, which are not a little remarkable for clearness of thought, and the earnestness of purpose, with which they inculcate practical piety. He had a son who was a merchant, who subsequently removed to London, and traded under the firm of Abernethy and

Donaldson, in Rood Lane, Fenchurch Street. This gentleman married a lady whose name was Elizabeth Weir, daughter of Henry and Margaret Weir, of the town of Antrim, and they had two sons and three daughters.

James[5], the elder brother, was also in business as a merchant, and died about the year 1823. He was a man of considerable talent, spoke with an accent suggestive of an Irish origin, and was remarkable for his admiration and critical familiarity with our immortal Shakspeare. He was probably born before his father left Ireland. John, the second son, the subject of our Memoir, was, as we have already said, born in London. The register of his christening at St. Stephen's is as follows:

1765.

Abernethy { John, son of John and Elizabeth, April, 24.

This register would suggest that he was born a year later than I have stated. I have, however, preferred 1764, as the year adopted by his family; for although a man's birth is an occurrence respecting the date of which he is not the very best authority, he usually gets his information from those who are. Besides, it was no uncommon thing at that time to defer the christening of children for a much longer period. The education of his early childhood was, most likely, altogether conducted at home; but it is certain that, while yet very young, he was sent to the Grammar School at Wolverhampton. Here he received the principal part of his education; and though the records are somewhat meagre, yet they tend to show that at an early age he manifested

abilities, both general and peculiar, which were indicative of no ordinary mind; and which, though they do not necessarily prefigure the future eminence at which he arrived, were sufficiently suggestive of the probability that, whatever his career might be, he would occupy a distinguished position.

[1]

| | Born. | Died. |
|---|---|---|
| [2]Galileo | 1564 | 1642. |
| Kepler | 1571 | 1630. |
| Bacon | 1561 | 1626. |
| Newton | 1642 | 1727. |

[2] The same year that Galileo died.

[3]

| | Born. | Died. |
|---|---|---|
| Priestly | 1733 | 1804. |
| Galvani | 1737 | 1798. |
| Volta | 1745 | 1826. |
| Lavoisier | 1743 | 1794. |
| Crauford | 1749 | 1795. |
| Hunter | 1728 | 1793. |
| Davy | 1778 | 1829. |

[4] The valvular contrivances in the veins and heart, which showed that the blood could move in only one direction, had been either observed, described, or their effects respectively remarked on, by Paul, Sylvius, Michael Servetus,

Realdus Columbus, Andreas Cesalpinus, and especially by Fabricius ab Aquapendente, of whom Harvey was a pupil.

[5] In a polite letter which I recently received from a distinguished pupil of Abernethy's (Dr. Butter, of Plymouth), I find that James Abernethy died of apoplexy, at Plymouth.

# CHAPTER II.

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"Ah, happy hills! ah, pleasing shade!
Ah, fields beloved in vain,
Where once my careless childhood stray'd,
A stranger yet to pain."

GRAY.

Mankind naturally feel an interest in the boyhood of men of genius; but it often happens that very little attention is paid to early indications; and, when observed, it is certain that they are often interpreted very falsely.

Nothing more emphatically suggests how much we have to learn on this subject, than the obscurity which so often hangs over the earlier years of distinguished men. At school, a number of variable organizations are subjected to very much the same influences; the necessity for generalization affords little opportunity for individual analysis. The main road is broad and familiar; there is no time for indulging in bye-paths, even should the master have the penetration to perceive, in individual cases, the expediency of such selection. Hence the quickening of those impulses, on which the development of character so much depends, is greatly a matter of uncertainty. The moment boys leave school, on the contrary, this uniformity of external influences is replaced by an interminable diversity; at home, scarcely two boys being subjected to exactly the same. Thus, in many

instances, it would be easier to deduce the character of the boy from the man, than to have predicted the man from the boy. The evidences of the one are present to us, those of the other may have been entirely unelicited, unobserved, or forgotten.

We cannot wonder, then, that expectation should have been so often disappointed in the boy, or that excellences little dreamt of should have been developed in the man.

Dryden, who, regarded in the triple capacity of poet, prose-writer, and critic, is hardly second to any English author, took no honour at the University. Swift, perhaps our best writer of pure English, whose talents proved scarcely less versatile and extraordinary than they had appeared restricted and deficient, was "plucked" for his degree, in Dublin, and only obtained his recommendation to Oxford "*speciali gratia*" as it was termed. The phrase, however, being obviously equivocal, and used only in the bad sense at Dublin, was, fortunately for Swift, interpreted in a good sense at Oxford—a misapprehension which Swift, of course, was at no pains to remove.

