

REV. JOHN SKINNER,

AUTHOR OF "TULLOCHGORUM."

A SKETCH OF HIS LIFE,

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH.

THE REV. JOHN SKINNER, one of our most popular lyric poets, and a man of great learning, was born on the 3d of October, 1721, at Balfour, in the parish of Birse, one of the wildest and most romantic districts in Aberdeenshire. His father, who had married the widow of Donald Farquharson of Balfour, was then schoolmaster of the parish; but about two years afterwards, he removed to Eeht, a small hilly parish within twelve miles of Aberdeen. For upwards of fifty years he faithfully discharged the duties of parochial teacher there. A man of upright character, and no mean attainments, he was much esteemed in the locality, and, it is recorded, prepared more young men for the University than most schoolmasters of his day. Shortly after his new appointment, his wife died, and, having been several years a widower, he married a second time, and had a numerous family, the youngest of whom, James, became a lawyer of some distinction in Edinburgh.

John was the only fruit of the first union. Unlike most men of eminence, he owed little to maternal influence and teaching—

A mother!—Ah! the venerable name,
Which my young lips were never taught to frame.

These were the words of the man, and to a devoted father he was indebted for his early training. No time was lost,

and the boy soon gave indication of his peculiar genius. He excelled in acquiring a knowledge of the Latin language, and evinced a taste for poetry at a very early age. Endowed with an excellent memory, and especially fond of poetry in the Scottish dialect, before his twelfth year he could repeat, with evident appreciation, the long poem of "Chryste-Kirk on the Green," attributed to James the First. Some of our best old songs were also stored up in his memory at this early period, and retained, it is said, with youthful freshness, even when he had become the venerable author of *Tullochgorum*. But study had not been neglected. Having made rapid progress under his father, in 1734, when only thirteen years of age, we find him at the annual competition for bursaries in Marischal College, Aberdeen, and, though the youngest of his year, he was successful in gaining a considerable one—no unimportant matter in these days to the son of a parish schoolmaster with a large family. He attended during the usual term of four sessions in that University, and passed with honour through all the stages of a classical education.

Such was the early history of John Skinner—only yet in his seventeenth year—and it resembles few others. The usual periods in life—childhood, boyhood, manhood—we can scarcely distinguish. Allowed to follow the bent of his mind, the first dawnings of intellect were not those of a child, and the boy of twelve an adept at Latin and an enthusiast in poetry was altogether out of the common course of things, and would even have been deemed remarkable in our own advanced age. In all this, however, we can trace indications of the scholar and the poet.

Like most others in the same station, Mr Skinner commenced life as a teacher. After leaving College, he was

employed in that capacity for a few months in the parish school of Kemnay, near Aberdeen; but in 1739, he removed to Monymusk, having accepted the office of assistant to the schoolmaster there. This parish, situated on the banks of the Don, contained some of the finest plantations in Aberdeenshire, and, with hill and dale, wood and water, presented some beautiful and imposing scenery. Here, it may be said, commenced the history of the poet. Although we are aware that from his earliest youth he delighted in the muse of his country, we have no authentic account of any earlier attempts at composition, unless it be contained in his own words to Burns—"While I was young, I dabbled a good deal in these things." He was now about eighteen years of age, and several pieces of a descriptive character were written about this time. Some of these having come under the notice of the lady of Sir Archibald Grant, Bart., the proprietor of the parish, gained for him the favour of that influential family. Generously received into the mansion, the library, consisting of many thousand well-selected works in every branch of literature, was placed at his command, and every facility afforded for the pursuit of his favourite studies. He had thus an opportunity of improving his mind, and a stimulus to cultivate his rustic muse, for which his distinguished patrons deserve honourable mention.

One of the pieces referred to as having attracted the notice of Lady Grant was a "Poem on a Visit to Paradise," which has unfortunately been lost, but is said to have described, in familiar terms, a beautiful little pleasure ground which Sir Archibald had laid out on the banks of the Don. Another was the "Monymusk Christmas Ba'ing," which, being the earliest and longest of Skinner's poems we possess, has been placed first in the present

collection. It was suggested by the celebrated poem of Chryste-Kirk on the Green, the favourite of his youth, and of which, retaining his early predilection, he gave an elegant translation into Latin verse after he had passed his fiftieth year. The poem of the Scottish Monarch has produced many imitations—Allan Ramsay added two cantos—and the humble effort of the Monymusk dominie, taken altogether, will bear comparison with any of them. The poem is descriptive of a Christmas sport, common at the time, and still practised in some rural districts. The scene was the kirkyard of the parish, and the actors, whose characteristics are hit off in a few lines with so much humour and effect, were chiefly young men in the neighbourhood who had taken part in the amusement. The author himself is introduced as the “insett dominie—just riftin frae his dinner,” and some of the humorous touches are indeed inimitable, as, for instance, after the day’s sport was over, and all had “consented to be friens”—

At evening syne the fallows keen
 Drank till the neist day’s dawing,
 Sae snell, that some tint baith their een,
 And could na pay their lawing
 Till the neist day.

Altogether, this poem, so full of unaffected pleasantry, forms a very complete and graphic description of the old rural sport of Christmas Ba’ing.

Mr Skinner had been brought up a Presbyterian ; but, while at Monymusk, and in frequent and familiar intercourse with an Episcopal clergyman there, he saw reason to change his views, and at once connected himself with the Scottish Episcopal Communion. Although this step may have disappointed his father and others who naturally looked forward to his becoming an ornament in

the Presbyterian Establishment, casting his lot with a small, despised, and persecuted people evinced the depth and sincerity of his convictions, and, as it has been expressed, the only sentiment which remained for the father to cherish was a fervent wish that the son might show himself sincere in his new profession, and do credit to the principles he had adopted. That he did so, his life will abundantly testify.

