



1 Samuel Smiles at 47, in the year *Self-Help* was published.
(The Mary Evans Picture Library)

THE SPIRIT OF SELF-HELP

A Life of Samuel Smiles

*'The value of life lies not in the length of days
but in the use you make of them'*

Michel de Montaigne
Essais, 1580

John Hunter



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INTRODUCTION

ANYONE walking along George IV Bridge in Edinburgh in 2014 might have examined with curiosity the line of decorated boards outside the National Library of Scotland. Put there to shield passers-by from building work going on inside, they'd been used to display images representing the library's great literary heritage. The choice was instructive. One of the most striking showed a trolley with a stack of books, and on their spines the names of selected giants of nineteenth-century writing: Sir Walter Scott, Lord Byron, Jane Austen, Washington Irving, Charles Darwin – and Samuel Smiles.¹ In this company Samuel Smiles is the name most twenty-first century readers might barely have heard of, yet he was, in his time, quite as famous as Sir Walter Scott, Lord Byron, or any of the others. In 1887 *Pall Mall Gazette* listed the capital's 'men of letters, savans (sic) and divines', including William Morris, Matthew Arnold, Christina Rossetti, Walter Pater, J A Symonds, Cardinal Newman, and Samuel Smiles. Indeed when Sir John Lubbock, polymath and long-term friend of Charles Darwin, published his *Hundred Best Books* in 1886, there, with the *Meditations of Marcus Aurelius* and Pascal's *Pensées*, with Thackeray, Dickens, and George Eliot, was Smiles's *Self-Help* (Smiles was delighted to note that 'I was the only living author whom Sir J Lubbock included on his list').²

Self-Help was, and remains, Samuel Smiles's best-known book, and when it appeared in 1859 it became a publishing sensation, not just in Britain, but across the world. The Khedive of Egypt³ had panels on his palace walls inscribed with quotations from the Koran, and from Smiles's *Self-Help*. 'Indeed', the Khedive told an English visitor, 'they are principally from Smeelis.' 'Smeelis' was honoured in his lifetime by national leaders in foreign countries from Italy and Bohemia to Japan and Argentina (in Buenos Aires his works were collectively translated as *The Social Gospel*, and presented to the Argentinian President). *Self-Help* sold

in Britain upwards of a quarter of a million copies in Smiles's lifetime, and worldwide, many times that number. It remains in print.

Self-Help was not Samuel Smiles's only successful book, nor his first. He wrote some thirty books, dozens of pamphlets, and many hundreds of newspaper and magazine articles. But *Self-Help's* title came to stand for more than a book. It represented an attitude to life, a response to the extraordinary conditions of its time, and, in the long term, a catch-all for a thousand theories on how each of us can become master of our own fate.

Samuel Smiles was born in the reign of George III, outlived George IV, William IV, and Queen Victoria, and survived into the Edwardian era. In his adult life he witnessed a century in which man changed the world faster and more dramatically than had ever before seemed possible. It was the time of the industrial revolution's second wave, the tidal wave of the manufacturing revolution. For the British people particularly, on whose doorstep most of this change had been generated, its speed was both exhilarating and alarming. 'Within the last half-century', a visitor to the 1851 Great Exhibition observed, 'there have been performed upon our island, unquestionably, the most prodigious feats of human industry and skill witnessed in any age of time or in any nation of the earth.' But Friedrich Engels⁴ had noted a few years earlier during his time in Manchester, that early deaths and low wages were more prevalent in the manufacturing cities than in the countryside. To many intellectuals of the time, men like John Ruskin and Matthew Arnold, this surge toward the future caused great unease. Their instinct was to fear the machine, and to look to the past for a model of innocence and beauty. Matthew Arnold asked, in 1869:

Which would excite most the love, interest, and admiration of mankind?
... The England of the last twenty years, or the England of Elizabeth, of a true, splendid, spiritual effort, but when our coal, and our industrial operations depending on coal, were very little developed? Well then, what an unsound habit of mind it must be which makes talk of things like coal, or iron as constituting the greatness of England.⁵

With his Hellenist hankerings, Arnold turned his fire on the emerging dream. 'The university of Mr Ezra Cornell ... seems to rest on a provincial

misconception of what culture truly is, and to be calculated to produce miners, or engineers, or architects, not sweetness and light.’ This was the Victorian dilemma – how to pursue economic progress without destroying sweetness and light.

