

“A New Departure in Biography”: Samuel Smiles’ Writing

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*I*n a typically eclectic section of *Self-Help* (1859) Samuel Smiles tells his reader that it took James Watt thirty years to perfect his invention of the steam engine. This observation is preceded by the example of Thomas Carlyle: upon discovering that the manuscript for the first volume of *The French Revolution* had been accidentally used by a housemaid to light the kitchen and parlor fires, Carlyle sat down and painstakingly rewrote the volume from memory. And it is followed by the unlikely partnership of three men (“a cadet, an India-House clerk, and a lawyer’s clerk”) who worked together to comprehend the unknown language of the cuneiform script on the Nineveh tablets (95-97). Each of these accounts reinforces the focus on perseverance that Smiles’ book seeks to drive home. But they also make their point in a style that relies on anecdote and example, and they offer stories of men – Watt, Carlyle, Rawlinson, Norris, and Austen Layard respectively – who, with the exception of Carlyle, would not have generally entered biographical records and certainly would not have done so in the same company.

In this essay I want to consider Samuel Smiles as a biographer. Almost all of Smiles’ twenty books and countless articles engage with biography in one way or another. Indeed, in his preface to Smiles’ *Autobiography*, Thomas Mackay describes Smiles as making a “new departure in biography” (viii). What captivated Smiles, according to Mackay, was the very rhythm and pulse of ordinary life. He recognized “that the everyday work of applied science had its romance. He grasped the fact that the million had become readers, and required to be amused as well as instructed” (viii).

Mackay at once captures Smiles' contribution to a new topic for biography (everyday work) and a new readership (the million). In this paper I will focus primarily on the first half of Mackay's observation in tandem with the stylistic innovations that followed from both his focus on everyday workers and his recognition that his readers were wide and varied. For many, Smiles' repetitive, digressive, anecdotal style has been the subject of critique. For many others, the very popularity of Smiles' self-help thesis has obscured the "new departure in biography" he was charting. I want to put these two points together to ask: how does the form of Smiles' writing – the repetition, the anecdotes, the random moments, the romance – have a bearing on his new departure in biography and his passion for the philosophy of self-help?

On Biography

The nineteenth century has often been referred to as the "Age of Biography" (Atkinson 14): the number of biographies rose exponentially through the century and was capped by the massive *Dictionary of National Biography* begun in 1885 and completed in 1901. In *Lives and Letters* Robert Altick famously writes: "Biography was [...] the literary emblem par excellence of Victorianism." But like many twentieth- and twenty-first-century commentators, Altick was quick to link these biographies with the perceived "hyprocisy and evasiveness" of the period as a whole (289). In the nineteenth century, biographies were critiqued for their excessive length, their poor writing (they often drew inexperienced writers), and their personal violations, even as they were eagerly read, enthusiastically discussed, and circulated and recommended to others. These critiques were extended in later criticism that did not flinch from seeing the genre as a "catastrophic failure."¹ Of course this later criticism was not bound to the implicit codes of reserve by which early writers were guided and, in large part, it was this very reserve in combination with formal inadequacies that was deemed to limit the genre's success.

Juliette Atkinson suggests that Smiles' recognition as a Victorian biographer is surpassed only by Carlyle. Nevertheless, Smiles is rarely referred to in books on Victorian biography. In the passage in which he

discusses Smiles' "new departure in biography," Mackay explains that Smiles self-consciously forgoes the lucrative option of setting up "a factory of biography on a large scale" (ix), preferring instead to rescue "forgotten worthies from oblivion" and to record their "obscure labours" (x). Smiles had defined his own contribution to biography in similar terms in the Preface to *Industrial Biography: Iron Workers and Tool Makers* (1863), written almost ten years after the composition of *Self-Help*: "Without derogating from the biographic claims of those who minister to intellect and taste, those who minister to utility need not be overlooked" (iv). He then makes a passionate plea for recording the lives that would have otherwise "passed into oblivion" (vi) and cites approvingly a mechanic he knew who observed that kings, warriors, and statesmen have monopolized the pages of biography. "There are still many gaps to fill," he concludes, "and the field of Industrial Biography is a wide one" (vi). Smiles may begin to fill the gap of industrial biography, but there are still many gaps for the critic to fill here. For if, as Peter Sinnema puts it in the Introduction to the Oxford edition of *Self-Help*, Smiles sees himself as "the architect of a new biographical mode" (xxvii), how should we understand that mode? Is it related only to new subject matter or does Smiles contribute to biographical form as well? Atkinson suggests that industrial biographies conform to a traditional biographical format; she is certainly right that they often borrow from the legitimacy of traditional biography to attract readers. But these biographies, and especially *Self-Help*, are also studies in experiments of form, experiments that have been eclipsed in the criticism by Smiles' focus on new subject matter. Further, and not surprisingly, these experiments arguably develop out of the new subject matter itself; they are in many ways indebted to the new industrial modes of work and subjectivity. At the same time, interestingly, they are also in tension with some of the central tenets of Smiles' self-help philosophy itself.