In the month of June, 1740, Mr Skinner accepted an invitation to become tutor to the only son of a gentleman in Shetland, Mr Sinclair of Scalloway. Here he remained till the death of his pupil's father, about a year afterwards, when the arrangements of the family rendered his services unnecessary, and he left with the sincere regret of all concerned. But the young man had gained other friends, with whom he was soon to form a nearer connection. Having enjoyed the acquaintance of the Rev. Mr Hunter, the only non-juring clergyman in the remote islands of Shetland, he had frequently been a visitor in the house of this pious and devoted man. A deep attachment had sprung up between him and Mr Hunter's family, and before leaving the district, he had won the affections of Grace, the minister's eldest daughter, and received in marriage the hand of her who, indeed a help-mate in many an hour of trial and affliction, was the companion of his joys and sorrows for the long period of fifty-eight years.

Returning to Aberdeenshire, in the summer of 1741, Mr Skinner completed his studies for the ministry, and was ordained a Presbyter of the Episcopal Church by Bishop Dunbar at Peterhead. A vacancy having occurred in the congregation at Longside, he accepted an unanimous invitation to become their pastor, and in November, 1742, when only twenty-one years of age, he entered upon his new and important charge.

Up to this time, Mr Skinner's life had been one of uninterrupted progress and unalloyed happiness; but it was not long to remain so. The church with which he had allied himself was soon to pass through a period of great oppression and suffering, in which he was destined to have his full share. The last effort of the Stuarts, in 1745-6, to regain their lost power had failed, and hard indeed was the lot of all who were deemed their friends. The adventurous band, under Prince Charlie, had been completely routed on the field of Culloden, and their brave-hearted leader, after wandering a fugitive among the woods and glens, forced to seek refuge in a foreign land. The scattered few were pursued by the victorious army with relentless cruelty, and the country became one scene of devastation. The Episcopalians, being in general Jacobites, were subjected to the most barbarous treatment, and the clergy became special objects of resentment. Their houses were plundered, their chapels destroyed, and their very lives endangered by the bands of lawless and ruthless soldiers sent through the country. Among others, Mr Skinner suffered in this vindictive persecution. For some time a prisoner, either in custody or on parole, he had often to leave his house and resort to stratagems lest he should fall into the hands of the soldiers. On one occasion, he attired himself in the garb of a miller, and thus escaped observation; and another most remarkable instance of the lawless severity of the times has been recorded. Mr Skinner was visiting at some distance one day, and on coming home in the evening, found his house in the possession of a military party—some of them guarding the door with fixed bayonets, and others searching the several apartments, even the bed-chamber where Mrs Skinner was lying-in of her fifth child. The house was pillaged by these unfeeling visitors of everything they

could carry with them, hardly leaving a change of linen to father, mother, or child. The little chapel, with all its furniture, was burned, and a lady of some rank is said to have manifested her zeal by riding in triumph round the blazing pile, repeating, with great zest, to the infuriated band—"Hold in the Prayer Books"! But Mr Skinner remained stedfast to his principles, and manifested his anxiety to maintain them by publishing, in 1746, a small tract, entitled a "Preservative against Presbytery"—the first of his literary productions.

About this time the severest restrictions were placed by Government on the Episcopal clergy. In 1746, an act was passed which prevented them from officiating to more than four persons, besides the members of the household, and in 1748, even that small privilege was taken from them, and it was rendered illegal to "exercise the function of a chaplain in any family." The penalties for infringement of these abominable enactments, which had no parallel since the days of the Reformation, were, for the first offence, six months' imprisonment, and, for the second, banishment out of Britain, either for a period of years, or for life.

Under such rigorous restrictions, the utmost caution was necessary; but Mr Skinner continued to visit among his people with untiring devotion, and the oppression only seemed to strengthen their attachment to him. Often, too, the congregation assembled at his lowly cottage, standing outside the house, in winter as well as summer, while he spoke to them from the window or the open door. It was on one of these occasions that the incident occurred which determined his preaching extempore. He had just commenced his sermon, when a hen which had got into one of the apartments cackled, and, means being used to get rid of her, the noisy visitor took flight, scattering in

every direction the unstitched pages that lay before the preacher. An effort was made to collect them, but without success. "Never mind them," said Mr Skinner, "a fowl shall not shut my mouth again"; and, true to his vow, he never used a manuscript afterwards. Thoroughly conversant with the Scriptures, and a firm, fluent speaker, though, no doubt, annoying at the time, there was little cause to regret this amusing and somewhat ludicrous occurrence.

Quietly and inoffensively Mr Skinner continued to discharge his duties as best he could, till several years afterwards, when he was most unexpectedly apprehended on a warrant from the Sheriff-Substitute of Aberdeenshire, and committed to prison. He at once acknowledged before the Sheriff having been in the way of officiating as a clergyman to more than four persons, besides his own family, and was accordingly sentenced to six months' imprisonment, which commenced on the 26th of May, 1753, terminating on the same day in November.

