

BIOGRAPHICAL INTRODUCTION,

BY THE LATE

SIR THOMAS DICK LAUDER, BART. OF GRANGE AND
FOUNTAINHALL.

It is natural that we should desire to know something of the personal history of any individual from whose works we have derived gratification ; and as we are led to believe that no one can have been acquainted with the productions of Mr Geikie's pencil without having been gratified, we feel ourselves called upon to give a short outline of his biography.

WALTER GEIKIE, the eldest son of Mr Archibald Geikie, perfumer, was born in Charles Street, George Square, Edinburgh, on the 9th November 1795. When nearly two years old, he was attacked by a nervous fever ; and the joy which his parents experienced from his ultimate recovery was sadly alloyed by the conviction, which soon came upon them, that the disease had destroyed his auricular organs, and that, consequently, their son was doomed to be ever afterwards deaf and dumb. Whilst this calamity proved to be a great though not an insurmountable obstacle to his education, it very much heightened the interest which he excited in all who knew him. He was nine years of age before his anxious father began to attempt to teach him to know the letters of the alphabet, and to understand their use and value ; yet, by his own indefatigable exertion, aided by the eager attention which his pupil paid to his instructions, he soon succeeded in enabling him to read ; and as the boy took especial pleasure in this acquirement, and, consequently, lost no opportunity of availing himself of it, he not only very speedily perused a great many books, but he daily exhibited so rapid an increase of intelligence, as to afford the most pregnant proof that he read with profit. This difficulty being overcome, the task of teaching him writing and arithmetic became more easy ; and Mr Cathcart of Drum, and some other philanthropic gentlemen, having about that time invited the celebrated Mr Braidwood to come from London, he opened an institution in Edinburgh for the instruction of the deaf and dumb, to which young Geikie was sent, at an expense to his father of nine guineas a quarter. The boy remained there, with great advantage to himself, till Mr Braidwood left Edinburgh, when the care and superintendence of his education again

devolved upon his affectionate and conscientious parent. So great had been young Geikie's progress before he went to this deaf and dumb school, and so keenly did he devote himself to his studies under Mr Braidwood whilst there, that his proficiency soon induced that gentleman to employ him more in the capacity of a monitor than as a pupil. Inflamed with an intense thirst for knowledge, his desire to preserve the information which he gathered induced him very early to adopt a practice which he ever steadily continued through life, of writing down those passages which most pleased or interested him in the authors he read, in order that he might the more perfectly fix them in his mind, and at the same time acquire a greater degree of familiarity with the varieties of style and the excellences of language.

Having had the good fortune to be born and nursed in a family which was strictly Christian, and where the utmost attention was paid to every moral and religious duty, he early acquired a strong reverence for both; and although his works and his whole life proved that his disposition was naturally replete with sportive imagination, broad humour, and innocent mirth, he was at all times filled with the warmest piety, and with the utmost veneration for that faith in which he was a sincere believer, and he had the firmest reliance in those promises of salvation which it holds out. During the later years of his life, the Bible, and such works as were calculated to elucidate sacred Scripture, were his daily study. His favourite authors were, 'Doddridge's Harmony and Exposition of the New Testament,' and Barnes's 'Notes' thereon. From his early domestic instruction, and his continued perusal of such writings, he acquired an extremely clear and correct knowledge of the Gospel; indeed, he became so perfectly master of scriptural lore, that he was enabled to expound it with great perspicuity to others. Associated with two of his friends, who laboured under the same organic deprivation as himself, he established a religious meeting of the deaf and dumb, to whom he was in the habit of delivering, on Sundays, sermons or lectures of his own composition, and explaining the Scriptures by means of the usual signs on the fingers which are employed by the deaf and dumb as a medium of verbal communication. We can hardly conceive a more gratifying and affecting spectacle than that which must have been afforded by such a scene as this, where so many unfortunate people were assembled together, not for the purpose of repining that they had been deprived of the important blessings of hearing and speech, possessed by mankind in general, but to manifest their love and gratitude to God for all those other mercies which he permitted them to enjoy. The hands which thus communicated the knowledge and truth of salvation to those who had no other channel through which they could receive them than that afforded by their eyes, are now, alas, mouldering in the dust; but it is gratifying to think that this most praiseworthy practice, which was so well begun by Mr Geikie, is still kept up, chiefly, we believe, under the management of Mr Blackwood.