As many critics have noted, the rise of nineteenth-century biography parallels the rise of the *idea* of the individual subject.² And one particularly charismatic version of this subject is the hero. Carlyle's *On Heroes and Hero-Worship* made a lasting impression on Smiles as it did on so many others, and Carlyle's oft-cited phrase "the History of the World is but the

Biography of great men” (32) contributed to biography understood in exemplary terms. In part, the critique of nineteenth-century biographies stems from this focus on heroism and the desire to avoid any details that might damage or be unfair to the biographical subject. James Eli Adams, for example, notes the tension between exemplarity and reality: it is hard to find biographical subjects free from moral blemishes. But limitations to biography are not just about the avoidance of individual flaws and faults; they are also, as Smiles notes above, about the avoidance of certain sorts of lives, lives that do not “count” in the prevailing biographical record. It is to this less epic form of heroism that Smiles turns. He revised Carlyle’s understanding of heroism to embrace instead everyday accomplishments; he wanted to acknowledge, he wrote, a “heroism of skill and toil” (Preface, *Industrial* iv). This heroism of skill and toil was often related to collective undertakings and joint projects and in this sense Smiles departed from his period’s biographical norms. As my opening anecdote illustrates, he was alert to the fact that the cuneiform alphabet could not be cracked by one person alone but required a team directing their energies toward a common effort.

With their focus on individuals, biographies also tended to adopt what Timothy Peltason refers to as narratives of “crisis and recovery” (360; see also David Amigoni). While Adams does not discount the crisis and recovery narrative (and indeed offers Wordsworth, Mill, and Ruskin as examples of it), he casts nineteenth-century biography in broader terms, describing the genre as “a model of moral struggle, of figures who triumphed over – or, occasionally were paralyzed by – the distinctive social and spiritual challenges of the age.” It was a good form, he continues, “for probing relations between individuals and the social order” (Adams 16). Smiles’ biographies, however, do not often capitalize on the game-changing moments of the “crisis and recovery” narrative and they are not typically accounts of “moral struggle” in any traditional sense. The longer biographies do, to be sure, follow a chronological narrative that is somewhat developmental, but their focus veers away from dominant nineteenth-century traditions. The reason for Smiles’ avoidance of the crisis narrative

is clear: his focus is on application, diligence, and perseverance, qualities that are not consistent with, or at least not supported by, sudden insight and abrupt changes in direction.

In recent years there have been many rethinkings of Victorian biography not just in terms of twentieth-century developments (in the context of which Victorian biographers, with their reserve and refusal to enter too closely into personal matters, typically fell short) but also in terms of how we categorize the Victorians. In his edited *Life Writing and Victorian Culture* (2006), for example, Amigoni embraces a much broader array of generic forms and writers to expand the purview of what counts as Victorian biography and autobiography. Atkinson's *Victorian Biography Reconsidered* (2010) revives an interest in the biographies of what she calls "obscure" or "hidden" lives. She dedicates a significant section to the very area that Smiles opened up for inquiry – industrial biography – and suggests that, contra prevailing critical views, there is a much larger canon of such works than previously suspected. Both of these works, and others, offer a welcome expansion of the critical field, but the form and style of Smiles' work continues to escape focused attention.