This outrageous act—for in no other light can we look upon it—naturally awakened the darkest fears in his family, and the deepest sorrow and indignation in his congregation. These feelings were shared in by many others, and no wonder. Mr Skinner had six children depending on him for their maintenance, and hard, indeed, must it have been to see a beloved father carried from their bosom like a common felon, it might be, to share the felon's doom. Keenly, too, although resigned to his lot, did the worthy man feel it, when thus cruelly severed from all he loved. The elder children showed the utmost anxiety, and one of them—the second son, who became Bishop of Aberdeen—was so affected that, his biographer tells us, he would have pined to death had not his father been permitted to receive him as his companion

and bed-fellow in prison. To one of these sad incidents in his life Mr Skinner thus adverts in the beautiful Epistle to a Daughter, now published for the first time—

Ere yet three suns had warm'd thy tender form,
Ere yet thy mother had got o'er her storm,
A band of armed ruffians round the bed
Where child and mother were together laid ;
Thy father seized in silent hour of night,
Thy mother trembling, and half kill'd with fright ;
And thou, sweet babe, with many a whimpering cry,
Uncared for and neglected, forced to lie.

But those who had been left so helpless when their guardian was taken from them were not forgotten. By generous and sympathising friends they were well provided for, until the expiry of his term of imprisonment, and welcome restoration to his family and his flock. A gradual change having taken place in public sentiment, more liberal laws were introduced, and in his humble sphere the good man struggled on, without a wish to change, till he had reached the venerable age of eighty-six.

Though humble his position and few his privileges, Mr Skinner attained great eminence as a scholar and theologian. Besides various publications of a controversial nature, he assisted Dr Gleig of Stirling, who had then the management of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, in preparing several articles for that work ; and in 1788, appeared in two volumes, his "*Ecclesiastical History of Scotland, from the First Appearance of Christianity in the Kingdom to the Present Time.*" In 1809, his posthumous works were published in three volumes, with a memoir by his son, the Bishop of Aberdeen, which embraces many valuable letters, and gives a very interesting and elaborate account of the progress of his studies, and the part he took in the religious controversies

of the time. On these we cannot enter; as a poet and a man Mr Skinner is now chiefly remembered, and as such it is our object to represent him.

With the growing responsibilities of a household, and placed in so straitened circumstances—literally passing rich on forty pounds a-year—Mr Skinner thought of bettering his position by farming. Accordingly, as nearly as can be ascertained, about 1758, he entered Mains of Ludquharn, a farm in the vicinity of Longside, which then formed part of the estate of the Earl of Erroll. But, devoted as he was to the duties of his profession, and otherwise ill adapted for the work, this speculation proved signally unsuccessful. After a hard struggle of nearly seven years, the farm was given up in disgust. In the “Letter to a Friend” on this occasion, one of the most humorous of his poetical effusions, he has given us a very minute account of his sufferings, and certainly they form abundant reasons for his resolution—

Another course to try—
 Sell corn and cattle off; pay every man;
 Get free of debt and duns as fast's I can;
 Give up the farm, with all its wants; and then,
 Why, even take me to the book and pen,—
 The fittest trade, I find, for clergymen.

On the subject of agricultural improvement, Mr Skinner held very peculiar opinions. He saw, or thought he saw as his son very cautiously tells us, that innovations in husbandry would lead the farmer into temptations, to which hitherto, in his pristine state of rural simplicity, when to plough, to sow, and to reap were all his care, he had been a perfect stranger. Nay, such was his prejudice against the landlord binding his tenant to a fixed rotation of crop that the introduction of the subject never failed to offend him. “What!” he would say, “has the boasted

freedom of our land really come to this, that the man who cultivates it is to become a slave, nay, the only slave to be found in our country? For, transfer a negro to the happy soil of Britain, and the law pronounces him free." As another illustration of this peculiarity—after all, not so remarkable, considering the age in which he lived—we may quote a few lines from an unpublished address which he puts into the mouth of a humble swain bidding farewell to his native parish:—

No need for bringing sage instructors north
 From Nature's rich domains beyond the Forth
 To teach thy farmers here, or spur them on
 To what they find, or should, or can be done;
 These in-brought helps would soon thy fields engross,
 And draw their profits from thy people's loss.
 Would, for their own behoof, shut many a door,
 Drive out the wealthies, and enslave the poor;
 Let but thy own have time—they have the skill—
 And family regard will spur the will.

Notwithstanding this, agricultural improvements—to the advantages of which he was not altogether blind—often formed the subject of conversation with the farmers in the neighbourhood, who were frequent visitors at his dwelling. The rural population were then extremely ignorant, and many an amusing instance of this came under the notice of the learned and worthy pastor. One may be here related. A good honest farmer had been spending an hour with Mr Skinner on one occasion, when the conversation happened to turn on the subject of the motion of the earth. The farmer would not be convinced that the earth moved at all. "The earth," he maintained, "never gaes oot o' the pairt, and it maun be that the sun gaes roun', for we a' ken that he rises in the east and sets i' the west;" and then, to silence his opponent, he put the following question:—"If the sun didna gae roun' the

earth, fu is it said in the Scriptures, that the Lord commanded the sun to stand still?" "Ay," responded Mr Skinner, in his own quiet way, "it's very true that the sun was commanded to *stand still*, and there he stands *still*, for he never was commanded to take the road again." As to the character of the people, however, he bears the following testimony in the poem to which we have referred :—

Cheerful, brisk, and keen,
In spirit lively, in apparel clean,
With proper feelings, and sufficient spring,
Good faithful subjects of their God and King.

