

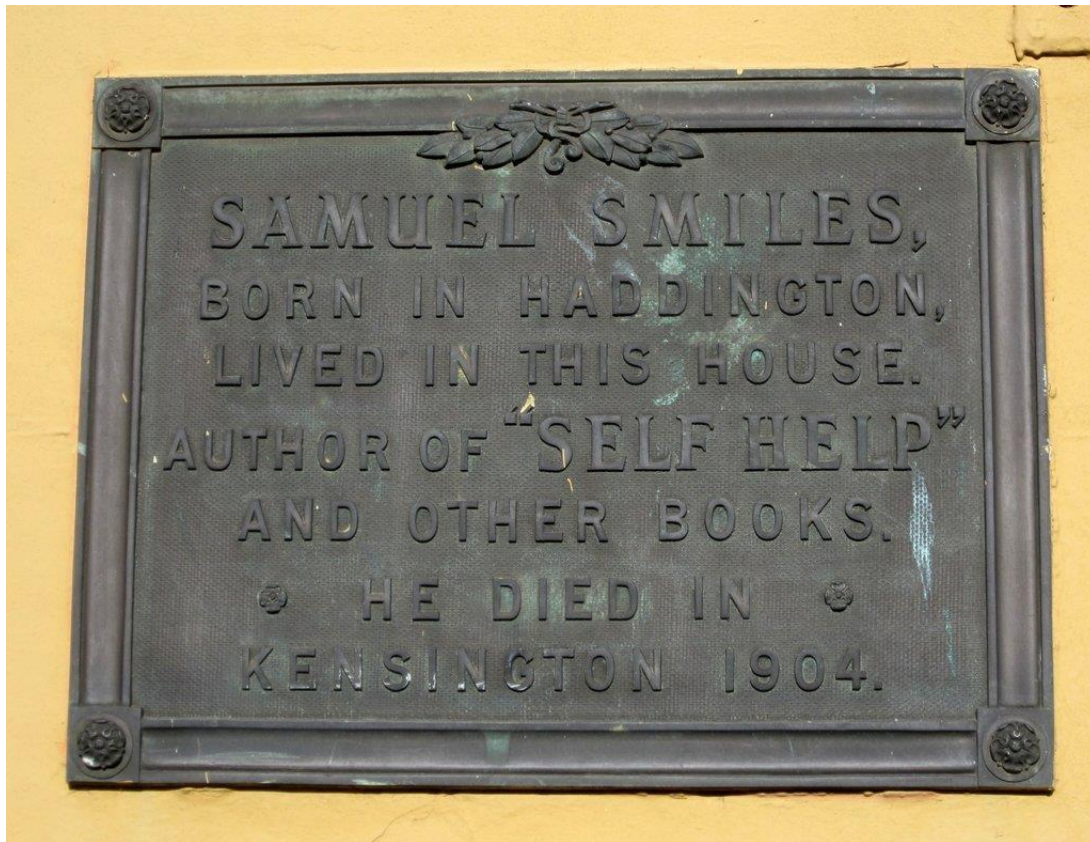
## **Samuel Smiles**

*At a special event to mark the centenary of the death of Samuel Smiles, four members of the Society presented talks on different aspects of his life and works. This article is composed from the scripts and notes of the speakers.*

### **His life in Haddington** *by Shirley Middlemass*

Samuel Smiles was born on December 23<sup>rd</sup> 1812 in a house at the head of the High Street where the British Linen Bank later stood. He was one of 11 children who survived infancy. His father, also Samuel, was employed as a paper maker at a time when paper was made by hand. Haddington was a busy, bustling place, full of soldiers expecting any day an invasion from Napoleon landing in Aberlady Bay. There were barracks in several places in town. Farmers and shopkeepers flourished. But the invasion never came; the barracks were eventually pulled down and Samuel's father bought a large number of army stores cheaply, mainly blankets and greatcoats. Samuel remembers as a small boy mainly ploughmen buying the greatcoats.

Probably from the proceeds of this business, Samuel's father bought the shop in the High Street where the plaque now is. He was now a general merchant. Across the street lived the Welshes and, although he was 11 years younger than Jane, he remembered that she had many admirers but never seemed really happy. In 1821, two years after her father's death, she had said, "Haddington is the dimmest, deadeast spot in the Creator's universe – the very air one breathes is impregnated with stupidity."



