

DUNCAN M'KERCHER,

DUNKELD.



DUNCAN M'KERCHER

“ATHOLL PAGANINI.”

L.

DUNCAN M'KERCHER,

DUNKELD.



Although he can never fill the imagination so satisfyingly as our "famous Niel," Duncan M'Kercher possessed an individuality both as a man and a fiddler, which could attract the notice of even those who had been brought under the spell of his great predecessor, and which will preserve his name for many a year yet amongst lovers of good Scots dance music. There appears to be some doubt regarding the exact date and place of his birth; but about 1796, and at Inver, near Dunkeld—the birth-place of Niel Gow, Charles M'Intosh (father and son), and James M'Intosh—are generally accepted. Niel departed life in 1807, so that Duncan would be about 11 years of age at the time; and although there is no certainty as to the fact, it is generally supposed that the boy had some lessons from the veteran player. In any case, he must have heard him frequently, and his style in some particulars was modelled on Niel's. He was the last man in the world, all the same, to be satisfied with mere reflected lustre. Niel, doubtless, was good enough in his way; but if you wanted to hear the very best thing in Scotch playing the world ever produced, why, then, Duncan M'Kercher was the man who could supply it, and no other.

Blairgowrie and Strathmore Worthies:

"Hooch ay," he would exclaim in his own Highland style, "Niel wass a fery good player, he was indeet, I'll not deny it; but Niel's deid, and there's one fiddler alive as goot, and maybe better, too!" Duncan may be regarded as

A SELF-TAUGHT MAN,

and as he grew up became known far and near for his playing, which, even though he was too much given to "blaw," was excellent of its kind. He was of no use as a slow air player; but at balls and social gatherings throughout the country, and at a time when the fiddle had not yet lost its supreme position at such functions, he was in great request. He also managed to form a good connection as a teacher, and counted among his patrons some of the best families in Perthshire and neighbouring counties. His fame even attracted the attention of that prince of entrepreneurs, Julian, who had secured Jamie Allan, of Forfar, for some of his tours, and Duncan had similar engagements as the "Atholl Paganini"—a position of which he was immensely proud, never tiring of recounting the great receptions he used to receive all over the country. In his better days he was a well-known figure at the Saturday evening concerts in the City Hall, Glasgow, under the auspices of the Abstainers' Union. There his appearances invariably evoked an ovation—partly, no doubt, jocular, but mostly genuine. One of his favourite "encores" was "The Masons' Apron," which he gave with great verve. His most memorable appearance in Blairgowrie was as leader of a score or so of fiddlers some time in the sixties or early seventies. After a solo display it was his habit, much as the acrobats, who ostentatiously bow an invitation to bestow applause after each feat,

Duncan M'Kercher, Dunkeld.

to throw up his arms with fiddle and bow, as if to say, "There noo, did ye ever hear it better dune?"—which never failed to fetch the audience and produce the inevitable encore. An incident connected with the Blairgowrie concert was one of the stock stories of that jolly landlord, the late Duncan Macdonald, of the Queen's Hotel, who used to relate with great gusto how his namesake and others were having a jorum of toddy in the billiard-room after the performance, when the "Atholl Paganini," who was rather short-sighted, mistaking a lump of cue-chalk for sugar, put it into his tumbler, and could not make out why his toddy was so drumly and its taste so wersh. Regarding his style, it may be stated that it differed greatly from Niel's. The latter used his bow like a veritable Jupiter *tonans*, rolling out strathspey and reel with a power and resonance which some one likened to an "organ at full gallop," whereas Duncan's short, "nippity" style of bowing provoked the undisguised contempt of such players as Jamie Allan, whose "wondrous length of arm" required a bow an inch longer than ordinary players, and who used to refer to "that d—d diddrie-fa style o' M'Kercher's!" The latter, however, was

QUITE ABLE TO SQUARE THE ACCOUNT

in his own favour, and was known to go the length of encouraging his pupils with the remark—"Hooch, ay, laddie, but ye'll be a grand fiddler yet! Ye're very near as guid's mysel' already, and far afore M'Leish!" That was William M'Leish, of Aberfeldy—Duncan's *bete noire*—an excellent player, composer, and teacher, amongst his pupils being Mr Troup, of Ballater. He was born at Aberfeldy in 1807,