But there were other visitors and other themes of conversation at Linshart. The lowly cottage, with its but-and-ben, was, in its day, a centre of attraction to young as well as old. Many a bright happy company met within its walls, presenting a pleasant contrast to the general austerity of the times; people could be "cheerful, brisk, and keen," even in those days, at Linshart. Mr Skinner had a rich fund of wit, a fluency in conversation, and a faculty of producing a laugh by grotesque combinations, especially in controversy, which made his company very fascinating. Perhaps, too, there were other attractions at the parsonage, for the daughters were growing up, and had all the pleasant art of "modulating the voice to melody." Be this as it may, the youth of the neighbourhood often met at the cottage to spend the evening, and the "old man," who delighted in mingling with such, had always some amusing story or appropriate song with which to entertain them. It was under these inspiring influences that most of his songs were composed, and in some of them, as the Old Man's Song, and the admirable allegory of Lizzy Liberty, we can easily trace the inspiration. When the daughters had any favourite tune without words, he was applied to, and would gratify their

wishes—perhaps leaning backward in his chair, and without the slightest effort—while they gathered round him and eagerly committed the lines to memory; and when any love adventure came to light, he seldom failed to make it the theme of some appropriate song or epistle, which he would relate, to the infinite delight of the youthful listeners, who were never satisfied till it also was learned. Thus produced and treasured up, the songs passed from one to another, and, long before their publication, some of them had become popular in many parts of Scotland.

In “The Old Man’s Song,” we have a sketch from real life—a genuine fireside picture—and delightful indeed it must have been to see the worthy sire with his “old wife sitting by,” and children and grandchildren around him. Here, too, he used to show the readiness and versatility of his poetic faculty. Possessing a singular power of adapting himself to the humble capacities of the “young folks,” as the Bishop, who himself had formed one of the happy circle, tells us, he would make them verses by the hour, and try to call forth the latent spark of genius by proposing questions which, though simple in themselves, were so arranged and expressed as to convey the idea of extreme difficulty. A little occurrence, on one occasion of this kind, is worthy of being preserved. His eldest grandson having failed to discover the little artifice employed to perplex him, was not a little alarmed by hearing his grandfather say that even Thomas the Rhymer had prophesied on the subject of the *fourth* John Skinner’s lamentable weakness of mind and want of capacity:—

The world shall *four* JOHN SKINNERS see,
 The *first* shall teach a school;
 The other *two* shall parsons be,
 And the *fourth* shall be a fool!

The prophet, however, was wrong. The young man became a clergyman, and the old man lived to make an honourable reparation. For after grandfather, father, and son had officiated at the same diet of worship in the chapel at Longside, he presented him with a beautiful compliment in Latin, which has been thus quaintly but expressively put into English :—

Of the same blood in pulpit now *three* JOHNS appear,—
 Grandfather, Father, and—alike to both—a Grandson dear ;
 The *first* for genius famed, the *second* for the preacher's art,
 In both of which the *third* now plays a shining part ;
 The powers of Nature's self no farther stretch could bear,
 The Son she with the Father blends, and does the Grandson rear.

Many more instances of Skinner's peculiar facility in versifying might be presented ; in his day, not a few could have quoted them by the dozen, and even yet there are old people who remember some of them. Being informed once of the somewhat sudden death of an individual whose life had not been characterised by either virtue or good deeds, he thus expressed himself—

Beneath this sod lies —— Scott who lived like a fool and
 died like a sot,
 But it's needless to argue whether he was so or not ;
 He was a man was despised and will soon be forgot,

and there is sound philosophy in the last line. There is an old prophecy of the famous Rhymer, which goes—

Dee and Don shall run in one,
 And Tweed shall run in Tay,
 And the bonny water of Ury
 Shall bear the Bass away,

of which he furnished the following interpretation, when the union was first proposed between King's and Marischal

Colleges ; from recent transactions it seems, in more ways than one, to have had a modern application :—

Ere Scotia was by Longshanks thrall'd,
A noted bard she had,
And Thomas Rhymer he was call'd,
As I have somewhere heard ;

Thro' Albion's regions far and wide,
Of mighty fame he was ;
And wond'rous things he prophesied
Should sometime come to pass.

That " Dee and Don shall run in one,"
'Mong other things he told ;
But to this day 'twas never known
How such a thing could hold.

In mystic garb his speech he drest,
As prophets used to do,
And what he darkly thus exprest
Begins to open now.

'Twas not that Don should run to Dee,
Or Dee run into Don,
But that their *Colleges* should be
United into one.

In honour, then, of Scotland's bard,
May *King* and *Earl* agree,
And *royal* Don not think it hard
To join with *martial* Dee.

So shall Philosophy's fair streams
Enlarge their former course,
And Learning's congregated beams
Shall shine with double force.

According to his favourite maxim that an intermixture of the jocular with the serious is always pleasant,

Mr Skinner often employed a leisure hour during his studies in composing some familiar strain, but it is worthy of remark that all his best productions were written at the suggestion of others. His muse seemed to require some special stimulus to exert its full strength. Although he possessed great powers as a controversialist, and could wield them unsparingly when occasion demanded, in company he was not only agreeable himself, but had a happy facility in making all others agreeable.