Geikie's turn for the art which he afterwards so eagerly practised, was first manifested, whilst he was yet a child, by his infantine attempts to cut out in paper representations of the objects which came within his observation. He began also, from his earliest youth, to sketch figures with chalk on floors and walls; and from these attempts he gradually advanced to the employment of pencils and paper. Having once acquired the use of these implements, he made frequent sallies from the city into the outskirts, where, with the fullest enjoyment, he would fill his sketch-book with picturesque subjects of every description, animate as well as inanimate. Often has our informant accompanied him whilst on such rambles, and frequently has he stood beside the young artist, where, perched upon a wall, or some other elevated place out of reach of danger from wheeled vehicles, he would busy

himself with his pencil in catching, with all that truth and accuracy so uniformly displayed by his sketches, those traits of feature and of character, with the union and combination of which his genius afterwards so luxuriantly recreated itself throughout his whole life. Observing that his bias was thus so unequivocally manifested, his father was desirous to give it every encouragement ; and, accordingly, when Geikie was about the age of fourteen, he was sent to study under Mr Patrick Gibson, and in May of the year 1812 he was admitted into the drawing academy established by the Honourable the Commissioners of the Board of Trustees for the Encouragement of Scottish Manufactures—a school which has been the nursery of so many artists who have done honour to Scotland, and through whose works the taste displayed in the industrial arts has been so much improved. Geikie's admission as a pupil there proves that by that time he must have made considerable progress as a draughtsman, for the candidates for admission are always numerous, and each of them being compelled to produce drawings done 'bona fide' by his own hand, these are strictly examined, and the vacant stools of the class are given to those young men whose works are of greatest promise. Although the Board did not then possess the magnificent gallery of casts from ancient statues, busts, &c., which it has since collected, yet Geikie enjoyed the high advantage of drawing under the direction of Mr Graham, who then held the chair of its valuable school. The attention which he paid to the instructions of this able master was productive of the greatest benefit to him, as was soon rendered apparent by the remarkable degree of dexterity of pencil which he very speedily acquired ; and this was all the more promoted by the indefatigable perseverance with which he continued to follow out his favourite pursuit of sketching from real objects in the open air. Being continually on the watch for characteristic subjects for his pencil, all those figures or groups that peculiarly pleased his fancy were immediately transferred with unerring accuracy to his portfolio ; and, indeed, so great was the facility and rapidity with which he used his crayon, that it was by no means an uncommon thing for him to catch the contour of odd figures or of remarkable features, together with all the raciness of character which they exhibited, whilst he was walking by the side of the originals in the streets.

An anecdote regarding one individual who makes a very conspicuous appearance among the characters to be found in his etchings, is worth relating, as an example of the difficulties he encountered, and the risks to which he was sometimes exposed in his attempts to gratify the ardent desire he had to collect the portraits of such people whom he saw in the street, whose figures, features, or general appearance were of a description calculated to strike his humorous fancy. The man to whom we now allude was a porter in the Grassmarket, somewhat pot-bellied, and with that projection and hang of the nether lip, and elevation of nose, that gives to the human countenance a certain air of vulgar importance. In this subject it seemed to say 'Though I'm a porter, I'm no fool.' Geikie had made various attempts to get sufficiently near this man to sketch his figure and physiognomy. Day after day he haunted his intended victim, without obtaining the least chance of him. At length, however, he thought he had caught a favourable opportunity. But he had hardly taken out his sketch-book from his pocket, and sharpened his pencil, when the porter, perceiving him and suspecting his intentions, immediately moved away, and plunged into the crowded market. Like a young Highland sportsman, who wishes to get a shot at an old fox who may have dodged into cover, Geikie, with his pencil and paper in hand, prowled about, now worming his way through the crowd after his prey, and now stealing around the outskirts of it, watching for a glimpse of him. The porter all this time was on his guard, and took especial care to keep behind some knot of farmers or corn-

