

GEORGE MURRAY (JAMES BOLIVAR MANSON).

WE have seen how, when Peter Still, early in 1839, first entertained the idea of putting his poetical wares into book form, one of his most enthusiastic advisers to print was a man of kindred tastes to himself, GEORGE MURRAY, then schoolmaster at Downiehill. Peter, though just recovering from a spell of ill-health, set out for the dominie's with a bundle of manuscript poems for his perusal and judgment, and he records in a letter to a friend how proud he returned home with Murray's favourable opinion of his poems and intended scheme—yea, he had actually got 13 sheets of goodly foolscap writing paper from his adviser for a copy of "The Rocky Hill"—a stroke of business which came as a god-send to Peter in those days! George Murray was the son of a small crofter at Kinnoir, Huntly, and was born in 1819. Early imbued with a love of literature, and animated with a spirit of indomitable industry, he wrought hard for many years preparing himself for the University, with an eye to the ministry as a probable profession. While passing through Marischal College classes, he was a very frequent contributor of poetical pieces to the columns of the *Aberdeen Herald*. When he had finished in a measure his college career, he became schoolmaster at Inverkeithing, and, in 1845, collected the best of his poems into a neat little volume, dedicated to Mr. and Mrs. Duff of Haddo, and entitled "Islaford and other Poems, a Book for Winter Evenings and Summer Moods, by George Murray. London: Smith, Elder, & Co.; Aberdeen:

G. & R. King, 1845". The volume met with a good reception from the public press, with the exception of the *Aberdeen Banner*, where, in company with Anderson ("Copperie"), Dougal, Still, and Denham, he was very severely and unjustly dealt with. "I am glad", says Still, in one of his letters anent this onslaught, "that another of the 'small poets' has had spirit to retaliate on the small critic. I presume it is Murray of Inverkeithing, and certainly it will puzzle the *Banner* to prove any of his poems irreligious. Murray is studying for the Church at Marischal College, and perhaps the small critic may meet his 'marrow', should they come to a height on the subject".

Whether Murray completed the necessary studies for the Church or not we cannot say—at all events he certainly gave up the idea of following out the clerical profession, and betook himself to teaching. After leaving Inverkeithing we lose sight of him for a good many years, he having taken, it is said, to private teaching, now here, now there, in various parts of Scotland. When he again turns up about 1855, as teacher of a large school at Bannockburn, he had dropped the name George Murray, and was known as James Bolivar Manson. While there he began his connection with the newspaper press, and in a few years made literary work, or more properly journalism, his entire avocation. He edited the *Stirling Observer* for some time, left it for a similar post on the *Newcastle Daily Express*, and in the beginning of 1862 accepted an engagement on the editorial staff of the *Edinburgh Daily Review*. Here the great resources which his extensive reading—for he was alike at home in either classical or vernacular literature—and his intimate knowledge of past and present political affairs, conjoined to a readiness of pen rarely equalled, soon brought him prominently into notice, and it was not long ere he became principal leader-writer for the paper. He had a rich vein of humour, and was not unfrequently a contributor to the pages of *Punch*. His death was very sudden and unexpected—for he had just seated himself in his own house at Keir Street to write a leader welcoming John Bright to Edinburgh, and had actually a few lines penned, when his wife entered to find him, not asleep, as she at first thought, but dead. Thus died in harness, in his 49th year, on the 2nd November, 1868, one of

the foremost journalists of his day—one who, besides achieving a considerable reputation as a public man, was esteemed in private life for the ease and geniality of his nature, and for his readiness to sympathise with the success or happiness of others.

He was a writer of verses all his days, but the work by virtue of which he demands a place among our local bards is the one noted above—to which we now turn our attention.

“Islaford”, which gives title to this volume, is a tale originally written for his pupils. It is not much of a story so far as incident or character painting go to make a story, but it contains many remarkable lines, and original if not poetic thoughts.