The famous song of "Tullochgorum" is a striking example of what we have said, and we will here relate—not exactly as it generally is—the incident which led to its production. On the occasion of a meeting of the Scotch clergy at Ellon, a small village in Aberdeenshire, Mr Skinner had gone to spend the day, with some others, at the house of a Mrs Montgomery. After dinner, a warm dispute of a political nature arose, during which the lady expressed to Mr Skinner—who was taking little part in it—her surprise that no appropriate words had been composed to the "fine old strathspey called the Reel of Tullochgorum," and, having asked for a song, he at once gratified her wishes, and, as Burns has observed, "the wishes of every lover of Scottish song, in this most excellent ballad." Our national poet was so fond of Tullochgorum, that he speaks of it at one time as "the first of songs," and at another as "the best Scotch song ever Scotland saw." Robert Chambers says something of a national as well as a patriotic character may be claimed for it, and certainly no song has taken a deeper hold on the affections of the people, or attained a wider celebrity. It is sung at our social gatherings, printed in every "collection," and there are few in Scotland who could not quote some of its sparkling, pithy lines. What is

more common, when speaking of the tunes of other countries, than—

I wadna gie our ain strathspeys
For half a hunder score o' them.

Or, again, on certain occasions—

For blythe and cheerie we'll be a',
As lang as we hae breath to draw,
And dance, till we be like to fa',
The Reel o' Tullochgorum.

Besides its intrinsic excellencies—generous sentiment, and lively, vigorous expression, the song gives a pleasant and faithful picture of Scottish character and customs.

Another song, which has attained a popularity only surpassed by that of Tullochgorum, affords a marked illustration of some of Skinner's peculiarities. "The Ewie wi' the Crookit Horn" is generally supposed to be a metaphor for the whisky still, and this vulgar error may have been fallen into from the fact that the words were written to an old Highland tune which had been so named. The song was requested of Mr Skinner, and the circumstance possesses some interest. About the time he occupied the farm of Mains of Ludquharn, Dr Beattie, then Professor of Moral Philosophy in Marischal College, Aberdeen, had been requested to write a pastoral song, and, having made the attempt, produced the following stanza, but could get no farther :—

The Ewie wi' the crookit horn,
Sic a ewe was never born,
Hereabout nor far awa'.

These lines the Professor—himself already an acknowledged poet—sent to Mr Skinner, as the "best qualified in Scotland," with the request to write a song that would suit the tune. With this hint, Mr Skinner at once set

to work, and produced the song which justly occupies so high a place among our household favourites. The heroine was a real character, and what could be more exquisitely touching than the discovery of her sad end:—

Yet last ook, for a' my keeping—
Wha can speak it without greeting?—
A villain cam when I was sleeping,
Sta' my Ewie, horn and a'.
I sought her sair upo' the morn,
And down aneath a buss o' thorn
I got my Ewie's crookit horn,
But my Ewie was awa'.

And then the genuine lament, and generous call on other bards to join, in which Skinner recognises himself as a poet:—

But thus, poor thing! to lose her life
Aneath a bloody villaiu's knife,
I'm really fley't that our guidwife
Will never win aboon't ava.
Oh! a' ye bards benorth Kinghorn,
Call your muses up and mourn,
Our Ewie wi' the crookit horn,
Stown frae's, and fell'd and a'!

This song suggested Burns' Elegy on his "pet yowe," Poor Mailie, which, although a very elegant morsel, as Hogg says, resembles the "Ewie" too closely to be admired as original. The similarity in some verses is, indeed, very striking, as, for instance, when Burns says—

Oh, a' ye bards on bonnie Doon,
An' wha on Ayr your chanter's tune,
Come, join the melancholius croon
O' Robin's reed!
His heart will never get aboon—
Poor Mailie's dead!

As a song writer, Skinner justly ranks high. There is nothing forced or artificial about his effusions; natural,

simple, and pathetic, they bear the stamp of sincerity and breathe our common sentiments, sympathies, and aspirations. One has remarked that their titles have only to be named to remind us how much is due to Skinner as a song writer; and Dr Rogers has said, "no song compositions of any modern writer in Scottish verse have, with the exception of those of Burns, maintained a stronger hold of the Scottish heart, or been more commonly sung in the social circle."

But a greater than either—even Robert Burns himself—was a warm admirer equally of the man and the poet, and many a hearty compliment did he give them. When Burns paid his visit to the north in 1787, he spent a short time in Aberdeen, and was introduced to Bishop Skinner at the printing office of Mr Chalmers. To the Ayrshire poet this was an interesting meeting, and with the worthy son of Tullochgorum he spent a most agreeable hour. "Did not your father write 'The Ewie wi' the Crookit Horn?" said Burns. "Yes," was the reply. "Oh, an I had the loun that did it!" he continued in a rapture of praise; "but tell him how I love, and esteem, and venerate his truly Scottish muse." In the course of the conversation, Burns remarked that he had been at Gordon Castle, and came by Peterhead. "Then," said the Bishop, "you were within four Scotch miles of Tullochgorum's dwelling." This changed the scene. Burns was deeply grieved at having missed the opportunity of seeing one for whom he entertained so sincere a regard, and whom he delighted to honour as a "brother bard." When parting with the Bishop, shaking his hand as if he had been really a brother, "Well," said the first of Scottish poets, "I am happy in having seen you, and thereby conveying my long-harboured sentiments of regard for your worthy sire; assure him of it in the

heartiest manner, and that never did a devotee of the Virgin Mary go to Loretto with more fervour than I would have approached his dwelling, and worshipped at his shrine." On learning what had taken place, the humble parson poet, though now nearly seventy years of age as lively and social as ever, was duly gratified, and sincerely sorry that he had missed seeing the famous ploughman poet. He at once produced an acknowledgment, in the form of a "Familiar Epistle to Robie Burns, the Ploughman Poet, in his own style." We have first an expression of satisfaction that his son, or "chill," as he calls him, had met with Burns, and then with genuine regret he says—

Wae's my auld heart I wasna wi' you,
 Tho' worth your while I couldna gie you;
 But sin' I hadna hap to see you
 Whan ye was north,
 I'm bauld to send my service to you,
 Hyne o'er the Forth.
 Sae proud's I am that ye hae heard
 O' my attempts to be a bard,
 And think my muse nae that ill-fawrd,
 Seil o' your face!
 I wadna wish for mair reward
 Than your guid grace.