The plaque on the site of the Smiles' shop on Haddington High Street

Samuel first went to school in St Ann's Place where his first teacher was Patrick Hardie. Hardie was then appointed teacher of English and Mathematics at the Burgh School in Church Street and Samuel was sent there. Patrick Hardie was a good teacher. He made his pupils learn by heart, recite poetry and speeches by great orators. He taught writing and arithmetic very well and also Latin. These were his good points. But he was also a tyrant and a toady who had favourites, mostly the sons of local councillors to whom he owed his position. Samuel was not a favourite. His father was an Anti-Burgher, a sort of Quaker Presbyterian, who would not take the burghess oath and was therefore not likely to be either a town councillor or baillie. Hardie hated all dissenters but especially Anti-Burghers.

Smiles was an average boy with a love of play, looking forward to shinty and football on Wednesday and Saturday afternoons and roaming the countryside. “I was fonder of frolic than learning, though I made my way with the rest. I could not have been very bright one day when Hardie in one of his tyrannical humours uttered in a loud voice, *Smiles, you will never be fit for anything but sweeping the streets of your native burgh*, a nice encouragement for a little scholar! Hardie occasionally used the most fearful language, *I will flog you, sir, within an inch of your life. I will dash your brains against the wall. I will split your skull into a thousand pieces*. Poor little terrified pupils! I have seen Hardie flog a boy so hard and long that he had to hold his sides and sit down exhausted. Another time he threw a book at a boy and cut open his upper lip. His face was covered in blood and the class was dismissed.” And yet here in St Mary’s churchyard is Patrick Hardie’s grave and a monument put up by some of his pupils.

*In memory of Patrick Hardie, master of the English and Mathematics Schools of the Burgh of Haddington for the period June 1822 – November 1837. Born at Kelso 26<sup>th</sup> March 1796. Died at Haddington November 19<sup>th</sup> 1837.*

*This memorial has been erected by a number of his pupils from the high sense they entertained of his virtues and worth as a member of society and in grateful recollection of his talents, acquirements and zealous perseverance as a [successful ?] teacher.*

Smiles then went on to the Classical School next door where the teacher was William Graham, the complete opposite of Hardie; full of fun, a little pompous, fond of quoting Latin and a smile for every boy. The tawse was Hardie’s instrument of torture and though Graham had a tawse, he never used it. “I think every boy in the school loved old Graham.”

For the Smiles children the Sabbath was the most unpleasant day of the week. First thing in the morning, catechism and paraphrase had to be learnt to be repeated last thing at night. There were family prayers and three church services with sermons more than an hour long. The only reading was the Bible, the Catechism and the Secession Magazine. No walking was permitted, except to the church, which was in Newton Port where the Library used to be.

Willie, the eldest son of Samuel, remembers visiting Haddington as a child and being taken for a walk by his father one Sunday. When he returned, they were greeted by old Mrs Smiles who told Samuel that he was leading his bairn straight to Hell! But I was not always Sunday in Haddington. As we have said, shinty and football were played. There was fishing in the Tyne, looking for birds' eggs, climbing in the Garleton Hills and playing in Wallace's Cave with home-made bows and arrows. Samuel would also go with his father to the graveyard at night to guard the new graves from being rifled by the body snatchers.

Samuel's father was also a great gardener and prided himself on his auriculas, tulips and polyanthus. The children had to help keep the garden in order. There was the housework, yearly a new baby, the shop, the byre with one cow, the garden, and the spinning wheel always whirring.

Samuel remembered, when he was ten, the visit to Edinburgh by King George IV in 1822. Coaches loaded with passengers and carts piled high with heather were continually passing through the streets of Haddington, all bound for Edinburgh. Bonfires were lit on Traprain Law and Haddington gave £10 towards the statue of the King in Edinburgh.



Samuel's mother

Other highlights were Mr Nisbet in the High Street lighting his house with gas; covers being put over the drain that ran down the middle of the High Street; and, in 1827, roads being macadamised.

In 1826 Samuel was 14, a fine, healthy boy. What was he to do? His brother John, the eldest son, would have the shop. Samuel wanted to be a painter. "Oh no, Sam" said his mother, thinking he wanted to stand on a ladder and be a house-painter, "that is a very dirty business". All his life he yearned to paint and his children's walls were covered in his paintings but not until his sixties was he able to indulge himself and spend days in South Kensington Museum copying in water colours and oils.