On *Self-Help*

How do we position Smiles within the tradition of biography and, especially, how are we to understand Mackay's sense of his "new departure in biography"? His oeuvre, as noted above, is comprised mainly of biographies. And *Self-Help* as many have noted is "in essence a series of brief lives" (Adams 16). It was also the success of Smiles' first full-length biography, *The Life of George Stephenson* (1857) that made the publication of *Self-Help* possible. *Self-Help* was quickly followed by *Brief Biographies* (1860), *Lives of the Engineers* (1862), *Industrial Biography* (1863) (the preface to which makes a case for the genre of the industrial biography as noted above), and *Boulton and Watt* (1865). The mid-1870s witnessed another grouping of biographies: the second edition of *Lives of the Engineers* (with two additional volumes to bring it to a total of five) (1874), *Life of a Scotch Naturalist: Thomas Edward* (1876) (deemed by Atkinson

as Smiles' best biography), *George Moore, Merchant and Philanthropist* (1878) and, in the same year, *Robert Dick, Baker of Thurso, Geologist and Botanist*. And finally the 1880s brought biographies on James Nasmyth, John Murray, Jasmin [Jacques Bo  ], and Josiah Wedgwood as well as two collections of smaller biographies, all of which were capped by Smiles' *Autobiography* published in 1905, the year after his death. Indeed, Mackay's description of Smiles as "the chronicler of the men who founded the industrial greatness of England" (vii) is surely apt.

With *Self-Help* Smiles introduces a biographical format that will continue to inform his later biographies. It is this format that, Tim Travers argues, makes *Self-Help* a "confusing book to read" (187). It is helpful here to turn to Smiles' own comments on his use of biography in this book. In the first chapter of *Self-Help* Smiles exhorts his readers to live rather than read and he elevates character over biography. But biographies, he grudgingly admits, can help to foster a form of living that is at the heart of his book:

Biographies of great, but especially of good men, are nevertheless most instructive and useful, as helps, guides, and incentives to others. Some of the best are almost equivalent to gospels – teaching high living, high thinking, and energetic action for their and the world's good. The valuable examples which they furnish of the power of self-help, of patient purpose, resolute working, and steadfast integrity, issuing in the formation of a truly noble and manly character, exhibit in language not to be misunderstood, what it is in the power of each to accomplish himself. (21)

Smiles clearly aspires to write those biographies that are among "the best," competing, indeed, with scripture itself. His focus on biography as an exemplary genre is consistent with prevailing views of the day. The biography here is seen as at once a lesson and an inspiration.

This passage is preceded by a section on the merits of biographies of lesser known lives that in many ways anticipates both the Finale to *Middlemarch* and Smiles' own introduction to *Industrial* cited above:

But our progress has always been owing to multitudes of smaller and less known men. Though only the generals' names may be remembered in the history of any great campaign, it has been in a great measure through the individual valour and heroism of the privates that victories have been won. And life, too, is 'a soldiers' battle,' – men in the ranks having in all times been amongst the greatest of workers. Many are the lives of men unwritten, which have nevertheless as powerfully influenced civilization and progress as the more fortunate Great whose names are recorded in biography. (20)

It is clear that the lives Smiles most wants to champion are precisely those that are "unwritten." He grants, of course, that generals and public figures have contributed to the fabric of the nation but their stories have long been told. It is time to turn to all those lives that contribute to national progress in smaller, but equally essential, ways. Taken together, these two passages, arising as they do in the first few pages of Smiles' book, make a case for the importance of biography, and biographies of unwritten lives, in particular, as examples and spurs, in shaping national identity. They prepare the reader for a "new departure in biography" insofar as they imply that *Self-Help* will address new industrial subjects. But they do not suggest any formal departures. For that we have to turn to Smiles' Prefaces to *Self-Help*.

In the first Preface (1859) Smiles notes the book's origin in a speech he gave to workers who sought inspiration that would be useful to their lives. The speech was a success and over the years he began "to add to the memoranda" and "to note down occasionally in his leisure evening moments, the results of such reading, observation, and experience of life, as he conceived to bear upon it" (8). He wrote Stephenson's biography in this way – through a patchwork accumulation of recorded notes – and "the present volume is written in a similar spirit" (8). He closes with a brief apology for the brevity of the biographies in *Self-Help*, "being busts rather than full-length portraits" (8). The second Preface (1866) was written in the wake of the enormous popularity of the first edition. The busts are now an

asset rather than a liability. The book enjoyed such a wider readership, Smiles speculates, “by reason of the variety of anecdotal illustrations of life and character which it contains” (3). Its “fragmentary character,” he reminds us, follows “from the manner in which [the book] was for the most part originally composed, – having been put together principally from jottings made during many years” (3). He acknowledges that there may have been “superfluous material” (3), now pruned, in the original volume but does not otherwise note what has been a frequent observation, if not complaint, of critics of recent years: its repetition. The majority of the remainder of the Preface is addressed to one of the most prominent critiques in the contemporary reception: the book’s focus on the success of its subjects rather than their failures.