The characters are John Rose, a parish minister, whose bugbear is Roman Catholicism. The Catholic Emancipation Bill appears to him nothing less than ruin to the kirk and country, and when it passes his mind gives way, and he becomes a harmless lunatic. He is nursed by his loving daughter Ada, who, mistaking the effect for the cause, blames and hates all Catholics as the authors of her father’s calamity. We are introduced to them during a summer walk, when Ada at least has her eyes open to all nature’s beauties, and

Wondered what the inner heaven would be  
When even the outer shone so gloriously.

A stranger joins in their walk, and when his eyes meet Ada’s her heart is gone, though she knows it not.

It is in the eyes  
That the soul trims her wings before she flies;  
'Tis there that grief sits darkest when we grieve,  
And reason lingers when about to leave.

Ada’s cousin, Ellen Hay, comes on a visit. Her character is neatly hit off in a single line:—

Ada Rose, a heaven on earth was she!  
And Ellen Hay, an earth in heaven would be.

She informs Ada that Islaford, a neighbouring estate, has changed its lord, and that a maid might profit by the change. She fails, however, to catch the laird, and drops out of the story. Allan Rae, the new laird in question, and, of course, the stranger of the walk, calls on the Roses:—

Allan and Ada met—and thought they loved;  
Parted, and—knew it.

That this visit was not the last may be easily imagined; “a sunny life they led by wood and stream”; both were enthusiastic lovers of nature:—

They loved all trees—the slight-clad lady birch,  
 The light pagoda-structure of the larch;  
 The oak patrician; and the minister  
 Of household duties, the plebeian fir;  
 The spruce, whose boughs (though tipped with golden growths,  
 Spring’s finger ends) look grave as those whose troths  
 Were plighted underneath them yesterday;  
 Ash, elm, and all—all lonely shades loved they.

They loved all rural flowers; and Allan knew  
 Their family secrets! harebells meek and blue,  
 The mountain-maiden eyes; the violet ever true;  
 The briar rose that just begins to pout  
 Its pretty lip, and from its bud looks out;  
 The yellow primroses, cosily pressed,  
 Like unfledged birdlings in a grassy nest;  
 Furze, broom, and heath, a trio which if new  
 Would be adored; the cheerful daisy too,  
 That gathered its crimson tips together  
 When rain descends, and blusheth for the weather.

One day Ada discovers on her lover’s breast a golden cross!  
 To her horror she learns that

Allan wears  
 The creed which gave her sire so many cares  
 That their amount was madness.

Allan is dismissed, and wanders about distraught—Ada much in the same condition. One day unseen he overhears her at prayer, and finds, to his joy, that she can pray even for him:—

Yet, Heavenly Father, erring though they be,  
 They look through clouds, but, oh! they look for Thee.

They come together again, and keeping his creed from her father’s knowledge, obtained his consent to their marriage, and agreed to remain in the minister’s house. Time passes on, and old Mr. Rose is getting weaker and weaker; they remove to Islaford, but the old man notices that, though he is free to go where he pleases, he is always debarred from one room. Naturally he gets curious about it, and one day, when Allan and Ada are out of the way, he makes his way to the forbidden door, to find it locked. A servant passes and he demands the

key; is told that it is the *chapel*, and that the *priest* has the key! The old man in a frenzy bursts open the door, plays John Knox with the altar, vessels, and pictures, and falls down on the floor—dead.

As we remarked, the tale was written for his pupils; moralising on youth, he says:—

O, happy time when smiles have no deceit—  
 Words no more meanings than a lambkin's bleat;  
 When the young heart bounds, lighter for its load,  
 And, pleased with life, forgets the dirty road;  
 Before it feels one string of life decay,  
 Or learns that friends are things that pass away!  
 O, children, though I pray your various races  
 May find paths smooth and shining as your faces,  
 Yet there are roughnesses on this green ball  
 Of earth that makes me tremble for you all!  
 Grim years will come, and cares that eat like rust  
 Into the shining cheek; and passion's gust  
 May overthrow a world of hopes; and time  
 Fills the black-lettered calendar of crime  
 With names as spotless once, and once as dear,  
 And once as happy too as any here.