Then we have a graceful and generous compliment to the poet—

Your bonny beukie, line by line,
 I've read, and think it freely fine;
 Indeed, I winna ca't divine,
 As others might;
 For that, ye ken, frae pen like mine,
 Wad no be right.
 But, by my sang, I dinna wonner,
 That ye've admirers mony hun'er;
 Let gowkit sleeps pretend to skunner,
 And tak offence,
 Ye've naething said that leuks like blun'er
 To fowk o' sense.

After particularising several poems, and pronouncing the ploughman a miracle—"deny't wha may"—a hope is expressed that he may long continue to write as he had been doing—

But thanks to praise, ye're i' your prime,
 And may chant on this lang, lang, time ;
 For, lat me tell you, 'tware a crime
 To haud your tongue,
 Wi' sic a knack's ye hae at rhyme,
 And ye sae young.

In a few easy, friendly verses, Mr Skinner proposes a correspondence with Burns ; this is one of them, and there is a touch of fine devotion in it—

An hour or sae, by hook or crook,
 And maybe twa, some orra ouk,
 That I can spare frae haly beuk,
 For that's my hobby,
 I'll slip awa' to some bye neuk,
 And crack wi' Robie.

And then, concludes the good-hearted old man—

Sae, canty ploughman, fare ye weel,
 Lord bless you lang wi' hae and heil,
 And keep you aye the honest chiel
 That ye hae been ;
 Syne lift ye to a better biel
 When this is dane.

After this, a short but interesting correspondence took place between these rhyming brothers, and an attachment was formed, the depth and strength of which can only be known to the sons of the muse. Burns responded to the Epistle, not in "rhyming ware," but, as he tells us, "in plain dull prose," and designates it the best poetical compliment he ever received. The letter, though without

a date, would appear to have been written at Edinburgh about the end of October, 1787 :—

REVEREND AND VENERABLE SIR,—Accept, in plain, dull prose, my most sincere thanks for the best poetical compliment I ever received. I assure you, Sir, as a poet, you have conjured up an airy demon of vanity in my fancy, which the best abilities in your other capacity would be ill able to lay. I regret, and, while I live, shall regret, that when I was in the north, I had not the pleasure of paying a younger brother's dutiful respect to the author of the best Scotch song ever Scotland saw—"Tullochgorum's my delight!" The world may think slightly of the craft of song-making if they please, but, as Job says, "Oh, that mine adversary had written a book!" let them try. There is a certain something in the old Scotch songs—a wild happiness of thought and expression—which peculiarly marks them, not only from English songs, but also from the modern efforts of song-wrights, in our native manner and language. The only remains of this enchantment—these spells of the imagination—rests with you. Our true brother, Ross of Lochlee, was likewise "owre cannie"—a "wild warlock"—but now he sings among the "sons of the morning." I have often wished, and will certainly endeavour, to form a kind of common acquaintance among all the genuine sons of Caledonian song. The world, busy in low prosaic pursuits, may overlook most of us; but "reverence thyself." The world is not our peers, so we challenge the jury. We can lash that world, and find ourselves a very great source of amusement and happiness independent of that world. There is a work going on in Edinburgh just now, which claims your best assistance. An engraver in this town has set about collecting and publishing all the Scotch songs, with the music, that can be found. Songs in the English language, if by Scotchmen, are admitted; but the music must all be Scotch. Drs Beattie and Blacklock are lending a hand, and the first musician in town presides over that department. I have been absolutely crazed about it, col-

lecting old stanzas, and every information remaining, respecting their origin, authors, &c. This last is but a very fragment business, but at the end of his second number—the first is already published—a small account will be given of the authors, particularly to preserve those of latter times. Your three songs —“Tullochgorum,” “John o’ Badenyon,” and “Ewie wi’ the Crookit Horn”—go in this second number. I was determined, before I got your letter, to write you, begging that you would let me know where the editions of these pieces may be found, as you would wish them to continue to future times; and if you would be so kind to this undertaking as send any songs, of your own or others, that you would think proper to publish. Your name will be inserted among the other authors, “*nil ye, will ye.*” One half of Scotland already give your songs to other authors. Paper is done. I beg to hear from you—the sooner the better, as I leave Edinburgh in a fortnight or three weeks. I am, with the warmest sincerity, Sir, your obliged humble servant,

ROBERT BURNS.

The work referred to in this letter was “Johnson’s Muscum,” a Musical Miscellany, and it will be seen from the following, dated 14th November, with what readiness Mr Skinner gave his assistance:—