The characteristics that Smiles attributes to his book – its anecdotal style, its fragmentary form, its qualified superfluity – have been echoed by more recent critics, often in less generous terms. Fielden describes *Self-Help* in terms of its “endless repetition” (160), Sinnema refers to its “loose structure and repetitive format” (xvi-xviii), and Tyrell notes that Smiles “recycled his own writings repeatedly” (196). The anecdotal, fragmentary, and repetitive style invites a non-progressive or interrupted reading practice on which critics also comment. Comparing Smiles to Richard Cobden, Fielden writes: “Smiles, a less keen mind, with less ordered thoughts, wrote diffuse books that positively begged to be opened at random” (176). *Self-Help* lends itself to “casual dipping,” Sinnema similarly remarks. “One can open Smiles’ text at virtually any page and come away with a pithy adage” (xvii). In this context, critics often suggest that Smiles intended his book to be read like the Bible, a suggestion that is supported by the comparison Smiles himself makes above between good biography and scripture. Smiles’ “tautological style,” Sinnema further writes, “is essential to self-help as both a doctrine and a way of living: Smiles’ ‘message’ needs to be driven home time and again, in much the same way as he insists that only the formation of good habits will ennoble the character. The progress of the self is a forward momentum achieved through habit rather than understanding” (xiii). But the form of Smiles’ biographies have not otherwise received

sustained attention. In the remainder of this essay, however, I want to address the form of *Self-Help*, and Smiles' "new departure in biography," in general, as a response to industrial modernity. His books are written within the constraints of new models of industrial work as they, at the same time, shape the industrial subject. That is, it is not just the subject matter – the new industrial worker and the work that he and (less often she) does – but also the way in which that subject matter is presented that defines Smiles biographical innovations.

On Habit and Attention: James Watt's Biography in *Self-Help*

To address Smiles' form I will trace a single biographical thread through *Self-Help*: the life of James Watt. As noted above, Smiles greatly admired Watt, inventor of the steam engine, not only for his tenacity and ability to overcome obstacles but also for what Smiles called his "habit of attention." Together with George Stephenson, Watt also appealed to Smiles for his position on what we might think of as the cutting edge of industrial modernity. Smiles gained his writing fame through his account of Stephenson's life, and Watt was also centrally featured in Smiles' work, most centrally in the long chapter in *Industrial Biographies* and in *Watt and Boulton*. In *Self-Help* Watt is referenced fourteen times. The longest section is comprised of a two-and-a-half-page short biography in the "Leaders of Industry" chapter; the other references, some of several sentences, occur on single pages. I will turn to the longest section first; it is the second of the fourteen entries.

As is often the case, Smiles begins his biography of Watt with what sounds more like a biography of a thing – the steam engine – than a person. He writes that the steam engine's origins date back "many centuries" and that it has developed slowly "over many generations" (39). As is also often the case, its final success is the product "of many men and many minds" (38) rather than a single visionary genius. "Grouped around it [the steam engine]," Smiles writes, "we find Savary, the military engineer; Newcomen, the Dartmouth blacksmith; Cawley, the glazier; Potter, the engine boy; Smeaton, the civil engineer; and, towering above all, the laborious, patient,

never-tiring James Watt, the mathematical instrument maker” (39). This list is striking not only for its insistence on the collective endeavor that made up the steam-engine project but also for the people it names, people whose jobs hitherto typically remained unrecorded and unacknowledged in the historical record. This focus on a joint project is reinforced on the following page when Smiles reminds his reader that Watt could not have realized his invention without Matthew Boulton (40) and reinforced once again when he reminds his reader that Stephenson could not have perfected the railway locomotive without Watt. Further examples accumulate in the pages that follow.