Samuel Smiles’s work grew from personal experience of this paradox in action. As a young working journalist in the manufacturing town of Leeds he saw the power of technology to create enormous wealth, and crucially, to democratise the wealth-producing process. Prosperity no longer needed ancestry. But at the same time he could see the lives of thousands of uneducated and unrepresented people reduced to squalor and deprived of meaning. Yet Smiles believed that these operative classes were, as he said in a speech in Leeds in 1839, ‘the fabricators of our national greatness ... the working men and mechanics, the true creators of our national wealth’.⁶

His books were about working men and mechanics, about the miners, engineers, and architects who worried Matthew Arnold so much, but also about cobblers and bakers and poets, and their route, each in his own way, to what Smiles called ‘happiness and well-being’ – one of his favourite phrases. ‘The grand object aimed at’ he said, ‘should be to make the great mass of the people virtuous, intelligent, well-informed, and well conducted; and open up to them new sources of pleasure and happiness.’ This, Smiles believed, was a man’s true mission, and his individual responsibility. But Smiles was no utopian. His vision was of happiness as an expression of work, of difficulty overcome, of self-discipline and moral courage, and an acceptance of the hardship that accompanies a life fully lived.

The voice that Samuel Smiles gave to this vision, in *Self-Help* and in his other books, touched a chord in millions of ordinary people, struggling to see, in a world of frightening change, a meaning for their own lives. ‘There are few books in history’, Asa Briggs wrote in 1958, ‘which have reflected the spirit of their age more faithfully and successfully than *Self-Help*’.⁷ Samuel Smiles, and *Self-Help*, remain a reference point for much of the discourse on ideas about ‘the search for happiness’ in the twenty-first century. What significance had Smiles’s work in generating the self-help movement so pervasive today? A quick examination of titles on Amazon (and there are thousands) suggests the answer ‘not

much'. *Change Your Life in Seven Days; How to be a Property Millionaire; or 59 Seconds: Think a Little, Change a Lot* – these and innumerable others run directly counter to the Smiles ethos. Their themes are quick, effort-free solutions, instant wealth, and life enhancement through mind games. Where is the patient, hard-slogging, pick-yourself-up-and-try-again Smiles hero?

The idea of self-help, as elaborated by Samuel Smiles in his writing, and in his life, has been charged with representing a particular set of 'Victorian values'. But at root it is an idea which is intensely personal, addressing questions about the nature of happiness, the meaning of success and failure, the relation between the two sets of ideas, and the moral dimension of both – in other words the questions which occupied Aristotle, Plato and the ancients, and every serious philosopher since. 'How should we live?' Aristotle asked, and answered: 'by seeking happiness'.

Samuel Smiles's contribution (without any pretensions to being a philosopher, or even a particularly original thinker), and the reason I suggest that his work has enduring significance, is that he was the first to find a voice, and a medium – biography – to make these ideas relevant to the everyday lives of everyday people. And not just Victorians.

PROLOGUE

An Evening Reimagined

THE OLD MAN, silver-haired, with a smartly trimmed white beard, dresses with special care for this evening – starched shirt, white tie, black tail-coat – before inspection by his wife Sarah Anne,¹ and a steadying hand from his driver as he steps into his brougham for the drive to the City. Dr Samuel Smiles is on his way to dine at London’s Mansion House.