dealers, so as to defy the attempts of his young persecutor, until at last, when the market began to thin, and his hopes of defeating the foul intention against him ebbed away with the lessening crowd, he lost all patience, and abused and threatened his tormentor with great fury both of words and of action. The first were of course lost upon the poor deaf lad, although there was no mistaking the meaning shake of the porter's mutton fist. But as this only threw his subject into a more tempting attitude, the artist's fervour for his art rendered him utterly regardless of consequences; and he proceeded to the exercise of his pencil with the utmost enthusiasm. This so enraged the porter, that, roaring like an infuriated bull, he rushed at him to give him immediate chastisement; and before Geikie had time to apply the point of the pencil to the paper, he was obliged to fly to save his bones from being beaten to a mummy. Though well built for carrying weight, the porter was of a mould that rendered him anything but fit for racing; and as Geikie had by much the heels of him, he stopped every now and then, as he fled, like a Parthian, up the Grass-market, to have a shot behind him with his pencil at his pursuer, who was puffing, and blowing, and labouring after him. But this only the more excited the fury of the porter, and made him strain every nerve to catch him; so that not only could Geikie make no use of the drawing implements which he carried in his hand, but the porpus in pursuit of him so pressed upon him, that he in his turn was compelled to look out for some place into which he could escape for temporary shelter. Fortunately an open stair, common to the doors of all the various inhabitants who occupied its respective flats, most opportunely presented itself. Into this he rushed, and the porter conceiving that he had retreated into some of the dwellings it contained, halted in the street opposite to it, and putting his arms behind him, under the tails of his coat, stood panting and heaving till he recovered his breath, with a full resolution of waiting till his enemy should venture forth from that which he believed might be merely a temporary place of concealment in the house of some acquaintance. Now was the time for Geikie, and he was not the man to lose it. Fortunately there was a window in the first flat of the common stair, through which he had a most perfect view of his subject, though its dirt-begrimed panes of glass completely concealed his own figure from view. With a few touches of his powerful crayon, he very quickly made the man his own property. This was all very well, but how was he to escape from the porter, who still continued to stand doggedly, like a sentry on his post, surveying all the windows of the huge tenement, long after Geikie would have most willingly seen him relieved from it. There was no alternative for the poor artist but to remain a prisoner in the common stair until the porter should give up his watch; and this he did not do for some hours, until his patience being at last exhausted, or some job occurring to his mind that called him away, he slowly and unwillingly retired, grumbling as he went, cursing the object of his wrath, and vowing vengeance; and then, Geikie stealing forth from his hiding-place, hurried homewards as fast as he could run, and without once looking over his shoulder. We may mention that the reader will find the hero of this anecdote made use of by Geikie in the plate entitled "Street Auctioneer." He is the fifth figure from the left, and is, it will be observed, in the act of consulting his old-fashioned chronometer.

The continual exercise which Geikie's graphic powers thus underwent had a very great influence on his subsequent excellence and dexterity as a draughtsman, whilst his ceaseless occupation in hunting after such odd figures as were most fitted for his purpose, naturally led him into those very scenes where they were most abundantly met with, and had thus the additional effect of fixing him in his favourite style, as well as of sharpening

those perceptive powers with which nature had so liberally furnished him, for the full comprehension, discrimination, and appreciation of all its varieties. His collection of sketches of figures and of groups was immense. Many of these were disposed of by private sale after his death, when part of them were purchased by Mr James Gibson-Craig, and the greater number by Mr Bindon Blood; and we believe that they are still in the possession of these gentlemen. But this of figure-sketching was not the only department of his art to which he devoted himself. Although he rarely afterwards painted landscape to any great extent, except in pictures where it was subsidiary to his groups and figures, when his efforts were by no means always successful, he drew a great deal from nature in that way. As his love for "his own romantic town" was always extremely warm, his subjects of this description were chiefly taken in and about its environs. There was not a hill or eminence of any importance in the whole vicinity of Edinburgh, from which he did not, at one time or other, make an extensive panoramic view of the city and its surrounding country, and that with a degree of accuracy and minuteness which few could have equalled.