"Will you no be a minister, Sam?", "I'll no be a minister". "Will you be a doctor then?" Now to be a doctor in 1826 was an appalling idea for a small boy. Doctors in those days were bogeymen for children. Samuel

remembered especially when he was a small boy that his brother John had an attack of inflammation of the lungs and Dr Welsh, Jane's father, came to visit and bled him. Samuel remembered seeing three cups of blood from John's arm sitting on the table. Nevertheless Samuel was bound to Dr Lewins as his apprentice and in 1829 he moved with the doctor to Leith and attended Edinburgh University. By 1832 he was a fully fledged medical doctor. Unfortunately this was the year his father died of cholera so Samuel returned to Haddington, a county surgeon, practising next to the George Hotel. He became a town councillor, was active in Haddington School of Arts and the Society for Scientific Study. He lectured and wrote articles for the Edinburgh Magazine but in 1838 he left Haddington. There were seven doctors in the town and he found it hard to make a living.

### **His life after Haddington** *by Bill Rarity*

Samuel was not overburdened by patients but, typically, did not idle his time away. He took up drawing and painting again, inspired by his artist cousin, William Yellowlees (1796-1859). He prepared a course of 15 lectures on personal health, illustrated by his own watercolours, which he delivered to audiences in the Sheriff court-room. He learned the violin and took part in concert performances and, above all, he read. He improved his French and wrote his first book *Physical Education or the Nurture and Management of Children, founded on the study of their Nature and Constitution*. It was published in both Edinburgh and London. The book sold in modest quantities but it brought him to the attention of Thomas Murray, the publisher of the Edinburgh Weekly Chronicle who invited him to submit an article. He soon became a regular contributor. In 1838 he saw an

advertisement for the vacant post of editor of the Leeds Times, a newspaper commended for its radical stance. His application was unsuccessful, the proprietor felt a more experienced journalist was needed.

Life in Haddington palled and Samuel felt it was time to move on. He would travel to the Continent, learn German and improve his French and take an MD degree. He sailed from Hull to Rotterdam and then on a horse-drawn canal barge to the old university city of Leyden where he boarded in a small hotel and prepared for the coming examination. He was not impressed by the examination board and their “dog Latin” and found the process by no means as thorough as the one in Edinburgh. But his objective was achieved and Dr Smiles was now an MD (the Edinburgh qualification was a diploma of the Royal College of Surgeons). He spent the summer on a walking tour of the Rhine then moved to London. He had a letter of introduction from Provost Lea of Haddington to his nephew Rowland Hill (later the famous inventor of the Penny Post) at that time working in and writing about education. Through Hill he met many intellectual heavyweights and participated in discussions on politics, education, religious liberalism and many other topics. But he still wanted to pursue a career in medicine. He had heard of an opportunity in Doncaster and travelled there via Haddington to collect his books and instruments. His mail was redirected to a friend and when he arrived there a letter was waiting. It was from the Leeds Times. The editor appointed to the vacancy that Samuel had applied for had not been a success and the proprietor, Frederic Hobson, wanted an energetic young Scot to restore the slipping circulation. Smiles travelled to Leeds and was to remain there for the next twenty years.

Leeds was a fast-growing industrial town and Samuel would see for the first time the poverty and poor living conditions that accompanied the

industrial revolution. The Leeds Times was a campaigning newspaper and in its new editor they had a man who had radical views supporting electoral reform, poor law amendment, male suffrage, free education, Corn Law repeal and many of the aims of the Chartist movement (but not violent protest). Dr Smiles was accepted by and became friends with many of the local businessmen and enlightened mill-owners, attended political meetings and rallies, gave lectures & attended dinners. At the Leeds Mechanics' Exhibition in 1839 he spoke of the inventions and achievements of the men who were his heroes, working men and mechanics who had risen by their own efforts, James Watt, Crompton, Smeaton, Arkwright – the true creators of our national wealth.

In 1842 Samuel Smiles priorities changed. He met Sarah Anne Holmes, 10 years his junior and the daughter of a successful businessman who believed his daughter deserved better than an impoverished journalist. Smiles resolved to demonstrate that he had more than one string to his bow. He embarked on a portfolio career. He gave up the full-time editorship, hung up his surgeon's plate again, began writing a series of guide books and pamphlets and wrote *A History of Ireland and the Irish People under the Government of England* – published as a part-work. On 7<sup>th</sup> December 1843 he took a morning off from his various employments and married his fiancée.