It is high summer, Saturday 18 June 1887. As his carriage moves through Kensington High Street and on past Kensington Gardens he can see on every building and lamp post, and among the crowds strolling in the park, flags and emblems in a rash of loyal colour. God Save the Queen! Victoria Regina! Red, white and blue, purple and gold, laughter and waves in the late evening sun. Celebration of the Queen Empress’s Golden Jubilee has already begun and Samuel Smiles has been invited by the Lord Mayor, Sir Reginald Hanson, to a ‘Banquet to representatives of Literature, Science and Art’. But what does Samuel Smiles really think about the Queen’s majesty? Almost fifty years earlier, as a young newspaper editor, he had introduced himself to the readers of the *Leeds Times* by advising them that ‘From the puppetry of thrones they have nothing to hope, except new demands for money, for friends and for army, to support the pomp and parade of monarchy ...’² The Crown he had dismissed as ‘the mere plaything of the aristocracy and its wearer, for the time being, but their pensioned creature and puppet’. His attitude to the monarchy was, at best, sceptical. ‘If it be not productive of good, royalty is not worth a sow’s bristle, nor is loyalty worth a sow’s grunt.’ But that had been in 1839. How hot now is the radical blood?

Under the Mansion House banquet hall’s chandeliers over three hundred gentlemen sit down to dinner (no ladies, of course) – eminent

scientists, and a host of Royal Academicians, but Literature is in truth rather thinly represented. Thomas Hardy is here, Edmund Gosse, the wildly popular Henry Rider Haggard (*She* has just been published), and 33-year old Oscar Wilde, though none of the work that will make him famous has yet been seen. For English literature it is a time of changing generations.

Tonight Samuel Smiles has little competition. Most of the Victorian giants, Smiles's contemporaries, are dead. Thomas Carlyle and John Stuart Mill, Charles Dickens, Anthony Trollope, Thackeray and George Eliot ... all gone, as is the man who had achieved public fame in the same year as Smiles, Charles Darwin. Both Darwin's *On The Origin of Species* and Smiles's *Self-Help* had been published by Murray's back in the autumn of 1859. Now, thirty years later, John Murray III, head of the famous publishing house, sits with Samuel Smiles among the Lord Mayor's guests. As Smiles's publisher, and a friend and collaborator for over thirty years, he and the seventy-four-year-old author might be seen in this company as twin icons of their generation; and Smiles as a sort of Grand Old Man of English letters. But Smiles, in spite of the huge sales and the international fame, suspects that he is not regarded in that way, and he is probably right. His peers do not embrace him.

In the intellectual discourse of the age, dominated by the voices of men like Carlyle, John Stuart Mill, Ruskin, and Matthew Arnold, Samuel Smiles spoke to a wider audience, and in a different voice – a voice much more like their own. As Humphrey Carpenter, chronicler of the House of Murray³ commented, Smiles's *Self-Help* had almost as much influence on the Victorian outlook as *The Origin of Species*; but among the intellectual establishment Smiles felt an outsider. 'I have received more recognition from the King and Queen [of Italy] down to their humblest subjects than in my own country', he wrote in his *Autobiography*. This sense of alienation, of exclusion from élite circles, was something he felt from his earliest days. On the Smiles shoulder a chip is never completely invisible. He acquired it as a child and perhaps unknowingly treasured it all his life, as the driver of his work and the inspiration for his relentless insistence on the loser as winner, on the inversion of privilege. 'What,' he asked about his school contemporaries 'became of the favourites at one school and the prize boys at the other? I do not think any of them

made a mark in the world. Some became insufferable prigs, stuck up with self-conceit. The prize boys began as prodigies and ended up as failures.' Samuels Smiles's work, and his career, are full of contradiction and paradox – of intolerance matched with understanding, severity with compassion, certainty with doubt – all originating from a childhood of happiness haunted by rejection, both real and perceived.

I

The Smiling Country

A FEW YEARS after that Jubilee dinner Smiles sat down to write an autobiography, unpublished until 1905, a year after his death. He needed a good memory, for the eminent Victorian was born a Georgian, on 23 December 1812, in the small town of Haddington, in the Scottish lowlands twenty miles from Edinburgh. He had, as we all have, memories of times beyond memory. ‘It seems to me like a dream,’¹ he wrote of the days after the Battle of Waterloo, ‘to remember the rejoicings on that occasion – the bands of the militia, the drums and pipes that paraded the town, and the illuminations.’ Writing his *Autobiography*, the eighty year-old Smiles could see a picture of his childhood, of himself, aged barely three, at the open window of the room above his father’s shop, hanging out too far no doubt, and scaring his mother, battling with his older brother John for a better view of the kilted soldiers in the street below. His eye even then was alert to impressions, and to information: a very Smilesian trait. He remembered the 42nd Highlanders, the glorious Black Watch, marching through Haddington the next year. He remembered the fireside talks about the war, the price of bread, so expensive at sixteen pence for a loaf, the eventual pulling down of the soldiers’ barracks, and his father’s coup on army surplus stores – ‘he bought a large quantity ... principally blankets and greatcoats’. Smiles senior was a conscientious shopkeeper.

