

## WILLIAM NICHOLSON, THE PEDLAR-POET OF GALLOWAY.

“Genius must be born, and never can be taught.”—*Dryden*.

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THE career of genius is rarely that of happiness or fortune, and no more signal illustration of this apothegm exists than the life of William Nicholson, author of that remarkable creation of genius, “The Brownie of Blednoch,” or “Aiken-drum.” One is almost tempted to think the world was not made for geniuses, and yet, what would it be without them? Lessing remarked that he had tried to have things like other folks, but it had proved an utter failure in his case; and we suspect that the subject of our sketch, though in a somewhat different sphere of life from the German dramatist, would have been ready to make the same confession at the sad end of his hapless career. That he had higher hopes and aspirations, and purer desires at one time of his life, is very evident from the beautiful prayer of the “Wild Woodside.” One can fancy him with such sentiments in life’s pleasant morning, with “Young Fancy’s rays the hills adorning”; and yet there is a touch of sadness in it, as if he had already tasted some of the sorrow which is ever creeping into even the lives of the most fortunate of mortals. After expatiating on the wintry scene, he breaks off, all at once, into this humble and beautiful petition:—

“Sweet Peace! descend—be thou my friend,  
And white-robed Innocence my guide;  
And teach me clear my course to steer,  
Poor wanderer by the wild wood-side.

Not yet had the vision grown dim, not yet had the ‘shades of the prison-house’ begun to close about his life. What a dream, what a beautiful vision—that of walking through life hand in hand with ‘sweet Peace’ and ‘white-robed Innocence!’ Alas! that there should ever come, as in his case, the doleful awakening.

William Nicholson, the Galloway poet, was born at Tannymaus,

in a cottage situated partly in the parish of Borgue, and partly in Twynholm. Like most men of genius, he seems to have owed a great deal to his mother, Janet Houston, who was a remarkable woman in her way. Endowed with a retentive memory, she could repeat many of the ballads and traditional stories of her fatherland. She had a passion for poetry; and, as William was the youngest of a large family of eight, and was left much to the society of his father and mother, he, no doubt, both inherited and imbibed many of their tastes; for the father, James Nicholson, is reported to have been a man of considerable observation, with a large fund of anecdote, and great fondness for music. He was also well acquainted with many of the characters that have since become famous in history or fiction. He was on friendly terms with "Old Mortality;" and Billy Marshall, the famous Gallovidian gipsy or *tinkler*, who died 28th November, 1792, at the advanced age of 120 years, was an occasional visitor at his house. He was a carrier to and from the town of Dumfries, and various parts of the Stewartry; and it was upon one of these carrying expeditions with wines, &c., for the laird of Borgue, *circa* 1760, that he met Janet Houston, daughter of Samuel Houston, tenant of Meikle Carleton (now Earlston, the seat of Sir William Gordon). Not long afterwards he married Miss Houston, and the newly-wedded couple settled in the village of Kirkandrews (pronounced Kirkanners) on the Borgue shore; and, some years after, they removed to the Eel Holes, a cottage near Barncrosh, in the parish of Tongland, where William was first put to school, under a Mr. Kelly.

At the little village of Ringford, near the town of Kirkcudbright, he received all the learning he ever got, except the education such a boy is sure to give himself by multifarious reading. But the "blue vault of heaven" was more grateful to William than the schoolroom; and Mr. McDiarmid informs us that nearly the whole of his literary performances were achieved in the open air. Naturally indolent, he disliked the trouble of attending school, and, under an indulgent father, he only found his way there occasionally, like Andra Kissock. Probably, also, the defect of vision which caused him, when reading, to bring his book almost in contact with his nose, added to his dislike of school; because this performance never failed to excite the risible faculties of his school-fellows, and this the sensitive boy could ill brook. A favourite book dreamed over, on a sunny day, upon the broom-clad

banks of his favourite Tarf, was Nicholson's idea of going to school.

The result of his own disposition, and his father's indulgence, was that he left school, says Mr. McDiarmid, after learning to read indifferently, and with a very slight knowledge of the commonest rules of Arithmetic—a science which he ever held in abhorrence. To any one reading his works, in the light of these facts, the greatness of the man's genius is at once apparent—a genius which made by force its merit known. His fondness for books was coeval with his ability to read them; and even when a mere boy he had a store of chapbooks, songs, ballads, &c., which he read and re-read with that eagerness and enjoyment, which only the boy of genius evinces for such treasure-trove. It was quite common for him, even in winter, when he fell in with a fresh book, to forsake the house, and betaking himself to the shelter of a hedge or plantation, remain there for hours on end, to all appearance as regardless of the cold, and the outer world, as if no such things existed.

The morning of youth passed all too quickly for the dreamy boy, and soon he had to choose a trade, in order to earn his livelihood. Owing to his defective eyesight, he was unfitted for being a shepherd, or ploughman, and so it was decreed that, with a capital of one guinea, he was to start life as a packman, a trade of considerable importance in his time, and one which often proved remunerative when conducted with care and prudence, but "prudent, cautious, self-control," was no more one of his endowments, than it was of Scotland's national bard. In the worldly wisdom, characteristic of the trade, he was sadly deficient, and thriftlessness, indecision, and indolence, were his besetting sins.

