

**JAMES FERGUSON,
STANLEY.**



JAMES FERGUSON:

LYRIC POET.

XXXIX.

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It is one of those things which the blundering world never wholly understands and never willingly permits—the anonymity or pseudonymity of an author. It is also one of those things which, sooner or later, the author himself generally regrets in the end. Both methods are very useful no doubt where a back-door has, unfortunately, come to be desirable as a means of escape from irate critics prowling about with shot guns, and it is among the supremest pleasures of life—quite equal to Charles Lamb's doing good by stealth and being found out by accident—to have the good fortune to hear happy things said of one's aims or efforts, all unknown to the first-class judge of a good thing who utters them. But the system has its drawbacks, and when the public have come to be sufficiently interested in the productions of an author to have some curiosity as to his personality, that individual, even if he elect to come before the curtain and own up in *propria persona*, has to pay extravagantly for the former immunity from publicity which he enjoyed. To persist wearing the mask right through life entails still greater annoyances upon both parties interested in the matter. The point need not be

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laboured, but if the writer might presume so far, his advice to young writers is: Stick your own name to what you write, and take your chance; it will prove more satisfactory in the long run.

These remarks are suggested by the probability that "Nisbet Noble" is a name much better known to the majority of readers than that which heads this article—an undesirable condition of affairs which need no longer exist. Our friend hails from Stanley, where he first saw light in 1842. His father was a most estimable man who left nothing but pleasant memories behind him; his mother died when he was about 10 years of age, and we have only to read his "Tullymet"—one of the finest things not strictly lyrical he has ever written—to realise how much that meant to him. After the usual village schooling, James was sent to Stanley Mills, and up to the age of 14, with light work and plenty of spare time, he fairly revelled in the lovely and historic district around him, not the least attraction of which was the lordly Tay at his door. But, as a brother-poet laments—

It's a thrawart fate that workin' bodies dree,
Sin' maistly a' to win their bread maun wander far awa';

and sometime about 1856 the "poet lad" went to Dundee, where he duly "served his time" behind a grocer's counter. Glasgow next claimed him as a shop assistant, then we hear of him back in Dundee in partnership with his brother; but business not prospering there, he was once more in the western metropolis, determined, apparently, to take out of life as much as possible—first as labourer in an engineer's shop; then as engine-keeper, timekeeper, and clerk. The Fair City was the next lodestone, and here he found employment for some time in Pullar's big estab-

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lishment, then in the Inland Revenue office and in a solicitor's office as clerk. As an enameller and painter of provision merchants' tickets he peregrinated the country, and became acquainted with some of the fairest districts in the dear old Scotland he has lauded in song so often.

Back in Perth once more, he became clerk in the Co-Operative Stores. Finally, "home," where he is at the present time, warping foreman in the cotton mill he wrought in as a boy. Should the kindly inquirer, however, ask for "Jamie Ferguson, the poet," he will probably get at his man all the sooner. It is hardly necessary to say that with such lyrical gift as he has given evidence of our friend began to "lisp in numbers" at an early age. When a mere apprentice lad he was diagnosed as hopelessly "bad wi' poetry," his first production, entitled "Lucknow," appearing in the "People's Journal" over 40 years ago. But although 60 years have passed over his head, of no one can it be more truly said than of the Stanley poet that

Years can never count for age
While hearts hold revelry with Time
And sport with Fate.

There is not a younger heart in Christendom. Encouraged by the reception of his first effort, the new star scintillated out in every direction. He has been a contributor to the "People's Friend" from the very start, many of his lyrics attracting the attention of musical readers able to wed them to tuneful melodies. Not a few of his lyrics have been copied into American, Canadian, and Australian papers. Year after year for a while he carried off first prize in the "People's Journal" and "People's Friend" poetical competitions, including a first prize three years in

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succession for a poetical charade in the latter popular Scottish miscellany. He has also been guilty of numerous readings in its pages, as well as in those of "Scottish Nights," and has even perpetrated a drama. A series of amusing articles of his, entitled "Cracks about the Country," ran for about two years in the "Scottish People"—dead, also, many years ago.

Aberdeen is well acquainted with Nisbet Noble's productions, for his pen ran riot in the "Free Press" over twenty years ago in his "Reminiscences of Saunders M'Sneeshin," and he—Nisbet, not Sandy—had another series under the title of "Snuffy Sandy's Lectures" in "Bon-Accord" of that ilk, together with a selection of "Songs by our own Lunatic" for the same paper. The fact is, he has written more than he can even name, much less produce or locate, for he is the most careless of parents to the offspring of his brain. His first booklet was his "Song of Solomon in a Modern Dress," which appeared in 1873. This was followed, in 1880, by the "Lays of Perthshire," containing 14 pieces, nearly every one of which is worthy of his reputation. His latest collection is "Wallace and other Poems," which saw light in 1897 in connection with a bazaar which was held in his native village. It contains 12 pieces, of which the following is one of the best, and gives a fair idea of our friend's lyrical vein:—

WALLACE, BRUCE, AND BURNS.