Young Sam found a lot to love about Haddington and, only later, a lot to resent. But for all the resentment, for all the later urge to escape, he still looked back to distant enchantments, to the small-world familiarity

so precious to children. 'I knew everybody,' he wrote, 'even the cocks and hens running about the streets.' The boy he remembered used to climb, on a fine day, to a high point on the Garleton hills that rose above the town, then look down and see a sort of Eden. To the south the grey buildings of the town gathered like friends, with the high tower of the cathedral church where the 'higher' people worshipped, and the lower slate roof of the dissenters' chapel, where God met the other sort, like Sam's family. He could see the little private school in St Ann's Street, fiefdom of the hated Mr Hardie, and nearby, the buildings of the Grammar School. The old narrow roof and long windows of the Town Library sat behind the High Street. Two other libraries snuggled between the houses and shops. No child in Haddington had to go without books or learning. And when he had taken in all this, he would have been able find the straight line of the High Street, and near the top the business place of S. Smiles, General Merchant. Then he would have felt an innocent pride, for just as Sam knew every cock and hen running about the streets, so every citizen of Haddington knew S. Smiles, General Merchant, who gave good value in ex-army blankets.

On Wednesday and Saturday afternoons Sam and his brothers and sisters had their free times; free that is from school, though their father made sure they did their stint helping in the narrow garden behind the house, among the tulips and red and yellow polyanthus. Then, if the work had not been too hard, he could run off, across the river and up the hills even higher, to look north, to the far-spread plain, rich with some of the finest agricultural land in East Lothian. Samuel Smiles has been patronised for his utilitarian style of writing. Even a kind critic called it 'serviceable prose' and his obituarist in the *London Standard* sneered that 'the standard at which the veteran author aimed was, perhaps, not the loftiest'.² But the descriptions of the place of his boyhood have a touching lyricism that he rarely showed. 'All around this smiling country,' he wrote, 'lies the Firth of Forth, and in the northern distance the blue hills of Fife. Beyond Musselburgh Bay, Arthur's seat lies like an elephant at rest ... and the smoke of Edinburgh in the distance.'

He would have come down the hill then, into the town, to the big Smiles family packed into their few rooms above the shop. Samuel Smiles senior and his wife Janet worked hard. Sam saw his mother tied

all day to the shop, serving, stacking, keeping the books; he watched her help tend the cow in the byre at the end of the garden, feed her husband and children and then, in her so-called 'spare hours', at her spinning wheel, for 'she not only wished to keep up the house store of linen, but to spin for the plenishing of her daughters'. In the end there were three of those (and one who died in infancy), and eight sons, with Sam the second eldest born in 1812,³ two years after his brother John.

He knew how fortunate he was. In spite of 'the smiling country' all about, life in the years after the Napoleonic wars was tough. The cost of war kept taxes and prices high. Men were pouring back from the army and navy looking for work on the land, or for any job they could find in towns like Haddington. Edinburgh, a day's walk to the west, was full of men without work. Mass employment in manufacturing, the great absorber of labour, was still unusual. But Sam's parents, as he put it, 'were neither "hunden doon" by poverty, nor oppressed by riches'. Almost every year another child arrived, every one fed wholesomely, clothed warmly, and most importantly, in Sam's eyes, 'sedulously started on the road to knowledge'.