Around this time Smiles lectured to the Leeds Mechanics' Institute on various topics. Mutual self-improvement groups were starting up amongst young working men and he travelled around Yorkshire addressing them. This was the start of the material that would later be published as *Self-Help*. With a wife and children to support, Dr Smiles applied for the position of Assistant Secretary of the Leeds & Thirsk Railway. Most of the directors



were already acquainted with him from his time as editor of the Leeds Times and knew him as a hard-working and articulate man. He was appointed and shortly afterwards the Secretary moved to another job and Samuel stepped up to the post. The railway industry was expanding very quickly and there was little experience of the work needed to comply with all of the legal obligations involved in opening a new line, parliamentary committee resolutions were needed for each new section. The Yorkshire geography was also a significant barrier, the new line needed to cross a high ridge between the rivers Aire and Wharfe at Bramhope. The solution involved over two miles of tunnelling and five great viaducts. The tunnels involved 2,500 men working with picks, shovels and bare hands. The cost of £800,000 estimated in 1845 rose to £2,150,313 by its completion in 1849. Samuel still thought of himself as a literary man. He was a businessman by day and a writer in the evening. He became involved with the Oddfellows and addressed one of their “grand soirées” in Leeds. He was commissioned to write an article on the benefit society movement for the Leeds Mercury. This led to the editorship of their quarterly magazine. He also began to contribute articles to London journals, especially biographies.

The Leeds & Thirsk Railway Company changed its name to the Leeds Northern Railway Company. The directors realised the need to expand and planned to merge with the York, Newcastle & Berwick and the North Midland Railways with a view to extending the line northwards to transport coals from Newcastle. The new organisation had no role for Samuel Smiles. He was sidelined and sent to Newcastle to help with the administration there. While frustrated at work he used the time in the area to further his research into George Stephenson, the famous railway pioneer, who had died six years earlier in 1848. Stephenson’s son Robert, also a

railway engineer, agreed to assist Smiles with his father's biography. Seeing no future with his present employer he applied for a job as secretary to the South Eastern Railway Company in London. He didn't want to leave Leeds but he needed a job. He was appointed in November 1854. The South Eastern Railway Company had its offices at London Bridge station and it seemed to Samuel more like a war zone than the busy, but orderly, enterprise he had left. There were feuds between different factions on the board but the company had a monopoly on rail travel in Kent. At last he found a home in Blackheath which was sure would suit Sarah and his five children and they moved down from Leeds

His notes from his lectures in Leeds had been collected and the manuscript submitted to George Routledge & Co as *Self-Help*. It was rejected. The notes for the George Stephenson biography were in his desk but he had no time to write it due to pressure of work. The atmosphere at the South Eastern improved; a new Chairman and some new directors had been appointed and Smiles began to enjoy his work once more. He divided up his days in an orderly manner, early to the office by train, returning promptly to spend time with the children then, after supper, writing at his desk. The biography of George Stephenson began to take shape. By the end of 1856 the manuscript of *The Life of George Stephenson* was completed and in the hands of John Murray III, his publisher. The book was a noted success and The Times spread its review over a full page. Many editions followed and Dr Samuel Smiles was now a successful author.

Meanwhile, his work at the South Eastern Railway continued. The company's problem was that its terminus was at London Bridge station on the south side of the Thames while the bulk of the city's commercial activity and growing population was on the north side. SER's rail network would be

much more valuable if it could cross the river. A campaign for a grand new station at Charing Cross and a rail link across the Thames began.

Parliamentary approval was eventually granted but with a particularly onerous condition. St Thomas' Hospital stood in the way of the new line. SER were forced to buy the site at a cost of £290,000 (about £80 million today) and demolish it. The new hospital was built and still stands today opposite the Houses of Parliament. The new line and station would not be finished till 1864.

The income from the Stephenson biography and articles in the Quarterly Review gave Smiles the confidence to move his family from Glenmohr Terrace to 6 Granville Park Terrace, a little nearer the heath where he would have more space and his own study. The manuscript for *Self-Help* was still in his desk, rejected 5 years earlier. He passed it to John Murray for consideration. Murray agreed to publish on the same fifty-fifty basis as before. Smiles decided to take on the publication costs himself and maximise the profit. The print run was doubled to 3,000 copies. Following the launch, it became apparent that a major publishing success was imminent. Smiles saw this as merely a distraction from other biographies he was planning. In 1859 he began work on the *Lives of the Engineers*, a massive work of 1,500 pages in three volumes full of engravings of landscapes, maps and mechanical diagrams. At the same time he was submitting regular articles to the Quarterly Review, coping with the demands of the success of *Self-Help* and the affairs of the South Eastern Railway. All three volumes were completed and published in 1862 when Samuel was 50. It was well-received and its success, more than that of *Self-Help*, enabled Smiles to see himself as a successful author. With growing prosperity he was able to indulge his family. Sarah Anne now moved in