Sheridan was remarkable for his readiness, his invention, and his wit; as a writer, he showed considerable powers of sustained thought also. He had an habitual eloquence, and, on one occasion, delivered an oration before one of the most distinguished audiences that the world ever saw[6], with an effect that seems to have rivalled the most successful efforts of Cicero, or even Demosthenes. Yet he had shown so little capacity as a boy, that he was presented to a tutor by his own mother with the complimentary accompaniment that he was an incorrigible dunce.

Some boys live on encouragement, others seem to work best "up stream." Niebuhr, the traveller, the father of a son no less illustrious, with anything but an originally acute mind, seems to have overcome every disadvantage which the almost constant absence of opportunity could combine. Those who are curious in such matters might easily multiply examples of the foregoing description, and add others where—as in the case of Galileo, Newton, Wren, and many others—the predictions suggested by early physical organization proved as erroneous as the intellectual indications to which we have just adverted.

The truth is, we have a great deal to learn on the subject of mind, although there is no want of materials for instruction. Medicine and surgery are not the only branches of knowledge which require the aid of strictly inductive inquiry. In all, the materials (facts) are abundant.

In Abernethy there was a polarity of character, an individuality, a positiveness of type, which would have made the boy a tolerably intelligible outline of the future man. The evidence is imperfect; it is chiefly drawn from the recollections of a living few, who, though living, have become the men of former days; but still the evidence all inclines one way.

We can quite imagine a little boy, "careless in his dress, not slovenly," with his hands in his pockets, some morning about the year 1774, standing under the sunny side of the wall, at Wolverhampton Grammar School[7]; his pockets containing, perhaps, a few shillings, some halfpence, and a knife with the point broken, a pencil, together with a tolerably accurate sketch of "Old Robertson's" wig. This

article, as shown in an accredited portrait[8] now lying before us, was one of those enormous bygone bushes which represented a sort of impenetrable fence round the cranium, as if to guard the precious material within. The said boy just finishing a story to his laughing companions, though no sign of fun appeared in him, save a little curl of the lip, and a smile which would creep out of the corner of his eye in spite of him. I have had the good fortune to find no less than three schoolfellows of Abernethy, who are still living: John Fowler, Esq. of Datchet, a gentleman whom I have had the pleasure of knowing for many years, and who enjoys, in honourable retirement at his country seat, at the age of eighty-two, the perfect possession of all his faculties; William Thacker[9], Esq. of Muchall, about two miles from Wolverhampton, who is in his eighty-fifth year; T. Tummins, Esq. of King Street, Wolverhampton, who is in his eighty-seventh year. To these gentlemen, and to J. Wynn, Esq. also of Wolverhampton, I am principally indebted for the few reminiscences I have been able to collect of the boyish days of Abernethy.

The information which I gained from Mr. Fowler, he gave me himself; he also kindly procured me a long letter from Mr. Wynn. The reminiscences of Mr. Tummins and Mr. Thacker, I have obtained through the very courteous and kind assistance of the Rev. W. White, the late[10] distinguished head master of the Wolverhampton School.

To all of these gentlemen I cannot too strongly express my thanks, for the prompt and kind manner in which they have replied to all the enquiries which have been addressed to them. The following are the principal facts which their

letters contain, or the conclusions they justify. Abernethy must have gone to Wolverhampton when very young, probably; I should say certainly before 1774. He was brought by Dr. Robertson from London, with another pupil, "his friend Thomas;" and the "two Londoners" boarded with Dr. Robertson. When Mr. Fowler went there in 1778, Abernethy was high up in the school, and ultimately got to the head of the senior form. He must have left Wolverhampton in all probability not later than 1778, because Dr. Robertson resigned the head mastership in that year; and we know that in the following (1779), when he was fifteen, Abernethy was apprenticed to Sir Charles Blicke.

Mr. Thacker says he was very studious, clever, a good scholar, humorous, but very passionate. Mr. Tummins, Mr. Thacker says, knew Abernethy well. Abernethy used to go and dine frequently with Mr. Tummins's father. Mr. Tummins says "Abernethy was a sharp boy, a very sharp boy, and a very passionate one too. Dr. Robertson," he says, "was also a very passionate man."