He was no sooner initiated into the mysteries of the pallet, than he became enthusiastically attached to it; and he yielded himself fully up to all the fascinations of oil painting. But here his ardour was in a short time cooled by the discovery which forced itself upon him, that he was by no means so successful in acquiring the art of colouring as he had been in obtaining a proficiency in drawing, and in gaining expertness in catching the traits of character. He had proved his excellence with regard to these parts of his study, and he had also shown that he was not deficient in grouping; but his colouring was cold and inharmonious. Mr Andrew Wilson, who succeeded Mr Graham in the chair of the Academy of the Board of Manufactures, took an extreme interest in the young deaf and dumb artist, invited him to call on him with his pictures, and gave him many private instructions in regard to colouring; but although he thus succeeded in enabling Geikie to produce some individual pieces that were rather of a better description than the rest, yet he could never impart to him such a knowledge of colours as might have insured to him anything like a certainty of perfection in that part of his art. It is probable that this arose from that physical defect in the eye, as regards a true perception and estimation of colour, which produces similar faults in greater masters. But however this may be, certain it is that Geikie's pictures, though well enough handled, were generally devoid of warmth and harmony, as well as in "chiaro-scuro;" and although he never failed to be fully sensible of his deficiency in these respects, the moment that his pictures were brought into juxtaposition with the works of other masters who were blessed with happier powers in these particulars, and who consequently painted in proper tone, yet he never could succeed in amending this imperfection. A few of his pictures, indeed, were less objectionable as to colour, especially those in which he confined himself to groups of figures, and avoided landscape; and among those we may mention "All-Hallow Fair," the "Grassmarket," and "Itinerant Fiddlers," which were painted for the late Earl of Hopetoun, to whom the artist had been introduced by Mr Andrew Wilson, for the purpose of painting his lordship's favourite horse. These pictures are in the collection at Hopetoun House.

Geikie was elected an Associate of the Scottish Academy in 1831, and a Fellow of the same body in 1834.

The truth and readiness of Geikie's pencil being ill supported by the powers of his brush, owing to his physical inaptitude for good colouring, it was no wonder that he should have naturally taken a strong affection for the etching tool, by the employment of which he was enabled to prove the existence of those talents which he possessed in greatest force.

without the risk of being subjected to that unfavourable criticism to which his paintings exposed him. He first tried this most seducing of all occupations to beguile the tedium of the long winter nights, and he pursued it with all that ardour which he invariably displayed in everything that he undertook; and he ultimately became so much devoted to it, that painting ceased in a great degree to be a work of primary consideration with him. His first etching was that of "John Barleycorn," which was executed as a tail-piece to a ballad of that name, in a collection of Scottish ballads published by Mr David Laing. He was afterwards employed by the same gentleman to etch several other plates, some of them for the Bannatyne Club. He published the first fourteen plates that he executed, on his own account; but thinking that they were not finished with sufficient care, he sold them to a gentleman of the trade. Having seen proofs taken from the plates of these etchings as they originally came from Geikie's hand, we have no hesitation in saying that he was unreasonably fastidious regarding them, and that they not only possess all the excellence, the nature, the character, and the spirit for which he was so remarkable, but they exhibit a delicacy of touch and of effect that may in some measure be said to approach to that of Rembrandt. If Geikie was proud of anything he ever did, he was so of the later etchings which he executed; we mean those which are now given in this publication from the original plates, which have remained untouched since they came from his etching tool. Even whilst labouring under those fits of despondency to which he was sometimes subjected, he used to say of these etchings, that those to whom they should come after his death would make more of them than he should ever do during his life—a foreboding which has been but too truly verified. But whilst he said this, he drew a melancholy consolation from the thought that his name might have some chance of endurance by being associated with them; and, ere he changed the subject, he was accustomed to add, "but that will do me little good."