London society, bought new gowns and hosted parties. The children were privately educated. Smiles joined the Athenaeum, proposed by a judge and an Archdeacon. A new house was commissioned in one of Blackheath's best areas, West Bank, a gentleman's residence complete with billiard room and library.

Now work was to begin on the next major industrial biography, the lives of James Watt and Matthew Boulton. This book was produced as a fourth volume to the *Lives of the Engineers*. However, its sales were a disappointment. Smiles felt the strain of all this activity. He had trouble sleeping and resorted to sedatives and appears to have suffered from depression. He resigned from the SER after the General Meeting on 30<sup>th</sup> August 1866. One of the most useful retirement gifts he received from the company was a lifetime travel pass over the company's lines with connections to continental railways. He would make good use of this. He was not to remain without employment for long. A board colleague at the SER was also a director of the National Provident Institution, one of London's leading life assurance societies, whose secretary had just retired. Smiles started work in the autumn of 1866. The work was less demanding than the railway business but involved a lot of travelling and with his increasing fame as an author he received many invitations to speak to societies throughout the country. He became an ambassador for the NPI. He still had a desire to write and read widely, always making notes. He became fascinated by the history of the Huguenots, exiled from France and successful in establishing new lives in Britain and Ireland.

While Smiles was spending his holidays travelling in France and collecting Huguenot family stories, his assistant Martin was busy researching in London. The book, *The Huguenots*, was printed in Edinburgh

and launched by John Murray in London in November 1867. While Smiles was writing industrial biography and other books like *The Huguenots*, forty per cent of his income from writing came from *Self-Help*. He was known to the public at large as the author of *Self-Help* and it was how he was introduced at meetings. A lot of his time was taken up with requests for foreign editions and translations as well as disputes over copyrights.

Meanwhile, his children were growing up. Willie had left school at sixteen and joined a firm of East India Merchants. He was now, at the age of 22, representing them in Belfast. He would go on to found his own company and become a very successful businessman in Northern Ireland. In 1872 he married Lucy Dorling, half sister of another well-known author, Mrs Beeton. Bear Gryllse, the adventurer, TV presenter and Chief Scout is descended from this branch of the family. He is Smiles' great-great grandson. Sam was sent to Bradford to learn a trade but he developed pneumonia and was sent abroad to improve his health in a warmer climate. Smiles presented him with a large notebook to record his impressions of his travels. Smiles' eldest child, his daughter Janet, married John Hartree, the grandson of a wealthy ironmaster, John Penn, in 1868.

No new publications emerged at this time. *Self-Help* continued to achieve success overseas with translations in Italy and Japan. Sam returned with his travel diaries and Samuel saw that they were published under joint authorship, *A Boy's Voyage Round the World*. A new book, *Character*, was written and published in 1871, his first book for four years. Overwork and stress was taking its toll again and he had a severe stroke. He was paralysed and unable to read or speak. His sixtieth birthday passed as he began the long struggle towards recovery. He had lost weight and his control of speech and mobility only returned slowly. Eventually, he regained enough strength

to contemplate travelling again. He visited his 84 year-old mother in Haddington, his son Sam in Dublin, and also Belfast, where not only Willie was living but also Janet and John Hartree. By the time he returned he felt much better and enrolled on an art course and rediscovered his enthusiasm for drawing and painting. He began writing again, another volume on the Huguenots and a five volume reprint of the *Lives of the Engineers*.



Portrait of Smiles at the age of 65 in 1877 by Sir George Reid who illustrated Smiles' *Life of a Scotch Naturalist*.

1874 started well with two weddings, firstly Sam in Belfast then Willie in Plimlico but on 19<sup>th</sup> June word reached Samuel that his mother had died. He travelled once more to Haddington for the funeral. In November 1874 tragedy struck again as Smiles' youngest daughter Edith died of appendicitis at the age of 27, leaving a two year old son. Most of Smiles' family were now in Northern Ireland but he and Sarah Anne did not want to move there. They gave up the house in Blackheath and moved to St-Leonard's-on-Sea in Sussex. Smiles enjoyed St Leonard's but his wife did

not; she had no friends there. They were soon on the move again. They travelled to Haddington where Smiles worked on a few chapters of *Thrift*. Then to Banff for a week where he met Thomas Edward, a local shoemaker turned naturalist (another book in prospect).

