

PRESS VIEW: Thursday 29 May 2008, 11.30am – 1.00pm



Sir George Reid
Samuel Smiles, 1812 – 1904, 1891
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HEROES

30 May – 7 December 2008

SCOTTISH NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY, 1 Queen St, Edinburgh

Admission free

The phenomenal success of *Self-Help*, one of the best-selling publications of the Victorian era, and the model for a literary form that has become an industry in itself, will be the subject of a fascinating new exhibition which opens at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery this spring. *Heroes* will examine the themes, appeal and legacy of Samuel Smiles' classic motivational book, which has sold millions of copies, in more than forty languages, around the world. A collaboration between the National Library of Scotland and the SNPG, the exhibition will bring together a diverse range of material, including dozens of original manuscripts and rare books, many of which will be on display for the first time. These will be shown alongside paintings, drawings and sculpture, by artists such as David Wilkie, Thomas Faed, Henry Raeburn, Sir Francis Chantrey and Bertel Thorvaldsen, which will illuminate the lives of the people promoted by Smiles as contemporary role models. Much of the material on display will come from the John Murray Archive, which was purchased by the NLS in 2006.

Self-Help: with Illustrations of Character, Conduct and Perseverance by Dr Samuel Smiles was published on 22 November 1859, the same day as Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*. Using brief stories and quotations from the lives of hundreds of inspirational figures, Haddington-born Smiles set out to provide his readership with useful examples of self-reliance and self-improvement. Largely aimed at ordinary working people *Self-Help* celebrates the triumph of individuals over adversity, and espouses the virtues of thrift, duty, perseverance and hard work. The book was an instant success, selling 20,000 copies in the UK in its first year (more than Darwin's book sold in twenty), and more than 250,000 by the end of the century - an astonishing achievement in an age when most families possessed very few books. [See Notes to Editors for biographical notes on Smiles and more on the book's global success].

Heroes will trace the evolution of Smiles' beliefs, the history of his phenomenal book, in all its many editions, and the significance of its world-wide impact. It will also examine the lives of some of those whom Smiles held up as an example to his readers. For the purposes of the exhibition these have been divided into four areas of interest: reformers; military heroes; artists and writers; and 'new heroes', or leading figures of the industrial age, such as engineers, scientists and industrialists.

REFORMERS

Smiles' heroes in the first category included the minister **Thomas Guthrie** (1803-73), who was a passionate supporter of free education for poor children, and the missionary and explorer **David Livingstone** (1813-73). The latter had worked for twelve hours a day in a cotton mill from the age of ten, before training as a doctor, and dedicating his life to missionary work in Africa. Fittingly, Livingstone's manuscript for *Narrative of an Expedition to the Zambesi and its Tributaries*, will feature in the exhibition.

MILITARY HEROES

Two of Smiles' greatest military heroes were **Lord Nelson** (1758-1805) and **the Duke of Wellington** (1769-1852) whom he admired not so much for their success as commanders, but because they lived their lives with an inspiring sense of duty.

ARTISTS AND WRITERS

In the creative field Smiles singled out the novelist and poet **Sir Walter Scott** (1771-1832) who selflessly and tirelessly worked to pay off a large debt incurred in a failed joint business venture; and **Thomas Carlyle**, a major influence on Smiles, who was forced to painstakingly rewrite his book *The French Revolution*, after his only manuscript copy was accidentally burned by a friend's servant. Documents from the John Murray Archive, relating to both Scott and Carlyle, and their relationship to Smiles, will be on display.

'NEW' HEROES

During the nineteenth century scientists, inventors and engineers created a new industrial world, and for the first time the wider public came to recognise and admire their work. For Smiles, engineers such as **James Watt** (1736-1819) and **James Nasmyth** (1808-90), or geologists such as **Hugh Miller** (1802-56) were among the greatest heroes of the age, sharing the admirable characteristics of those working in creative, military and reforming fields.

As *Self-Help* contained only short accounts of people's lives and character, Smiles generally ignored or overlooked his heroes' flaws, which he viewed as a natural part of their human condition. However, while Smiles could excuse the imperfections of figures such as David Livingstone, or Lord Nelson, there were others who, though they displayed many *Self-Help* values, were so flawed that the author attacked and criticised them. *Heroes* will highlight a number of these 'failed' role models, including the poets Robert Burns and Lord Byron and the Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte.