In the beginning of the short biography Smiles singles out one trait to which he attributes much of Watt’s success:

[Watt] cultivated carefully that habit of active attention on which all of the higher working qualities of the mind mainly depend. Indeed, Mr Edgeworth entertained the opinion, that the difference of intellect in men depends more upon the early cultivation of this *habit of attention*, than upon any great disparity between the powers of one individual and another. (39)

This comment is consonant with the many places in which Smiles seeks to downplay genius and special “powers” in favor of perseverance, diligence, application, and, here, attention. Attention, habit, and work are, of course, in many ways interconnected. “It is no coincidence,” Stephen Arata writes, “that attention emerges as an object of inquiry during a period when new forms of industrial production were transforming the conditions and experiences of work” (196). The rise of factories and new forms of industrial work produced the tedious work that, as Arata puts it, required attention “but fostered *inattention*” (196). Smiles, however, is drawn to figures who, in the face of mechanical work, monotony, and dull routine, still notice – are attentive to – connections that enable innovation.

Sinnema offers a handy summary of the narrative form of Smiles’ biographies as follows:

(a) early years and influences (often accompanied by predications of failure and a lack of discernible talent in the young apprentice); (b) adversity, usually represented by state oppression or public aggression, but sometimes by mechanical-breakdown; (c) perseverance in the face of these seeming insurmountable obstacles; (d) success, honorific and/or financial, occasionally in the form of posthumous recognition. (xxvii)

Smiles' brief account of Watt follows each of these features. Watt was unpromising at school; he encountered adversity with respect to realizing his vision for the steam engine but he persisted; and he was successful in the end. This short section with its formulaic biography, as noted above, is augmented by thirteen additional references to Watt in *Self-Help*. I turn to them now with an eye to their impact on Smiles' form and especially his much-noted tendencies toward fragmentation, anecdotes, repetition, and discontinuous reading. For if Sinnema's formulaic summary reflects the chronology of Watt's life, it does not reflect the form through which Smiles recounts it.

The first reference to Watt is in the first chapter of *Self-Help* in which Smiles introduces a theme that persists throughout his work: "Great men of science, literature, and art [...] have belonged to no exclusive class nor rank in life [...] they have come from the huts of the poor man and the mansions of the rich" (23). What follows, however, are several pages of examples that lean much more toward the huts of the poor man (and artisan) than the mansions of the rich. Great men emerge from backgrounds as diverse as barber's shops, day laborers, weavers, tailors, butchers, tinkers, and so on. Watt is included in this coverage as the "maker of mathematical instruments" (23). That is, Watt, like others, serves as an example of the general rule that Smiles seeks to demonstrate. Indeed, in the conclusion to this section on social mobility he notes that the examples of those who "have raised themselves from the humblest ranks of industry" are now "so numerous that they have long ceased to be regarded as exceptional" (28) and, more, "it might almost be said that early encounter with difficulty and

adverse circumstances was the necessary and indispensable condition of success” (28). While the adversity that Watt endured was vaguely presented in the short extended biography, here it takes the form of a challenging class background.

The third reference refers to people who tried to steal Watt and Boulton’s idea for the steam engine, amplifying a point also raised in passing in the short extended biography (44). The example of perseverance with which I opened this paper is the fourth reference. In the fifth reference Smiles returns to the issue of attention, here focalized as “observation” (110). Figures like Watt, Smiles argues, find significance in “the most familiar and simple facts” and “their greatness” consists “mainly in their wise interpretation of them” (110). Sir Samuel Brown, for example, had been interested in the construction of bridges and happened one day upon “a tiny spider’s net suspended across his path”; from this he devised the suspension bridge. Smiles continues: “So James Watt, when consulted about the mode of carrying water by pipes under the Clyde, along the unequal bed of the river, turned his attention one day to the shell of a lobster presented at table; and from that model he invented an iron tube, which, when laid down, was found effectually to answer the purpose” (111). And in a list of ordinary things leading to insight and opportunity: “Watt made his first model of the condensing steam-engine out of an old anatomist’s syringe, used to inject the arteries previous to dissection” (114). In these and other references, Smiles turns his “habit of attention” to productive ends. But the lengthy lists in which these examples are embedded try the readers’ own habit of attention; there are often ten or more examples on a single page, each linked to others (or not) in myriad ways.