Where is the land on all the earth
Like to the land we own?
The land where broad-browed Freedom found
A birthplace and a throne.
The land where Bruce and Wallace fought
And tyranny down hurled,
The land where Burns poured forth the songs
Whose echoes fill the world.

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There is no land, no land like ours,
Where'er a footstep turns,
The land, the land of liberty,
Of Wallace, Bruce, and Burns.

The hills that rise around our heads
Are filled from base to brow
With memories of the mighty three
Whose names all honour now.
The waving woods, the raving winds,
The dashing waters all,
Our moors and mosses blend in one,
And swell the thunder call.

It rings across the heaving sea,
And thousands far and wide
Uplift their voices in reply
And raise their heads in pride.
Its echoes come across the deep
In answer back again,
And lands and peoples pause to note
The freeman-born refrain.

And lo, wherever Freedom waves
Her war-notched sword in air,
Her heroes bare their dauntless brows
And make our shout their prayer.
And may its spirit nerve their hearts
And teach them how to die,
And how to conquer, till at last
They learn like us to cry—

There is no land, no land like ours,
Where'er a footstep turns,
The land, the land of liberty,
Of Wallace, Bruce, and Burns.

Of the man himself, any one who meets him cannot but be impressed by the genuine harmony existing between the poet and his expression—the *perfervidum ingenium* is as evident in word and look as in his writings. He is a Scot to the core, and has but one love—his country, its beauties, its history, and its heroes. Only now and then has he sung of love; he is essentially

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heroic in his utterances, and these make for the coursing of warmer blood through the veins, the imparting of a more resolute fire to the eye and more nervous grip to the hand. No one among living Scottish poets is in more touch with reality than he when he sings of the—

Land of beetling crags and cliffs,
Of hills and glens and heroes.

Regarding "Tullymet," which is one of the present writer's favourites, it is interesting to note that some time ago, when much talk went the round of the press relative to the strength of the line in one of Kipling's poems—

And salted earth down with their bones

—quite a number of correspondents to the newspapers pointed out that James Ferguson had said something like this, but much better, long before in the poem with the first part of which this sketch is concluded—

Every land earth owns
Is dinted deep with Highland heels
And strewn with Highland bones!

Countless admirers desire to see a thoroughly worthy collection of his poems: to which we can only add—*Nisbet Noblesse oblige!*

TULLYMET.

Fair Summer walks among the hills, and flowers rise up to greet
Its coming with a sunny smile, and kiss its jewelled feet;
The birds are tuned to song, and pour their orisons on high,
And beauty beams upon our gaze by land, and lake, and sky.
The woods, the mighty harps of earth, to solemn music bend—

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High heavenwards to the throne of God the swelling
strains ascend;
The listening earth looks up in love, and quivers like a
gong
With ecstasy of bliss beneath the magic of the song.
The laughing burnies dance for joy beneath the passing
breeze.
The waving corn-fields respond, and roll like silver seas;
The very shadows seem to smile in sunny Summer's face,
And softly creep to kiss its feet from out each hiding-
place.
A fairer scene on all the earth I've never gazed on yet
Than this that greets my eyes upon the braes of Tullymet.

The spot is hallowed unto me; mayhap 'tis this that
throws
Such glory o'er the spreading scene till all the prospect
glows,
And brightens into beauty's best; for here, where now
I stand,
Once stood my mother's baby feet. Here oft my mother's
hand
Hath plucked the flowers from off the braes and gleaned
among the corn;
In this thatched cottage by my side the sainted dead was
born.
No wonder that it seems to me the fairest spot on earth—
No wonder that my heart awakes as if a newer birth
Had fallen on it as I tread the paths she must have
trod,
Long ere her gentle soul had flown to walk above with
God.
None knew the love I bore the dead, none now can ever
know;
I feel her presence round me yet wherever I may go.
I would to God that she had lived to train my steps
aright,
And teach me how to walk the world, and how to fight
the fight.
A weed upon the sea of time I float about to-day,
The sport of all the waves of thought that o'er my feelings
play;
She left me all too young—she died—I did not loudly
rave:
How my struck heart was numbed that day they bore her
to the grave!
The blow was far too deep. It stunned. Its deadening
influence still

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Weighs weightily on brain, and nerve, and heart, and
soul, and will.

It made me what I am, alas! not what I might have been,
Had she but lived who loved me so. But let the false
between

That spreads from that far time to this be buried where
it lies.

Awake, my heart! from yon high heaven my mother's
loving eyes

Look down on me. For her dear sake I'll make an effort
yet,

And tune my life to better things; I swear it, Tullymet!