His artistic temperament set him musing in poetic fancy over every vista of beautiful scenery he came to, and thus he would linger about drinking in the beauties of nature, like some painter with his sketch-book, to the utter neglect of his business. Possibly he might, in happier circumstances, have made a pedlar like the hero of "The Excursion," but as a money-making packman he was nowhere. By-and-by the pack failed him, and soon want, misery and ruin, stared him in the face. From this time forward his life was a series of misfortunes. Following the wise man's advice to forget his sorrow in the wine cup, the effect on his highly-strung, poetic temperament, was disastrous in the extreme. A literary friend of mine tells me that a gentleman of his acquaintance remembers, when a boy, seeing "old Will" seated on a stone-heap

by the roadside, in the *delirium tremens* stage, with a thick, knotty stick in his hand, smashing the heads of the devils, or calling out to an imaginary troop of terrier-dogs, named "Pepper" and "Mustard," &c., &c., to come close up to him, and then he smote them "hip and thigh." But why repeat such stories? Suffice it to say that his health, and his mental and moral powers became, at length, impaired; and, as Dr. John Brown says, "he is still remembered in that region for his humour, his music, his verse, and his gingham; and also, alas! for his misery and his sin."

Remembering the advice of Burns to "Gently scan our brother man," let us draw a veil over the misery and shortcomings of his later years, for—

" A soul exasperated in ills falls out  
With everything,—its friend, itself."

This was not the real man, but only some strange caricature of him who used to be the life and soul of every lonely town-end with his music,<sup>1</sup> "his stories and jokes and ballads, his songs and reels and 'wanton wiles.'" The real man is to be sought for in his works, in the preface to which he solicits the charitable judgment of the public in estimating his poems, and so would we be inclined to judge charitably of his life, and cast the mantle of oblivion over all that was unworthy of the "lofty vow"; and, forgetting the thriftless and finally packless pedlar, we would desire only to remember him as the man of genius and a true poet.

Judged by his works, William Nicholson appears no ordinary man. There is all the spontaneity, ease, and abandon about his verses, which Goethe considered indicative of the highest genius. As Mr. Malcolm Harper remarks in his able introduction to "The Bards of Galloway,"—"There was no doubt as to the genuineness of *his* inspiration. His songs, crooned over by the peasantry at 'the gloamin' and the milkin' hour,' or warbled by the shepherd as he tended his sheep on the hill-side, soon became popular."

His "Country Lass," a long, narrative poem, is excellent, showing much of Crabbe's or Wordsworth's descriptive and delineative power; while his portraits of character are telling and terse, and not unworthy of Burns himself. His "Tale of Terror" is Dantesque, and reminds one of some of the scenes in the *Inferno*.

<sup>1</sup> Besides his turn for verse, Nicholson had a melodious voice, and was proud of his performances on the bagpipes.

He looked upon nature with the eye of an artist, and his observations are sympathetic and instinct with poetry. Take this from one of his songs:—

“ November wins blaw loud and chill,  
The bird chirms o'er the leafless tree ;  
The wintry blast is comin' fast,  
And loudly roars the restless sea.”

There is true poetic insight here. “The bird chirms o'er the leafless tree,” at once calls up a picture of Winter in all his desolateness; but this is just at random. Turn where you will, there is scarcely a poem or song that does not contain verses or lines which stamp him a true poet, as opposed to the poetaster. There are pictures in his “Rural Retirement” which recall the “Cottar's Saturday Night,” and that exquisite lyric, “My Ain kind Dearie, O”—

“ Leeze me on e'en, whan hill and tree  
Are pictured in the vallies ;  
When lassies to the loanin' hie,  
To milk and feed their mailies ;  
While sweet and lang they lilt the saug,  
As lads come frae the mawin',  
Wha prie their mou' ere it be lang,  
In corner till the dawin'.

“ When seated roun' the milkin' slap  
Their toils are a' forgotten ;  
For lasses looks hae ay the knack  
To stir up fun and joku'.  
The lads that's kind will bear the pail,  
And pair as love directs them ;  
While lightly footin' 't owre the dale  
Nae doubts or fears perplex them.

. . . . .

“ Here auld fouks live wi' bairns' bairns,  
And blest wi' peace and plenty ;  
Here parents' hope the bosom warms,  
Here youth blooms fair and dainty.  
Here dwalls the mither's virtuous smiles,  
The faithfu' friend and father ;  
Unlike them skilled in city wiles,  
That aften slip the tether.

“ Here grey-beard mirth forgets his years,  
And tells his tale fou cheerly ;  
Amazed, the listening youngster hears  
The feats o' Papish Charlie.

But whan the lasses tune the lays,  
 As Coila's Bard composed them ;  
 'Bout thoughtless joys o' lover's waes,  
 They dirl through the bosom."