Blairgowrie and Strathmore Worthies:

and died there in 1890. Him our friend Duncan could not thole on any account. Duncan himself posed as a composer of dance music, and published two collections in 1830. Well-read musical critics have found points of more than usual interest in these volumes; they go the length of asserting that the reputed author had very little to do with their contents. The first of the books is entitled "A Collection of Original Strathspeys and Reels, Arranged for the Pianoforte, Violin, and Violoncello," and is "respectfully dedicated to the Highland Society of Scotland by D. M'Kercher." It consists of twenty-two pages, and contains 52 tunes. Both Mr Troup and Mr J. S. Marshall, Carnoustie, as well as others, are of opinion that the majority of the tunes are not M'Kercher's at all, but those of Captain Daniel Menzies, who was born about 1790 and died about 1828, and was a composer of acknowledged merit. From a correspondence on the subject, which took place between Mr Marshall, the late Mr Buttar Malcolm, Perth, and the late Rev. Alexander Duff, Kirriemuir, it appears that Mr Duncan Duff, father of the last named, a well-known teacher in King James' Hospital School, Perth, and who died in the early seventies, was an intimate friend of Captain Menzies, and not only recognised his tunes in M'Kercher's "original" collections, but openly accused him of having stolen them. He told Mr Buttar Malcolm that he met M'Kercher one day at the corner of the South Street, Perth, and during a violent altercation arising out of the accusation was "only with difficulty restrained from giving him (M'Kercher) a castigation." It is supposed that "Pag." had had the MSS. on loan at the Captain's death, and been tempted

Duncan M'Kercher, Dunkeld.

to include them in his collection. The style of the majority of the tunes is very different from that the old fiddler was partial to, being much on the lines of R. M'Intosh's, Duncan M'Intosh's and William Marshall's compositions. It is a curious circumstance that he was never known to play his own music in public—which is very much opposed to both custom and natural inclination—with the single exception of “George IV.'s Welcome to Scotland”—one of the easiest strathspeys in the books.

THE LAST APPEARANCE

of our “Atholl Paganini”—he got the title from Fox Maule in one of his jocular moods, and was very proud of it—was at one of Lumsden's concerts in November 1873. He was rather low in health at the time, but became seriously ill thereafter, and finished his course in Collinton Poorhouse a month later. James Stewart, the well-known poet of Perth, Crieff, and Dunkeld, hit off the characteristics of the old fiddler very neatly in his “Duncan Ker,” which follows. Every one who knew the subject of the poem declared the portrait perfect, but old “Pag.” himself was anything but partial to it.

DUNCAN KER,

THE ATHOLL PAGANINI.

Hark! the tweedledum!
That bow hand hath fleetness,
Gusts o' music come,
Rich in Highland sweetness.
Hearts an' heels bestir—
Rise, my bonny hinny,
Dance to Duncan Ker,
The Atholl Paganini!

Blairgowrie and Strathmore Worthies.

The bridal ha' is lit,
Brikers round are foamin',
Licht the dancers flit,
As the wind o' gloamin';
Bobbin' through the reel
Like a water-waggie;
"Play," cries ilka chiel',
"Tullochgorum, Pagie!"

A bonnet meets his broo,
Thistle-badged an' cockit,
Round him a surtout,
I' the fashion—dockit.
Short's a plant o' fir,
Onything but scraggie,
Such is Duncan Ker,
Atholl's famous Pagie.

A civil body, Pag.
Pleasant on his fiddle,
Whistle, cry, or wag—
At your beck he'll triddle;
Seat him on a firm
Near a whisky kaggie,
The mavis canna chirm
Sweeter notes than Pagie.

Bridals, balls, and ploys,
Haud the bottle clunkin';
They wha then rejoice
Need the aid o' Duncan,
Dull wad be the stir
To Highland Jock an' Maggie
Wantin' Dhonnach Ker,
Atholl's famous Pagie.

Fastly flee the clouds.
Driven by the storm;
Faster sorrow howds
Ilka gait before 'im;
Weel may we infer,
A' his days are sunny—
Wha's like Duncan Ker,
The Atholl Paganini?