\* \* \* \* \*

. . . taken in the moral light of duty,  
 A straight line is the only "line of beauty",  
 And even a secret's best concealed, in sooth,  
 When only hid beneath a fold of truth.

What strikes one in "Islaford and other Poems" is not only its uniformity of excellence, but its variety, or rather the variousness of its moods. "Improvement" is a "two-handed crack" between a guidwife and a guidman on the march of the times; the former can see nothing so good as it was in her young days; the latter begs to differ from her, and, what is curious, has the last word. Many of the songs are excellent: "Culloden," which first appeared in a Canadian paper about 1840, has the true ballad ring. Several of the pieces, such as "Stanzas on Visiting Lord Pitligo's Cave near Roseheart", a version of "Gaudie Rins", "Bonny Rothiemay", and "Haddo Banks and Haddo Bowers" have a local interest, but they are not the best of his work.

The following is good, especially the third stanza:—

I canna bide at e'en  
 Frae my ain board-en,  
 There's a wife and a wean  
 At my ain board-en' ;  
 And a blithesome, beaming e'e  
 Blinks across the hameward lea,  
 And a dish is laid for me  
 At my ain board-en'.

But though I maun awa'  
 To my ain board-en',  
 I'll be blithe to see ye a'  
 At my ain board-en' ;  
 Wit mayna aften flash,  
 But gossips seldom gash,  
 And scandals never clash  
 At my ain board-en'.

I hae aye a jug o' ale  
 At my ain board-en',  
 An' mony a canty tale  
 At my ain board-en' ;  
 They are wearin' auld I trow,  
 But they're better far than new,  
 When tauld by lips we loo,  
 At my ain board-en'.

I hae twa-three miles to gang  
 To my ain board-en',  
 And in troth I'm thinkin' lang  
 For my ain board-en' ;  
 And nane will surely blame,  
 For gin bliss be worth a name,  
 It is worth the carrying hame  
 To our ain board-en'.

There is an echo of William Thom in—

Lang hae ye been roamin', laddie,  
 Lang hae I been grievin';  
 Life sae near its gloamin', laddie.  
 'S hardly worth the livin'.

\* \* \* \* \*

This poor heart so laden, laddie,  
 Mind ye how ye won it?  
 This poor cheek so fadin', laddie,  
 Ken ye wha has done it?

As an example of the author's versatility, and as a specimen of most excellent fooling, we extract a few stanzas of "The Metamorphosis of a Scholar into a Book : a new translation of Ovidius Naso by Ovidius So-so : with interpolations, containing, among other matters, An Address to the Sun, by Mak'-Verse-on". We are introduced to the scholar, who delighted in—

A shower in sunshine, when the rambler feels  
 He walketh in a rainbow : a stream side,  
 Where the glad waters hold no muddy eels,  
 But trouts like meteors shoot, and leap, and glide ;  
 A holiday—that Sunday out of starch ;  
 The church—especially the road to church.

\* \* \* \* \*

He lived unmarried, though he loved a wedding,  
 And has been known to take a lady's hand,  
 Though, certes, never at the parson's bidding ;  
 This singular feeling rose, I understand,  
 From reading some sad verses wherein wedlock  
 (Rhymes must he had) was made to chime with padlock.

Another reason !—once he loved a maid,  
 Named Elspet, when they both had scarce a guinea,  
 But sudden wealth had turned the damsel's head,  
 And suddenly her name turned Elspetina !  
 Yet dream he sometime would of Elsie's charms,  
 And waken with the pillow in his arms.