Back to Haddington where a few more chapters of *Thrift* were completed then to Darlington where he was an honoured guest at the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration of the opening of the Stockton and Darlington railway. A new home in London was needed. A house at 4 Pembroke Gardens in Kensington was found. *Thrift* was published and sales were very encouraging. A biography of Thomas Edward, Naturalist, was now in prospect, illustrated by no less an artist than Sir George Reid, then only 33. The book sold well and Smiles was able to campaign successfully for a Civil List pension for the cobbler. He undertook a commission to write a biography of *George Moore, Merchant and Philanthropist*. He did not enjoy the work and was surprised when it sold well. He turned down a similar commission from David Livingstone's sisters. The next book was *Robert Dick: Baker of Thurso, Geologist and Botanist*. Again it sold well and Samuel and Sarah Anne set off on holiday to Italy, purely for relaxation. His reputation was high in Italy. He was entertained by both the former and present Prime Ministers, received by Queen Margherita and Garibaldi. After three months in Italy they returned to England and in Autumn 1879 toured the north of Scotland, visiting Haddington on the way. Another 'little book' was completed and published, *Duty*.

John Murray, the father of his current publisher, was to be his next major project. The engineer, James Nasmyth, son of the famous Scottish artist, was also writing an autobiography which Smiles had agreed to edit. Smiles proceeded with both works at a fairly relaxed pace. Waiting for

replies from Nasmyth or the next batch of documents from Murray enabled Samuel and Sarah Anne to travel both at home and abroad, attend concerts or theatre in London and visit children and grandchildren. Smiles had slowed down with increasing age and the disciplined approach to writing, combined with his commercial employment, was behind him. In early 1883 *James Nasmyth Engineer – an Autobiography* was published. It was one of Smiles' least popular books. The John Murray project remained in the background while he produced *Men of Industry and Invention*, largely featuring the Belfast shipbuilding trade which his son Willie was very much a part of with his successful Belfast Ropeworks and his friends E J Harland and Gustav Wolff. After protracted dealings with the Murrays, the long-awaited John Murray biography, *A Publisher and his Friends*, finally came out in two volumes in March 1891.

Smiles gradually felt old age overtake him. Although increasingly infirm, he continued writing. A biography of Josiah Wedgwood was published but as it had been largely based on papers he had been given without the knowledge of the subject's family it caused some controversy. A book in the *Self-Help* tradition (*Conduct*) was supplied to Murray but they were reluctant to publish it. Smiles' son Sam agreed with that decision. He had largely taken over the management of his father's affairs by this time. At the end of 1898 Samuel suffered a severe stroke. His family thought he would not survive but he did, for a further six years, his quality of life much reduced. His daughter Janet died in February 1900, Sarah Anne a few weeks later than Sam, a few months later. Willie dropped dead of a heart attack at his golf club in County Down in February 1904. His father followed on 16<sup>th</sup> April. Born in the reign of George III, he outlived George IV, William IV and Queen Victoria and survived into the Edwardian era. He left Scotland in



1838 but in his dressing gown pocket at the time of his death was a small volume, one of his favourite books, J. J. Bell's *Wee Macgregor*.



*A. Smiles*

Portrait of Smiles from his autobiography published posthumously in 1905

### **His works and his message** *by Eric Glendinning*

When I was a student in Edinburgh in the 60s, two authors with Haddington connections could always be found in the second-hand bookshops: Carlyle, usually school prizes in fine editions, looking as if they had never been read and Samuel Smiles, often cheap editions, sometimes with passages underlined and with margin comments from early readers.

The fact that his books were still turning up 100 years after they were written is some indication of his popularity amongst and his influence on ordinary Victorians. He was as well-known to Victorian Britain and beyond as another author on self-improvement, Dale Carnegie, was to the USA and beyond in the 1940s, 50s and 60s. Both sold amazingly well, both are still in print, both were translated widely, both had a message of self-improvement. There the comparison stops; they are separated by 80 years and the Atlantic. Their messages are very different.

What was Smiles' message? I've chosen a famous Victorian painting to put Smiles into a historical context and to illustrate his message.