Though he held relatively progressive views on the question of their very limited political, legal and social rights, few women get more than a passing reference in *Self-Help*. While this omission largely reflects the culture of the period, it underlines the irony that some of the greatest obstacles to overcome in the nineteenth century were, arguably, those faced by women. *Heroes* will seek to redress this imbalance by highlighting the lives of contemporary women whose gender proved to be no obstacle to achievement and success. These will include

- **Caroline Norton** (1808–1877), a tireless campaigner for women and children’s rights, who managed to win for women the right to own property and the right of custody of their children in a divorce.
- **Mary Somerville** (1780-1872) who, as one of the most popular scientific and mathematical writers of the nineteenth century managed to succeed in an area wholly dominated by men.
- **Florence Nightingale** (1820-1910), the nurse who became famous for her hard work and self-sacrifice in the Crimean War, and who used her fame to reform nursing and establish it as a respectable profession for women.

Speaking of the exhibition, David McClay, curator of the John Murray Archive at the National Library of Scotland, said: ‘Though it is largely overlooked in the UK today, it is almost impossible to assess the enormity of the impact made by *Self-Help*. It was a book that genuinely changed people’s lives, and was cited by figures such as Lord Leverhulme (1851–1925), the soap manufacturer who used his wealth for the education and welfare of his workforce, as a major factor in their success. If we can judge by its continued popularity in the Far East, *Self-Help* retains much of its relevance and inspirational power, and it has a direct legacy in the enormous market for motivational literature so familiar to us now. We hope this exhibition will offer an insight into the values that underpinned the lives of Smiles’ role models, and perhaps help us to understand the ways in which we make our own heroes.’

The exhibition also invites visitors to think about what constitutes a role model, or even a ‘hero’ today, and whether the principles that Smiles outlined are still pertinent today. It is timely that a new book, *Self-Help for the 21st Century*, is to be launched by Luath Press just before the exhibition. In it, Malcolm Good takes a look at how Smiles’ original concept of self-help fits today by interviewing people from various backgrounds for their views on topics such as ambition, upbringing, support from others and perseverance. With their compelling mixture of opinion, social observation and biography, these contributions provide an interesting and thought-provoking commentary, offering an up-to-date view on just what *Self-Help for the 21st Century* means for different people.

Heroes has been jointly organised by the National Library of Scotland, and the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, and is the second project in a new ‘Partnership for Learning and Access’, created by the two institutions in 2006.

For further information and images, please contact the National Galleries Press Office on 0131 624 6325/ 332/ 314 /247; pressoffice@nationalgalleries.org
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Notes to Editors

Samuel Smiles Biography

Samuel Smiles was born in Haddington, in East Lothian, in 1812, and his life was itself an example of self-help. He had a humble and undistinguished upbringing (one teacher told him, ‘Smiles! You will never be fit for anything but sweeping the streets of your native borough.’) and struggled to make his way as a doctor, newspaper editor and railway company secretary. In his spare time he campaigned for parliamentary, social and educational reform through lecturing and writing. His first real success as an author came at the age of 45, with his biography of the engineer George Stephenson. This encouraged Smiles to try again with his previously rejected book *Self-Help*. Despite his new success as an author Smiles kept his ‘day-job’, only retiring after a stroke at the age of 59. His recovery required him to relearn how to read and write, but he continued to write into old age, and his final book was published when he was 82. In all, he wrote 25 biographies and self-help books, as well as hundreds of articles, essays and pamphlets.

The International Success of Self-Help

Self-Help also enjoyed enormous success abroad, selling in millions from Iceland to Vietnam. The range of foreign-language editions (including examples in Arabic, Armenian, Bengali, Bulgarian, Chinese, Croatian, Estonian, Gujerati, Greek, Marathi, Norwegian, Persian, Russian, Tamil, Turkish, Urdu and Welsh) reflects the enormous breadth of the book’s appeal. The Spanish-language edition was hugely popular in South America, and in the USA, where relaxed copyright laws allowed publishers to sell cheap, unauthorised copies of *Self-Help* in massive numbers, the book influenced the next generation of self-help and success writers. *Self-Help* was translated into most European languages, and was especially popular in Italy, where it was reprinted 59 times during the nineteenth century. Though its popularity tailed off in the early twentieth century, when the book’s emphasis on self-reliance came under fire from the political Left, *Self-Help* remains in print in many countries, including Japan, where it has sold more than one million copies, China and Korea.