He becomes discontented, and in a long address to the Sun he prays to be metamorphosed. Apollo is willing to grant his request, and suggests a tree, &c., as a suitable change, but "No", says the scholar,

"Make me a book!" anon his clothes, without  
 The intervention of a paper mill,  
 Fall down in quires ; his blood grows double stout  
 To all appearance, but has life in't still ;  
 The branching veins have blackened into lines ;  
 And all his gold upon the edges shines.

The volume is illustrated by Phiz,  
 His joint-bones still are hinges, though called pauses,  
 Excepting that the large intestine is  
 A colon still ; the chapters, sections, clauses,  
 Are all found, somehow, somewhere in the brain.  
 When shall a book like this be made again ?

In most decided contrast to this is the weird glamour of his "Bird o' Fairy Land":—

Oh! fair is Fairy Land  
 And the fields where I was roaming,  
 For the skies of Fairy Land  
 Are days without a gloaming!

The dunder's foot is fleet,  
 But the elfin foot is fleeter;  
 The mountain air is sweet,  
 But fairy breath is sweeter.

His warld has hillocks green,  
 And no ploughshare can wrang them;  
 And he loves his hillocks green,  
 For there's no ae grave amang them.

My wing is weet and chill  
 Beneath your cloudy carey,  
 And I've come against my will  
 Frae the pleasant land of Faëry:

Ye have called me by a spell  
 Into your world sae dreary,  
 Pale, heart-sick youth, to tell  
 The tidings o' thy deary.

*Youth.*—Then tell me, bonny bird,  
 Whaur is the fause heart roaming?

*Bird.*—With Errington's young lord  
 She spends the summer gloaming.

*Youth.*—But what wiled her frae me?  
 What takes she a' her pride in?

*Bird.*—The hope o' high degree,  
 And a bonnie coach to ride in.

*Youth.*—And is her e'e as clear?  
 Her cheek, is't aye as smiling?

*Bird.*—Ah, no! she learns to fear  
 And feel her lord's beguiling.

*Youth.*—But, birdie, when the neist  
 Spring flower unfaulds its blossom—

*Bird.*—There's a baby at her breast  
 And a worm within her bosom!



*Youth.*—And will the fause lord grieve  
That has trained her hopes to wither ?

*Bird.*—Ah, no! he'll yet deceive  
Another and another.

*Youth.*—And what shall be my doom  
For loving her so dearly ?

*Bird.*—The heart-break and the tomb,  
A cauld, cauld grave and early.

Had the author lived till the year of grace 1887, he would probably have dedicated the following to the "Liberation Society":—

The gude auld Kirk o' Scotland,  
The wild winds round her blaw,  
And when her foemen hear her sough,  
They prophecy her fa' ;  
But what although her fate has been  
Amang the floods to sit—  
The gude auld Kirk o' Scotland,  
She's nae in ruins yet!

There may be wrath within her wa's,  
What reck! her wa's are wide ;  
It's but the beating of a heart,  
The rushing of a tide,  
Whose motion keeps its waters pure ;  
Then let them foam or fret,  
The gude auld Kirk o' Scotland,  
She's nae in ruins yet!

She was a lithe, she was a licht,  
When a' thing else was mirk,  
An' mony a trembling heart has found  
Its bield behind the kirk ;  
She bore the brunt, and did her due,  
When Scotland's sword was wet,  
The gude auld kirk o' Scotland,  
She's nae in ruins yet!

The clouds that overcast her sky  
Maun shortly flit awa',  
A bonny, blue, and peaceful heaven  
Smiles sweetly through them a'!  
Her country's life-blood's in her veins,  
The wide warld's in her debt!  
The gude auld kirk o' Scotland,  
She's nae in ruins yet!

We conclude with an epitaph which has a brevity and point often wanting in those sombre compositions:—

Here lies one who lived (but lived not long);  
As right as knew he had been often wrong;  
So proud—he would not e'en to bliss be driven;  
So poor—he carried all he had to heaven.