SIR,—Your kind return, without date, but of post-mark October 25th, came to my hand only this day; and, to testify my punctuality to my poetic engagement, I sit down immediately to answer it in kind. Your acknowledgment of my poor but just encomiums on your surprising genius, and your opinion of my rhyming excursions, are both, I think, by far too high. The difference between our two tracks of education, and ways of life, is entirely in your favour, and gives you the preference every manner of way. I know a classical education will not create a versifying taste, but it mightily improves and assists it; and though, where both these meet, there may sometimes be ground for approbation, yet where taste appears single, as it were, and neither cramped nor supported by acquisition, I will

always sustain the justice of its prior claim to applause. A small portion of taste this way I have had almost from childhood, especially in the old Scottish dialect, and it is as old a thing as I remember, my fondness for "Chryste-Kirk on the Green," which I had by heart ere I was twelve years of age, and which, some years ago, I attempted to turn into Latin verse. While I was young, I dabbled a good deal in these things; but, on getting the black gown, I gave it pretty much over, till my daughters grow up, who, being all tolerably good singers, plagued me for words to some of their favourite tunes, and so extorted those effusions which have made a public appearance beyond my expectations, and contrary to my intentions—at the same time that I hope there is nothing to be found in them uncharacteristic, or unbecoming the cloth, which I would always wish to see respected. As to the assistance you propose from me in the undertaking you are engaged in, I am sorry I cannot give it so far as I could wish, and you, perhaps, expect. My daughters, who were my only intelligencers, are all *foris-familiate*, and the old woman, their mother, has lost that taste. There are two from my own pen which I might give you, if worth the while—one to the old Scotch tune of "Dumbarton's Drums." The other perhaps you have met with, as your noble friend, the Duchess has, I am told, heard of it. It was squeezed out of me by a brother parson in her neighbourhood, to accommodate a new Highland reel for the Marquis birthday, to the stanza of

Tune your fiddles, tune them sweetly.

If this last answer your purpose, you may have it from a brother of mine, Mr James Skinner, writer in Edinburgh, who, I believe, can give the music too. There is another humorous thing, I have heard, said to be done by the Catholic priest, Geddes, and which hit my taste much:—

There was a wee wifeikie was comin' frae the fair,
Had gotten a little drapikie, which bred her meikle eare;
It took upo' the wife's heart, and she began to spew,
And quo' the wee wifeikie I wish I binna fou.

I have heard of another new composition by a young ploughman of my acquaintance, that I am vasily pleased with, to the tune of the "Humours of Glen," which, I fear, won't do, as the music, I am told, is of Irish origin. I have mentioned these, such as they are, to show my readiness to oblige you, and to contribute my mite, if I could, to the patriotic work you have in hand, and which I wish all success to. You have only to notify your mind, and what you want of the above shall be sent you. Meantime, while you are thus publicly, I may say, employed, do not sheath your own proper and piercing weapon. From what I have seen of yours already, I am inclined to hope for much good. One lesson of virtue and morality delivered in your amusing style, and from such as you, will operate more than dozens would do from such as me, who shall be told it is our employment, and be never more minded; whereas, from a pen like yours, as being one of the many, what comes will be admired. Admiration will produce regard, and regard will leave an impression, especially when example goes along.

Now binna saying I'm ill bred,
 Else, by my troth, I'll no be glad;
 For cadgers, ye ha'e heard it said,
 And sic like fry,
 Maun aye be harlin in their trade,
 And sae maun I.

Wishing you, from my poet-pen, all success, and in my other character, all happiness and heavenly direction, I remain, with esteem, your sincere friend,
JOHN SKINNER.

We may mention here that, although some have doubted it, "The Wee Wifeikie" is now attributed, by good authorities, to the well-known translator of the Bible and polemical writer, Dr Geddes, who was a native of Banffshire, and officiated as a priest for several years in different parts of the north of Scotland. The "young ploughman" was Mr William Lillie, of Inverugie, near Peterhead, who wrote several songs and poems of con-

siderable merit. The next letter from Burns is dated at Edinburgh, the 14th February, 1788 :—

REVEREND AND DEAR SIR,—I have been a cripple now near three months, though I am getting vastly better, and have been very much hurried beside, or else I would have wrote you sooner. I must beg your pardon for the epistle you sent me appearing in the Magazine. I had given a copy or two to some of my intimate friends, but did not know of the printing of it till the publication of the Magazine. However, as it does great honour to us both, I hope you will forgive it. The second volume of the songs I mentioned to you in my last, is published to-day. I send you a copy, which I beg you will accept as a mark of the veneration I have long had, and shall ever have, for your character, and of the claim I make to your continued acquaintance. Your songs appear in the third volume, with your name in the index, as I assure you, Sir, I have heard your “Tullochgorum,” particularly among our west country folks, given to many different names, and most commonly to the immortal author of the “Minstrel,” who, indeed, never wrote anything superior to “Gie’s a sang Montgomery cried.” Your brother has promised me your verses to the Marquis of Huntly’s Reel, which certainly deserve a place in the collection. My kind host, Mr Cruickshank of the High School here, and said to be one of the best Latins in this age, begs me to make you his grateful acknowledgments for the entertainment he has got in a Latin publication of yours that I borrowed for him from your acquaintance, and my much respected friend, in this place, the Rev. Dr Webster. Mr Cruickshank maintains that you write the best Latin since Buchanan. I leave Edinburgh to-morrow, but shall return in three weeks. Your song you mentioned in your last, to the tune of “Dumbarton’s Drums,” and the other, which you say was done by a brother by trade of mine, a ploughman, I shall thank you much for a copy of each. I am ever, reverend Sir, with the most respectful esteem, and sincere veneration, yours,

ROBERT BURNS.