The next reference turns to the most productive and economical use of time. Again Smiles bundles many examples together, of which Watt is one, to demonstrate the importance of seizing “odd moments” as they arise. “Watt taught himself chemistry and mechanics while working at his trade of a mathematical-instrument maker, at the same time that he was learning German from a Swiss dyer” (118). The “odds and ends of time” all add up, Smiles genially reminds his reader (118). Darwin composed all of his

writing “on little scraps of paper” while driving on errands (118). “Daguesseau, one of the great Chancellors of France, by carefully working up his odd bits of time, wrote a bulky and able volume in the successive intervals of waiting for dinner” (119). Madame de Genlis wrote several volumes while waiting for her student to arrive. The blacksmith, Elihu Burritt, learned “eighteen ancient and modern languages, and twenty-two European dialects” through his careful cultivation of “fragments of time, called ‘odd moments’” (119). And so on.

The second-to-last example relates to failure, a theme to which Smiles often returned: “Watt the engineer said, of all things most wanted in mechanical engineering was a history of failures: ‘We want,’ he said, ‘a book of blots’” (280). “It is not ease, but effort – not facility, but difficulty, that makes men” (280). This point returns us to the question of adversity and the benefits it brings if tackled with perseverance. And the last reference stresses that “it is never too late to learn”: when Watt was around forty “he learnt French, German, and Italian to enable himself to peruse the valuable works on mechanical philosophy which existed in those languages” (292).

It is the penultimate reference, however, that perhaps gets closest to the point I want to make here. Smiles describes the artist Chantrey and the bust he made of Smiles:

the pocket-book which accompanied him [Chantrey] on his Italian tour contained mingled notes on art, records of daily expenses, and the current prices of marble. His tastes were simple, and he made his finest subjects great by the mere force of simplicity. His statue of Watt, in Handsworth church, seems to us the very consummation of art; yet it is perfectly artless and simple. (158)

The eclectic range of recorded items in Chantrey’s pocket-book reflects Smiles’ own writing practice. It is little wonder, given his appreciation for the “artless and simple,” that he was so often drawn to feats of mechanical engineering that often in a single inspired move brought together their component parts to become, as Smiles says of the steam engine, a “marvelous machine” (39).

On Industrial Biography, Railways, and Biographical Form

Taken together, these references to Watt illustrate the anecdotal, fragmented, and repetitive approach that Smiles brings to his biographies in *Self-Help*. But how do they contribute to our comprehension of Smiles' new departure in biography overall? As most critics of Smiles are quick to acknowledge, his works were a product of his times. While not everyone would agree with Asa Briggs's assessment that Smiles was one of the period's "most important propagandists" (124) and that his works promoted the development of "a special kind of character" appropriate to the needs of the day, they would likely agree that Smiles was in step with the tempo of his time. His enormous popularity certainly supports such views.

As Smiles knew well, workers under industrial modernity did not have the time for sustained reading over long periods of time. In the examples noted above in relation to Watt – and in many others – Smiles applauds the worker who capitalizes on the few free hours that are available to read, write, learn languages, invent, or otherwise contribute to the productivity and progress of the nation. As we have seen, Smiles himself wrote his books from the collected "jottings" he accumulated over the years. It is but a simple step from this process to imagining both a form of writing that embraces a similar randomness and a new reading public for whom this randomness resonates. The anecdotes, after all, work well for the reader who only has small pockets of time between shifts at work. The repetitions serve to remind the interrupted reader of where she or he was and the person about whom she or he reads (consider Smiles' many references to Watt as a "mathematical instrument maker" above). In this sense, the form is not simply annoying or the sign of a "less keen mind," as Fielden puts it, but rather a carefully crafted attempt to draw in readers who would not, perhaps, be able to read a single volume from beginning to end. Importantly, it also fuses these readers to other luminary figures in whose company they may not otherwise imagine themselves. If Watt shares qualities with Carlyle, then so too may they. Smiles is democratic, in other words, not only because he extends the purview of the biography (as has oft been noted) but also because he puts different classes together in the same conversation, on the

same page, with the same value. In a period when factory work was on the rise, Smiles delivers his self-help message in a format perfectly adapted to his expanded readership.