Ford Maddox Brown, *Work*, 1858, Manchester Art Gallery

*Work* was painted just a year earlier than one of Smiles' best-known works, *Self-Help*, published in 1859. What does it show? On the surface, a street scene in mid-Victorian Britain; laying drains or water-pipes – one of the great achievements of that period and a scene the artist had witnessed outside his own front door. Twenty years earlier and a depiction of *Work* would be the harvest or ploughing but this is the late 1850s and careers other than following a horse's tail are opening up.

Much has been written on the characters portrayed. The two groups of workers, navvies and intellectuals, represent physical and intellectual labour. One of the intellectuals should be familiar to us: Thomas Carlyle on the right, wearing a hat and leaning on a stick. He looks a bit stiff. He was painted from a photograph as he couldn't stand still for long enough to be portrayed. Beside him is the Rev F.D. Maurice, Founder of the Christian Socialist Movement. The Rev. Maurice's message is 'We're equal in the sight of God. Join the working men's association. Let Church and workers combine to combat capitalism.' The young woman handing out religious tracts may represent salvation through good works. The toffs in the background, in contrast, are the drones.

What is this to do with Smiles? Both Carlyle and Smiles extolled the virtues of hard work but the messages are rather different. Carlyle wanted society to recognise the value of all kinds of work. We should respect the labourer; he is not a commodity to be bought and sold. The toffs rest on the labours of the working man.

Smiles is not in the picture. He is 29 and living in Leeds but we know what his message is from his works. It would be directed to the chief figure in the picture – the young labourer standing upright with a shovel. We can summarise his message as:

**“Heaven helps those who help themselves.”** These are opening lines of *Self-Help*. You can improve your situation through your own efforts. You can be the foreman here, not the labourer. Better still, you can start your own drainage business; you can invent or improve machinery which will do the job faster. He was a great admirer of improvers. *Self-Help: with Illustrations of Character, Conduct and Perseverance* takes the form of a series of anecdotes from the lives of great men (only one woman is mentioned) and

the not so great. For the most part of they are humble origin and little formal education. For example Robert Dick, baker of Thurso, geologist and botanist who was able to demonstrate to the President of the Royal Geographical Society the geology of his native county with the flour and dough on his mixing board and had a labelled collection of all the plants of Caithness. Each anecdote illustrates a particular virtue. The chapters have the structure of a sermon. His style is plain, perhaps to appeal to the ordinary reader – a welcome relief from Carlyle – but reading *Self-Help* is like reading ten copies of the Reader's Digest one after the other. It is impossible not to admire his sincerity but his optimism is relentless and his heroes utterly worthy.

**Get an education.** Perhaps attend the Working Men's College, founded by Maurice, and at which Maddox Brown, the artist, taught. Smiles' great hero, George Stephenson, paid the village schoolmaster to teach him to read and master mathematics. Smiles wrote a number of biographies, the best known is the *Lives of the Engineers* – George and his son Robert Stephenson. They are more tributes than biographies in a modern sense but that was the Victorian style. You wrote about people you admired - until Lytton Strachey came along.

**Be thrifty** (and keep off the beer; thrift and sobriety go together). One of his works is *Thrift*. You can save 40s a year by not having a pint of beer a day. Invested in a savings bank, this would provide £120 for your old age - echoes of today's encouragement to save more for your pension. When Stephenson's fellow workers at the pit were off down the pub on a Saturday,

Stephenson was dismantling the pit pump to work out a way of making it more efficient.

**Persevere if you face difficulties.** Perseverance is one of his favourite virtues, illustrated again by Stephenson, who was eventually successful in driving his line across the great moor between Leeds and Manchester. Smiles wrote too about the Huguenots— arriving as refugees from persecution in France and becoming successful business people who started some of the first industries in England and flourished through hard work.

**Don't despair.** Cheerfulness is a Smiles virtue – no pun intended. I think Baden Powell's "a scout smiles and whistles under all difficulties" owes much to Smiles.

Smiles has many other messages - *Self-Help* is a preachy kind of book - but his message to this labourer would not be: Join the Transport and General Workers Union and agitate for better conditions. For Smiles self-help is the answer, not collective action. This may explain why the Edinburgh Trades Council- an early trade union organisation - in the 1860s felt that *Self-Help* had little relevance for them.