The high compliment here paid to Skinner's Latin poems has been confirmed by others. They have been much admired by men of learning for their purity and elegance. His facility in turning English into Latin was most wonderful, and a translation from Homer, it has been said, loses nothing of the vigour and spirit of the Greek original. The reply to this last letter was written on the 28th of April, in the same year :—

DEAR SIR,—I received your last, with the curious present you have favoured me with, and would have made proper acknowledgments before now, but that I have been necessarily engaged in matters of a different complexion. And now that I have got a little respite, I make use of it to thank you for this valuable instance of your good-will, and to assure you that, with the sincere heart of a true Scotsman, I highly esteem both the gift and the giver—as a small testimony of which I have herewith sent you, for your amusement (and in a form which I hope you will excuse, for saving postage) the two songs I wrote about to you already. “Charming Nancy” is the real production of genius in a ploughman of twenty years of age at the time of its appearing, with no more education than what he picked up at an old farmer grandfather's fire-side. And I doubt not but you will find in it, a simplicity and delicacy, with some turns of humour, that will please one of your taste ; at least it pleased me when I first saw it, if that can be any recommendation to it. The other is entirely descriptive of my own sentiments, and you may make use of one or both as you shall see good. You will oblige me by presenting my respects to your host, Mr Cruickshank, who has given such high approbation to my poor Latinity. You may let him know, that as I have likewise been a dabbler in Latin poetry, I have two things that I would, if he desires it, submit, not to his judgment, but to his amusement—the one, a translation of “Chryste-Kirk o' the Green,” printed at Aberdeen some years ago ; the other, “*Batrachomyomachia Homeri latinis vestita cum additamentis,*”

given in lately to Chalmers to print, if he pleases. Mr C. will know "*Seria non semper delectant, non joca semper. Semper delectant seria mixta jocis.*" I have just room to repeat compliments and good wishes from, Sir, your humble servant,

JOHN SKINNER.

It is pleasant to see such men as Robert Burns and the Rev. John Skinner thus conversing together, and we think all the more of the "noble twain" in light of their warm and disinterested devotion. Speaking of Skinner's songs on one occasion, Burn's adds—"and what is of still more consequence, he is one of the worthiest of mankind." This was seen in every relation of life. The district around Linshart was perhaps one of the most barren and desolate in Scotland. A plain of almost two miles square was unbroken by either house, or tree, or stone, or shrub; in her gayest moods, it was observed, Nature never wore a pleasant aspect in Long-gate (the appropriate name of one part of the uninhabited waste), nor did the distant prospect compensate for the dreary gloominess of the surrounding landscape. But over the solitude there was always one cheering ray. Every visitor was welcome at the little cottage, and in the darkest night there was a star to guide the humble pedestrian. "What consolation have I," the good man used to say; "my taper never burns in vain. For should it fail to cheer myself and family, it never fails to cheer some roaming youth or solitary traveller, since the polar star itself is not truer to its position than is the Linshart candle, its rise and set, true to the Buchan hind;" and never did he retire to rest with comfort while there was the chance of any human creature traversing the Long-gate. Living in a scene so little calculated to invite poetic inspiration, may account for the fact that Skinner

has written nothing on natural scenery, for we know that he could appreciate the beauties of nature. But all is changed now. The low thatched cottage, which still stands about half a mile southwards of the village of Longside, has been improved, and in place of the dreary waste, the lands are highly cultivated, and the prospect diversified with trees and comfortable dwellings.

About the end of the year 1799, Mr Skinner lost his beloved partner, who had taken her part so joyfully in the cares and responsibilities of rearing a family of seven, and had been the devoted companion of his life for eight years more than half a century. This was a sad affliction to the old man, now nearly eighty, and we cannot better express his feelings and wishes than in the following verses, written about two years afterwards, on being asked by Mr Ferguson of Pitfour what he could do to make him comfortable :—

Lodged in a canty cell of nine feet square,
 Bare bread and sowans and milk my daily fare ;
 Shoes for my feet, soft clothing for my back—
 If warm, no matter whether blue or black :
 In such a sober, low, contented state,
 What comfort now need I from rich or great ?

Now in my eightieth year, my thread near spun,
 My race through poverty and labour run,
 Wishing to be by all my flock beloved,
 And for long service by my Judge approved ;
 Death at my door, and heaven in my eye,
 From rich or great what comfort now need I ?

Let but our sacred edifice go on
 With cheerfulness until the work be done ;
 Let but my flock be faithfully supplied,
 My friends all with their lot well satisfied ;
 Then, oh, with joy and comfort from on high,
 Let me in Christian quiet calmly die,
 And lay my ashes in my Grizel's grave,
 'Tis all I wish upon the earth to have !

Several years after his bereavement, Mr Skinner received a pressing invitation from his son, the Bishop, to go to Aberdeen and spend his last days in a family where every attention could be shown to his weakness and his wants. His acceptance of this invitation was intimated in a letter dated May 25, 1807, and the following are the last words he wrote:—"I cordially embrace your proposal, and am making preparations to be with you, God willing, next week. By that time you will have got your Forfar friends about you, and I wish much to share in that pleasure, and see once more my children's grand-children, and peace upon Israel. So God grant us a happy meeting, even here, and at last, a still more happy meeting in Abraham's bosom hereafter. This is the constant, and shall, I hope, be the dying wish of your truly and deservedly affectionate father."

Although he may have felt a momentary regret on leaving his rural abode—the scene of his labours for nearly sixty-five years—and resigning his flock to the care of another, Mr Skinner removed to Aberdeen on the 4th of June, but was not long to enjoy the company and kindness of his devoted relatives. After a slight illness, he fell asleep, without a struggle or a sigh, in the arms of his son, on the 16th of June, 1807, being thus in his eighty-sixth year. According to his request, his remains, attended by a large assemblage of sorrowing friends, were carried to the churchyard of Longside, and over the grave was erected a handsome monument, which bears a noble tribute to the memory of him who—LIVED SO JUSTLY RESPECTED, AND DIED SO SINCERELY LAMENTED.