But here something curious happens. For what has happened to Smiles' message itself? What has happened to the "habit of attention"? What has happened to perseverance? *Self-Help* seems to be written not for the attentive mind but for the distracted mind. Indeed, one might argue that *Self-Help* completely defies any idea of perseverance, application, and attention to make its points instead by repetition, short anecdotes, and compelling fragments. And what happens to biography as the developmental history of a life? For there is nothing *developed* about these narratives. *Self-Help*, with its disjointed, rambling style, and tendency toward lists, discourages continuous reading. Indeed if one reads it through, as I have done, the experience is somewhat wearying as the redundancies pile up, and Smiles' jumps and leaps make it hard to follow any sort of narrative line. This is a very different approach to biographical form. Smiles' new departure in biography, indeed, is not only a new departure in biographical writing but also a new departure in relation to what it means to have a life. The clash between Smiles' focus on perseverance and the narrative form that understands its impossibility under industrial conditions captures the difficulty of articulating a new formula equal to the challenges of these new conditions. Smiles' own stroke from overwork in 1871 is a grim reminder of just what the cost may be.

A different approach to Smiles' new departure in biography emerges out of one of the central symbols of industrial modernity: the railway. As Briggs notes, Smiles was keenly attuned to the fact that he was writing for a new, more dynamic, more mobile society, in which people no longer stayed in one place all their lives (126). This mobility was true for Smiles himself and it was also coupled with his lifelong interest in railways. In 1845 Smiles took a position as a secretary at the Leeds and Thirsk Railway. This position brought him, finally, a measure of financial security to which many have attributed the shift in his political allegiances. It was followed in 1854 by a post as secretary of the South-Eastern Railway in London.

Indeed, one might argue that Smiles' writing is as informed by railways as it is by biographies. The first pages of Stephenson's biography are a paean to the railway.³ Smiles wrote *Railway Property: Its Conditions and Prospects* in 1849; he wrote several railway articles for the *Quarterly Review* in 1858; and he returned to railways throughout his career in myriad forms. Always an ardent advocate of railways, he writes that they are the "most magnificent system of public intercommunication that has yet been given to the world" (*George* vi). In *Railway Property* he refers to the "splendid advantages of railways": "the impulse they have given to civilization," he continues, "by their distribution of the products of labour and of thought, with a speed, regularity, and economy, is altogether unprecedented in the world's history" (8). Positioned as Smiles was at the heart of railway innovation, it is hardly surprising that this new industrial system might inform the style and structure of his many books. Consider the ways in which the narrative lines move in many different directions, intercutting with one another, stalling, arriving, departing, and then criss-crossing again. Certainly the structure of *Self-Help* seems to more closely conform to a system of interconnecting railway tracks than to the progress of a singular developmental narrative moving from "here to there." In this context, we could see the biographies not as progressive life stories but as switch points catalyzing signal moments that Smiles seeks to communicate.

The vast railway network that Smiles celebrates might then find its narrative parallel in a book of equally unbounded, exuberant, intense, and disruptive energy. One can easily imagine a reader on a train, sitting by the window or standing in the aisle, with Smiles' book propped open, by turns looking at the passing scenery, speaking to his or her interlocutor, and reading the well-paced instructional and amusing anecdotes in *Self-Help*. Smiles gave "romance" to everyday life – and especially to industrial life – in a form appropriate to its rhythms. The uneasy relationship between Smiles' interrupted form and his promotion of perseverance, among other tensions, may be a by-product of his effort to keep pace with the monumental social, political, and technological changes in his period. In this

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essay I have focused primarily on *Self-Help*. But more studies of Smiles' biographies as a whole will enable us to gain a better appreciation of the full complexity of his "new departure in biography" and his prescient sense of the forms best adapted to modernity in general.

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Notes

¹ This citation is from Harold Nicolson (cited in Atkinson 1). For detailed coverage of the negative response to Victorian biography see Atkinson and Caine.

² See especially Regenia Gagnier.

³ Indeed, the first line of this biography reads: "The invention of the Locomotive Engine and its application to the workings of Railways, is one of the most remarkable events of the present century" (iii).

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