Whilst Geikie's works display generally a wonderful degree of nature, as well as of truth and 'vraisemblance' in the delineation of the national character as it is found to exist among the lower orders of the Scottish people, as well as an individuality that renders them particularly striking, we must confess that we look in vain for those touches of the 'beau ideal' which, like glimpses of sunshine, gild even the humbler characters of Shakspeare, of Scott, or of Burns. But this is a want which has manifestly sprung from the physical obstruction which existed in the most important channel of his information, preventing him from having an opportunity of learning, from his ear, that any such refinement was necessary. As he was thus just so much the more confined to the exercise of his eye, the nature from which he drew was, on that very account, more truly and racily represented. We can less readily account for the absence of all grace from his figures, however, and especially from his young women, for, with regard to them, we think that nature might herself have been his teacher. But whilst we do not pretend to defend him in these particulars, we believe that we shall be supported by the general opinion of all those who know his works, in the assertion, that, laying aside the faults of his colouring, he is entitled by his other qualities, and especially by the broad humour which he exhibits, to be classed as the Teniers or the Ostade of the Scottish school.

Geikie was remarkable for the excellence and amiability of his disposition. Unlike the generality of those who are afflicted with similar physical deprivation, his temper was extremely patient, and he bore every little annoyance that occurred to him with the best possible humour, and with the most unruffled countenance. His understanding was remarkably acute, and his perception was so surprisingly quick, that he speedily formed

an accurate estimate of those individuals with whom he was brought into close intercourse, though perhaps it were only of a temporary nature. He was most remarkable for comic humour, and for his talent in displaying it: and if he had been blessed with the sense of hearing and the power of utterance, he might have proved a first-rate actor of low comedy. As it was, his talent for the mimicry of countenance, character, manners, and circumstances, was very surprising. The writer of this article, who was kindly admitted an honorary member of the St Luke's Club of artists, has there often had the good fortune to see Geikie entertaining large assemblages of his brethren of the easel, and throwing them into convulsions of laughter by his admirable and most ludicrous imitations of a cobbler working on his stall—a man overpowered by liquor—a sea-sick dandy—or some other of those various pieces of acting with which, at their request, he was wont to amuse them. But this was nothing more than the same talent that produced his sketches exhibiting itself in a different form. It was, however, a matter of extreme interest to see a man whose organic defects deprived him of all participation in the conversation that prevailed around him in a large company, who was yet thus enabled to excite the mirth of a whole room; and as he always appeared to have the greatest possible enjoyment in his own exertions in this way, so they were always received with the kindest feeling towards him on the part of his fellow-artists.

Geikie was warm-hearted and affectionate, and particularly so to his relatives. He was especially attached to his young nephews, of whom indeed he was so fond, that whilst painting his last picture—the subject of which was that part of the High Street, towards the Castle Hill, since demolished by the recent improvements, a painting executed only six days before his death, and whilst the fatal fever was growing on him—he worked at his easel for the greater part of the day with one of the boys seated on his knee, and he only gave up when he felt his eye beginning to be so affected by the disease as to render it unfitted for the correct guidance of his brush.

Geikie had all his life been blessed with uninterrupted health, and his premature death may be, in a great measure, ascribed to that confidence in his own constitution with which his knowledge of this fact inspired him. He gave no hint of his being unwell to those around him, and he avoided all medicine till the disease had taken so resistless a hold of him as to render all medical aid unavailing. Five days before his death he took to his bed, and soon sank into a state of insensibility from which he never could be roused.

He died on the 1st of August 1837, at the age of forty-one, and he was interred in the Greyfriars' Churchyard.