One day, Abernethy had to "do" some Greek Testament; and it appeared that he set off very glibly, having a "crib" in the shape of a Greek Testament, with a Latin version on the other side. The old Doctor, suspecting the case, discovered the crib, and the pupil was instantly "levelled with the earth." This *fortiter in re* plan of carrying the intellect by a *coup-de-main*, has, as the late head master observed, been replaced by more refined modes of proceeding. The more energetic plan was (however coarse and objectionable) not always unsuccessful in implanting a certain quantity of Latin and Greek. Abernethy was a very fair Latin scholar, and he

certainly had not, at one period, a bad knowledge of Greek also.

There are, however, many other things to be learnt besides Latin and Greek; and it is probable that the more measured reliance on such violent appeals, which characterizes modern education, might have been better suited to Abernethy. To a boy who was naturally shy, and certainly passionate, such mechanical illustrations of his duty were likely to augment shyness into distrust, and to exacerbate an excitable *temper* into an irritable *disposition*.

Abernethy, in chatting over matters, was accustomed jocularly to observe that, for his part, he thought his mind had, on some subjects, what he called a "*punctum saturationis*;" so that "if you put anything more into his head, you pushed something out." If so, we may readily conceive that this plan of forcing in the Greek, might have forced out an equivalent quantity of patience or self-possession. It is difficult to imagine anything less appropriate to a disposition like Abernethy's than the discipline in question. It was, in fact, calculated to create those very infirmities of character which it is the object of education to correct or remove.

It seems that neither writing nor arithmetic were taught in the school; and "Tummins and Abernethy" used to go to learn these matters at the school of a Miss Ready, in King Street, Wolverhampton. This lady appears to have had, like Dr. Robertson, a high opinion of what the profession usually term "local applications" in the conduct of education. Many years afterwards, she called upon Mr. Abernethy. He was then in full practice in London. He received her with the

greatest kindness, begged her to come and dine with him as often as she could while she stayed in London; and, introducing her to Mrs. Abernethy, said: "I beg to introduce to you a lady who has boxed my years many a time."

Had Miss Ready, however, heard us call in question the necessity of this association of boxing ears and quill-driving, she would probably have retorted on us, that few men wrote so good a hand as John Abernethy. It is certain that, *brusque* as the discipline might have been, or ill-suited to the disposition of Abernethy, it did not interfere with the happiness of his schoolboy life. He always looked back to his days at Wolverhampton with peculiar pleasure, and seemed to regard every association with the place with affectionate remembrance.

Mr. Wynn observes, in his letter: "About twenty years ago I accompanied a patient to Mr. Abernethy. After prescribing, he said, 'let me see you again in about a week,' 'We cannot, for we are returning into the country.' 'Why, where do you live?' 'Wolverhampton.' 'Wolverhampton? Why, I went to school there. Come, sit down, and tell me who's alive and who's dead.' After running over the names of some of the old families, their health, circumstances, &c. he wished us good morning, saying, 'Ah! I cannot forget Wolverhampton!'"

Mr. Thacker's note I subjoin, written in a good firm hand, at eighty-five.

"Muchall, near Wolverhampton,
"May 17, 1852.
"Sir,

"As a boy, I remember John Abernethy and William Thomas coming from London to board with, and as scholars to, Dr. Robertson, the head master of the Wolverhampton School, in which there were two masters, both clergymen. We were formed into several classes, in which John Abernethy, William Thomas, Walter Acton Mosely, and myself, formed one. Abernethy took the head or top of the class; but the boys used to change places in the classes according to their proficiency; but I do not recollect that Abernethy ever took a third place in the class. So also in his sports, he usually made a strong side, for he was remarkably quick and active, and soon learned a new game. He had but one fault that I knew of—he was rather hasty and impetuous in his manner, but it was soon over and forgotten.

"The 'Doctor,' as we used to call him (Robertson), had a daughter grown up, and she used to hear the boarders in the house read plays before her father, in which, in particular passages, she showed where the emphasis should be laid, and how to pronounce the same properly; this occasioned the use of the play of 'Cato,' and originated the boys' performance of that play in the school-room before their fathers and friends. I do not remember the part that Abernethy took in that play. I have applied to Mr. Tummins of Wolverhampton, but his memory does not supply information. He knew Mr. Abernethy well.

"If I recollect any others of my schoolfellows who knew him, I will apply to them for information, and

communicate the same to you immediately.

"I am, Sir,

"Your obedient servant,

"WILLIAM THACKER.

To George Macilwain, Esq."

We learn from another reminiscent, that in the play at Wolverhampton Abernethy took a "principal part." He certainly had a good deal of dramatic talent, in the highest sense of the word; and, as will be seen in the sequel, could light up a story with rich humour, or clothe it with pathos, as suited the occasion, with equal facility. Scanty as they are, there is much in these school reminiscences significant of his future character.