Is he particularly Scottish? One US textbook on Sociology refers to him as an Englishman. Some aspects of his work chime with what we like to think of as Scottish characteristics: admiration for the lad o'pairts and for stoicism. One of his subjects, Sir Ralph Abercrombie, victor of the Battle of the Pyramids, illustrates both. Dying on the battlefield, he asked whose blanket had been given to him and insisted on knowing the name of the trooper so that it could be returned to him when no longer needed. Others include respect for education; thrift – of course; a certain preachiness – his

writing was shaped by the endless sermons of those Sabbaths in Haddington; pride in independence – we are masters of our own destiny, beholden to none. Remember that Smiles wrote at a time when, apart from self-help, there was not much help available: no welfare state, no easy access to institutions of higher education for those without private incomes, no help at all, apart from cold charity, if you fell off what Churchill called ‘the scaffolding of modern life’. So yes, I think we can claim him as a Scottish writer.

Does he have any relevance today? Self-help titles are common on the shelves in Waterstones but I don’t think Smiles would approve of *Ten easy ways to succeed in business*. There is nothing easy about *Self-Help*; it is all graft. Smiles is still in print but I suspect for academic study rather than a lifestyle guide. Nevertheless those who refer to the welfare state as the ‘nanny state’ like to draw messages from Smiles. There is an edition of 1986 with such an introduction by Sir Keith Joseph. There is an echo of Smiles in Norman Tebbit’s advice to the unemployed ‘Get on your bike’. But that is to take him out of his context. ‘Stand on your own two feet’ is not a bad motto at any time but for me Smiles belongs firmly to his period. He wrote for a mid-Victorian world and his sales demonstrate that he found a receptive audience for his message.

Why is Smiles worth remembering? Because he gives us some understanding of Victorian values. He is one of the influences that shaped the attitudes of our grandparents and great grandparents. To the extent that these attitudes have descended through the generations, there is a little of Smiles in us too. I don’t know how many of the hundreds of thousands who read his books were able to improve their circumstances, but I have no doubt

some did so with his encouragement. Samuel Smiles is worth remembering, a worthy son of Haddington.

**Samuel Smiles and my Family** by Jean McKinnon

A copy of his book, *Self-Help with illustrations of Character and Conduct*, 1862 edition, has survived in my family through several households and flittings. It is likely it could have been acquired by my grandfather, son of an East Lothian shepherd.

Why the book survived may tell us something of our past. But even more interesting is that someone has marked several passages in the book. The choice of passage raises questions. What do these marked pieces reveal about the reader? What did they find interesting? Did they agree or disagree with Smiles' ideas? Did they question the text? Did they find these ideas profound?

The passages marked come from the three chapters on: Business Qualities, Self Culture, and Character – the true gentleman, the noblest possession.

**Business Qualities** The subtitle is the 'Necessity for labour a Blessing'.

"The feeling that life is destitute of any motive or necessity for action, must be of all others the most distressing and the most insupportable to a rational being." (p 209)

*Promptitude* "One of the minor uses of steady employment is, that it keeps one out of mischief, for truly an idle brain is the devil's workshop and a lazy man the devil's bolster." (p 214)

**Self Culture** The page header is 'Knowledge and Wisdom'



“... Knowledge of itself, unless wisely directed, might merely make bad men more dangerous... many instances of men filled with learning of the schools, yet possessing little practical wisdom, and offering examples rather for warning than imitation.” (p 271)

*Books not the Best Teacher* “...reading is yet only one mode of cultivating the mind and is much less influential than practical experience and good example in the formation of character.” (p 273)

### **Character – The true gentleman the noblest possession**

“That character is power is true in a much higher sense than that knowledge is power.” (p 333)

*Rules of Conduct followed by Lord Erskine* “always to do what my conscience told me to be a duty and to leave the consequence to God” (p 334)

*Importance of good Habits* “that boy was well trained who, when asked why he did not pocket some pears, for nobody was there to see, replied, ‘Yes there was. I was there to see myself, and I don’t intend ever to see myself do a dishonest thing’.” (p 337)

It would be interesting to consider how many were influenced, even slightly, by the Smiles ideology. Reference is still made to Smiles from time to time. According to the Scotsman, February 2004, “The strength of Self-Help is in the ethical dimension which has too often been bleached out of most discussions in business.” George McKay Brown mentions in his autobiography, published 1997, that his father subscribed in a way to Smilesian philosophy, always however, with reservations.

Who and where is our Samuel Smiles of today?