Sedulously – it is a very Smilesian word, a Sunday-school word, packed with persistence, application and honest diligence, a word children may not have understood but whose meaning they would have sensed (Smiles, a sharp etymologist, no doubt appreciated its Latin root in *se dolo*: without guile). This straightness, the sort of diligence Sam saw at home, was stern but benevolent, and applied with assumed love. But as soon as his small white legs were old enough to carry him down the street and through the doors of St Ann's school, he found them exposed to the rod of its master, Patrick Hardie. 'I have seen,' Smiles wrote, 'Hardie flog a boy so hard and so long that he had to hold his sides and sit down exhausted.' Unfortunately for Sam, a year or so later Hardie was appointed to the mathematical school, the first level of the Burgh schools which constituted the famous Haddington Grammar School, a jewel in East Lothian education. So when Sam moved on there, Hardie was waiting. With his bilious pale complexion and yellowish-red hair he must have been a terrifying figure for the children whose parents, apparently without question, left them day after day, unprotected, in his power.

Sam learned several lessons from Mr Hardie. 'He was a good teacher. He taught reading, writing and arithmetic very well. He cultivated in his pupils the gift of memory. He made us learn by heart, and recite, poetry and speeches by memorable orators.' He also gave Sam his first lessons in class discrimination and its hypocrisies. Sam saw Hardie trying to wheedle his way into acceptance by 'the well to do men, who could give him dinners and drink'. Though he would thrash the poorer boys and yell at them, his favourites were spared. These favourites were not the clever or well-behaved but the sons of provosts, bailies, or town councillors. The fierce light in Hardie's eyes – sure sign of a storm coming on – was kindled by the humble and unconnected, and especially by Dissenters. '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!' But to his favourites the master was always mild and sleek. 'The cut of the leather would never be used to raise wales on their backs.' Yet apparently not everyone shared Smiles's unhappy memories of Patrick Hardie. When the teacher died in 1837 some of his ex-pupils erected a tombstone to his memory 'In grateful recollection of his talents, acquirements and zealous perseverance as a successful teacher of youth.' Mr Hardie's favourites were apparently loyal.

The other lesson Sam took from the Hardie terror was that, though education was priceless, its worth could be poisoned by brutality. 'Learning is not advanced by harshness and tyranny on the part of the masters. These are enough to drive a boy into stupidity and make him reckless.' Smiles maintained a life-long interest in education and became a significant voice in the debate on Victorian educational policies, always inspired by a resolutely anti-Hardie approach.

People who met Smiles in later life almost universally used words like 'kindly,' 'genial' or 'gentle'. As a boy he clearly responded to qualities like these – to gentleness (if not to gentility), to being led not pushed, to what he called 'moral suasion'. When, at the age of about ten, he escaped Hardie's reign, his life opened and learning became a source of joy. The change came when he moved up to the classical division of the Grammar School, under Rector Graham.

William Graham, plump, jovial, with a smile for every child, ran the Classical School and was Hardie's opposite – 'as much a gentleman as

the other was a tyrant,' Smiles wrote. Graham had the gift of enthusing children, and Sam discovered that Greek, Latin and French could be enjoyed. But even in this enlightened air, young Smiles, son of a small tradesman and Anti-burgher (a narrow sect that refused to vote for burghers or councillors) continued to twitch at the whiff of social exclusion and privilege. He was very aware of 'the better sort' who attended the Grammar School – the English, or the sons of Indian officers, or county men with large farms. Sam's father had to save hard to send him to the Grammar School; it was not the natural habitat of a boy from his background. Even the minister's sons had the advantage of cramming at home so that they could win prizes. Sam won nothing, and affected disdain for the school-boy winners.

In the Smiles household no one had time to help Sam with cramming. For his parents the hours not spent on trading, cleaning, feeding, caring for babies and infants, spinning, washing, milking and keeping the garden were devoted to religion – heads-down, eyes fixed, unquestioning religion of the most strict Calvinist sort. Sam's father's people had been Cameronians, followers of a flint-eyed Covenanter called Richard Cameron. In the seventeenth century Cameron had seen a new light when he decided that the Covenanters were altogether too liberal, too easy with the papists, and must be discarded. So he moved off to the sternest edge of the Protestant faith to preach, not in chapels, but in the fields of God. Field preaching became the Cameronians' favoured style of worship. When Sam visited his grandfather the old man was still an elder of the Cameronians, and an active preacher. Sam heard him, his voice carried on the wind to the congregation gathered in the field like birds of a single dark feather, from vast distances, for holy reasons. The boy sat among them on the grass, all day, through prayer upon prayer, psalm upon psalm, sermon upon sermon; for the preachers came in relays, so that the day darkened and not until the sun had set did the service end. Sam does not say what these relentless ministers told him. Perhaps the crowd, and the sunset, and his increasingly numb backside distracted his mind from their message.