As we have observed, Abernethy left Wolverhampton in 1778. He was then head of the school, a quick, clever boy, and more that an average scholar. He returned to London, that world of hopes, fears, and anxieties; that spacious arena, on which all are desirous of entering as competitors who are ambitious of professional or commercial distinction.

[6] We allude to his first speech on the trial of Warren Hastings.

[7] Wolverhampton School, founded by Sir Stephen Jermyn, Alderman and Knight of the City of London, in the reign of Henry VIII, for the "Instruction of youth in morals and learning." Many distinguished men were educated at the School; as Abernethy; Mr. Tork, fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge; Sir William Congreve; and others.

[8] Kindly sent us by Mr. Fowler, of Datchet.

[9] This gentleman died last year. He had retired to his seat at Muchall, from Wolverhampton, where he had practised as a solicitor of great eminence and respectability.

[10] Since the last edition, I have to regret the death of this gentleman. He was an excellent man, a good mathematician, and an accomplished scholar. He graduated at Cambridge, and took honors in 1815.

# CHAPTER III.

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"Nunquam ita quisquam bene subductâ ratione ad vitam fuit
Quin res, ætas, usus, semper aliquid apportet novi
Aliquid moneat; ut illâ quæ te scire credas, nescias:
Et quæ tibi putâris primâ, in experiundo repudias."

TER. AD. A. 5, SC. 4.

"Never did man lay down so fair a plan,
So wise a rule of life, but fortune, age,
Or long experience made some change in it,
And taught him that those things he thought he knew,
He did not know, and what he held as best
In practice, he threw by."

COLMAN.

Circumstances, in themselves apparently unimportant, often determine the selection of a profession. Few boys can do exactly what they please, and the *pros* and *cons* are seldom placed before them in a way to assist them in determining the just value of the reasons on which their choice may have proceeded. They are not, indeed,

unfrequently dealt with as if, whilst not incompetent to make choice of a profession, they were held incapable of weighing the circumstances by which alone such choice could be judiciously directed. The absurdity of this appears, when we think a moment of what it involves, which is nothing less than expecting them to do what is impossible; viz. to form an opinion on a subject when the main facts in relation to it are withheld from them. Be this as it may, every day shows us that men are too frequently dissatisfied with the profession which they follow. The question of our boyhood recollections—

> "Qui fit Mæcenas ut nemo quam sibi sortem,
> Seu ratio dederit seu fors objecerit, illâ,
> Contentus vivat?"[11]

is just as applicable as ever; and although human nature has almost everything ascribed to its natural infirmities, yet it appears quite as sensible, and not a whit less humble, to conclude, that paths chosen without consideration naturally lead to disappointment. The evil, like most others, carries with it the elements of self correction.

Parents are slow to encourage their children to select paths which they themselves have trodden with regret. This tends to distribute their professions to other families. Mutual interchanges of this kind serve to protect the interests of society, by, in some degree, limiting the number of cases in which men have failed to select the pursuits best adapted to them.

In almost all pursuits of life, success is determined, much more than many are disposed to imagine, by the homely

qualities of steadiness and industry. We are apt—and sometimes not improperly—to ascribe peculiar *excellence* to peculiar powers. Yet the more insight we obtain into the histories of men, the more we perceive how constantly the most brilliant have been aided by the more homely qualifications to which we have adverted.

No doubt some minds are so constituted as to be moderately certain of success or distinction in almost any pursuit to which they might have been directed; and we are disposed to think that Abernethy's was a mind of that order; but there is abundant evidence to show that his talents were at least equalled by his industry. One paper of his, which contains a beautiful and discriminative adjustment of a difficult point of practice in Injuries of the Head—which contains no intrinsic evidence of such industry—was not published until after he had attended to every serious injury of the head in a large hospital for almost twenty years; besides examining the bodies of all the fatal cases. Nor can we estimate this industry properly, without recollecting that all this time he was only an *assistant surgeon*, whose duties, for the *most* part, neither required nor *permitted* him to do more than to *observe* the treatment; and that, therefore, the whole of this industry was simply in the character of a student of his profession[12]. All biography is full of this kind of evidence; and art, as well as science, furnishes its contribution. Who could have imagined that the peculiar, chaste composition, the easy and graceful touch of Sir Augustus Callcott, could have owed so much to industry as it undoubtedly must have done? It is known, for example, that he made no less than forty different sketches in the