On Sundays at home not even the sunset was visible to lift his spirit. The hard work of the sabbath started straight after breakfast, in the grey dawn. Then the Smiles children, a small congregation in their own right,

squeezed round the table for prayers led by their father. After prayers they were set to learning their catechism and paraphrase – with no whispering and no fidgeting; they would be tested on these lessons later. But when they were at last released into the light of the High Street it was for a cold, silent walk to the kirk, and a morning of psalms, prayers, and a sermon of over an hour long. At one o'clock they went home again, to grace and quiet and a slice of meat, but not freedom. By two o'clock they were back in their pew in the kirk, for another sermon until four, then home to be tested on their paraphrases and catechism and, holy of holies, back to the kirk for a third sermon at six, taking the day's observances up to eight o'clock. And then, even then, the dreaded paraphrase and catechism had to be repeated, by a line of small voices by that time surely shredded by their devotions.

None of this inspired or stimulated Sam. 'Our preacher,' he remembered, 'preached the narrowest form of Calvinism and there was far more fear than love in his sermons.' Just as Hardie failed to beat in knowledge, this regime failed to hammer in doctrine. The preacher was 'wearisome and unsympathetic, and his doctrines, though intended to frighten us into goodness, had perhaps the reverse effect'. For the rest of his life Smiles showed little interest in the church, and contempt for any religious organisation that tried to stand above its people.

But it would be wrong to see Sam's boyhood as dominated by severe schooling and a scowling God at his shoulder. The smiling countryside was still there, friends and brothers and sisters, to go hunting for birds' nests, or sloes, or haws, to play shinty with, or football on the sands. And whatever he felt about his father's field-preaching family, Sam had an altogether softer affection for his mother's side, the Wilsons and Yellowlees.

The magic was with her cousin William Yellowlees, a young artist from the borders near Berwick, learning his trade in Edinburgh. Yellowlees came over to Haddington to paint the portraits of Sam's parents. He was an exquisite draughtsman – he later became cabinet portrait painter to King William's brother, the Duke of Sussex, and was dubbed 'the Little Romney'. His skill dazzled Sam. The boy watched as the small canvases came alive with the faces of his mother and father. He sat, wide-eyed, as Cousin William dashed off superb drawings of the Union

and Mail coaches, waiting for the change of horses at the George Inn lower down the High Street for their last stage between London and Edinburgh.

Sam thought he might become an artist. He later illustrated some of his own lectures, and at least one of his books. Sketches in pen and wash of engineering works, made in his later career as a railway official, show sensitivity and talent. Their feeling for line and colour suggest the work of a man more romantic than the author of the no-nonsense books that were to make him famous. The contrast is deceptive. In his books Smiles may have chosen practical language for what he saw as a practical purpose, but a belief in the power of the human spirit drove that purpose. In that sense, at least, Samuel Smiles was a true romantic.

It was not only the bewitching Yellowlees who attracted Sam. He found his Wilson uncles equally fascinating. They were inventors, men of practical ingenuity and real, tangible usefulness. Neither of them made it into his 1884 book, *Men of Invention and Industry*, but young Sam was proud of the prize Uncle George won at the Dalkeith Farming Club for his invention of one of the first reaping machines, and of his Uncle Robert's success as a builder and carpenter. Uncle Robert Wilson gave his name to Sam's younger brother, Robert Wilson Smiles, and later the two Smiles brothers were to find much in common, particularly in trying to bring education, untainted by privilege or piety, to the people they believed needed it most.

The eldest boy in the Smiles family, John, was seven years old when he became very ill with lung inflammation. The drama at the time made a deep impression on Sam – the doctor's visit, John's thin arm stretched out on the table for bleeding, and the cups, first one, then another, then a third, filling with the child's dark blood. When Sam wrote about this sixty years later, bleeding had almost disappeared from accepted medical practice. He made no judgement, except to note that it had worked. 'Though the boy was only seven years old, the bleeding at once cured him. Doctors were not afraid to bleed in those days.'

His brother's healer Dr Welsh was, like Sam's favourite schoolmaster Rector Graham, 'a most agreeable and cheerful man. Everybody loved him. He had a comely face and expressive features.' Not, apparently, like his daughter Jane's – the Jane who, as Jane Welsh Carlyle, later became

Haddington's most famous daughter. She was eleven years older than Sam, a haughty sixteen-year-old at the time, with a number of admirers, in spite of being outshone, in Sam's opinion, by her tall, beautiful mother. 'Jeanie was less lovely,' he wrote. 'Her face was too angular,' as, apparently, was her disposition. She later wrote cruelly of Haddington, calling it 'the dimmest, deadliest spot in the Creator's universe ... the very air one breathes is impregnated with stupidity'.⁴ Jane Welsh enjoyed the keen edge of her own tongue. It amused her friends, intimidated her critics, and later helped to make her probably the most admired letter writer of the nineteenth century. Provincial Haddington and its small-town people made an easy target. Of an encounter with Samuel Smiles (not dignified with a name in an 1849 letter to her husband Thomas Carlyle), she wrote describing 'a gentleman who dined at Forster's⁵ yesterday and claimed acquaintance with me on the strength of his vivid recollection of my "white veil" at Haddington (having lived exactly at the bottom of our entry!) his father keeping a china shop ...'

In fact after Dr Welsh died in 1819 Mrs Welsh and Jane moved into what Smiles called 'the upper flat of Mr Roughhead's large mansion almost opposite the house in the High street which my father had bought'. She may have lived in a large mansion, but Jane Welsh Carlyle's dismissal of the china shop 'at the bottom of our entry' seems a little, well, Jane Welsh Carlyle. Later her view of her home town softened noticeably. In 1855 she wrote to Richard Tait during a visit to Haddington that it 'is like being pretty well up towards heaven, being here'.

'Up towards heaven' was probably never Smiles's view of his home town. Undoubtedly the idea of Haddington was attractive to him, the idea of a community on a comfortable scale where change happened at a measurable pace and you always knew who you were talking to. On the other hand, in a small town this same assumption of familiarity could breed small, corruptive poisons, of the sort he perceived in Mr Hardie's behaviour, and in his own characterisation of 'the better sort' at his school. In a small town a man might, he said later, 'be muzzled or shouted down on account of his opinions, or exposed to the petty persecutions he sometimes has to endure in the provinces'.

Though Haddington in the 1820s was a small town, it was no mere village. The Royal Burgh had a population of about 3,800 and a proud

history as the ancient capital of East Lothian. The London to Edinburgh coaches had their last stage there, and busy markets flourished. Big farmers and aristocratic landowners like the Earl of Wemyss lived all about. Many of them sent their sons to the Grammar School and patronised the local merchants and professional people like Dr Welsh and his partners, lending status by their patronage. The churches were a key part of local life, giving prestige to ministers and nodding rights to the good when they met the great. Haddington had its society. The Veneerings in Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend*, published almost fifty years later, were alive and well and living in Haddington in 1820. Society there had its pecking order, and the Smiles family, with their eleven children packed into two floors over the shop, their uncertain 'general trade', but most of all with their adherence to the narrow, anti-establishment Cameronian sect, were on its lower rungs. Sam was aware of these distinctions, of the circles from which he was deemed to be excluded. His later work is marked by impatience with 'circles'. 'When work of importance needs to be done,' he wrote, 'nobody cares to ask where the man who can do it best comes from ... but what he is, and what he can do.' At an early age he seems to have acquired an inner life, not of fantasy or colourful imagination, but of serious reflection on the ways of the world. Did the boy who recoiled from the idea of an élite at school, who sat on the grass among hundreds of worshippers, unmoved, and who used to climb alone to view the world from the top of a mountain, use those times to ponder what he was and what he could do?