Fain would we quote the whole poem, as there are verses that make us inclined to exclaim:—"But thee, Theocritus, wha matches?" What could be finer than this?—

"The moon, like ony buskēd bride,  
 In siller gray was glancin',  
 And on the restless, rocking tide,  
 Her lightsome locks were dancin'."

Or this:—

"The sheep amang the breckan braes  
 Are feedin' wi' their lammies ;  
 There, kids, as white as new-bleached claes,  
 'Maug crags bleat for their mammies.  
 The shepherd lad, sae blythe and gay,  
 Does loudly tune his chanter ;  
 Plays — 'Owre the hills and far away,'  
 To chase ilk care and canker."

Neither Theocritus nor Virgil, in their charming pastorals, have done much better than some of the descriptions and delineations of rural sights and sounds in this poem. Where all is so good it is difficult to select quotations; but, in order to show the poet's happy picturing of some of the minuter phenomena of nature, we are tempted to quote another stanza:—

"The sun blinks blithely on the pool  
 That bickers to his glances ;  
 And water-clocks, untaught by rule,  
 Skip through their countra dances."

Again, he reminds us of the cultured Horace with his dainty odes, which owe much of their sparkle and finish to Greek art. The following:—

"Here's Byron's health, the chief o' bards,  
 Here's Burns's memory (three times three !)  
 Wi' a' the rest o' tunefu' train,  
 Frae Homer down to hamely me,"

at once recalls Horace's beautiful ode to the muse,—*Quem tu, Melpomene semel, &c.*

"The sons of queenly Rome count me—  
 Me too, with them whose chants delight,—  
 The poet's kindly company ;  
 Now broken is the tooth of spite."

Of "The Brownie of Blednoch," we have already spoken, and Dr. John Brown (author of "Rab and his Friends") writing in 1858, after quoting the whole ballad, remarks,—“We would rather have written these lines than any amount of Aurora Leighs, Festuses, or such like, with all their mighty somethingness, as Mr. Bailey would say. For they, are they not the ‘native wood-notes wild’ of one of nature’s darlings? Here is the indescribable, inestimable, unmistakable, impress of genius: Chaucer, had he been a Galloway man, might have written it, only he would have been more garrulous, and less compact and stern. It is like ‘Tam o’ Shanter,’ in its living union of the comic, the pathetic, and the terrible. Shrewdness, tenderness, imagination, fancy, humour, word-music, dramatic power, even wit—are all here.”

Most of his works are in lowland Scotch, one of the most poetic and expressive of dialects: but he could write in nervous English when he chose—see the Fable, "The Butterfly and the Bee," the English and refined humour of which would do honour to some of our best English poets. Nor was he wanting in the rugged sarcasm of which Burns is a master. "Siller" shows unmistakable evidence of this power.

Of his strange journey to London, and abortive attempt to get an audience of the king, in order to present him with a copy of his works, and to acquaint him with the doctrine of universal redemption, which Nicholson considered himself commissioned to preach, it is impossible to speak here. His adventures and mishaps in London, and at Warrington and Liverpool, to which he travelled as a drover, are incidents that belong to a detailed biography; but here are two stories perfectly in keeping with his character as a poet:—

One of the best of his songs, "The Dark Rolling Dee," was a favourite with the rural population. The late Mr. Robert Edgar, of Dumfries, who was a fine vocalist, sung it at some social gathering in the vicinity; and, no sooner had he finished, than one of the company, who had been listening with rapt attention, addressing himself to Mr. Edgar, asked him if he knew who was the author of the song. "No," said Mr. Edgar. "Then I can tell you," replied the unknown. "That song, 'Dark Rolling Dee,' was written by me, William Nicholson, an' richt prood am I that ye hae sung it to this company the nicht, and that it has pleased them sae weel."

His sympathy and insight into the pastoral sights and surround-

ings of his walks through Galloway, have brought one old Greek poet to mind; and the following ideal story completely identifies him with another—a veritable Orpheus. On one occasion a Kirkcudbright gentleman, travelling on a fine spring morning to the Abbey of Dundrennan, was attracted by the sound of music not far off, and mellowed as it was by a soft breeze, it recalled to his mind stories of “Music from Fairyland.” Moreover, as he advanced, it seemed somehow to arise from out the earth, and he was all the more convinced of this, from the fact of there being no bushes nor anything to hide the musician, so far as the eye could see, which stirred his curiosity to find out the author of such enchanting strains. So, tying his horse to a gate, he proceeded on foot, guided by the music, through some fields, and on arriving at an old quarry-hole, he found Nicholson seated on his pack in the bottom of it, playing on the bagpipes. After he had reproved the poet in a sort of bantering way for wasting his time piping there when he should have been pushing the sale of his wares, Nicholson replied—“This quarry and me are auld acquaintances, and I’ve had mair pleasure in piping to thae daft cowts, than if the best ladies in a’ the land had been figuring away to my puir music.” The gentleman, on this, looked round, and for the first time observed half-a-dozen young colts which, attracted by the sound of the pipes, were capering in a most extraordinary fashion. Now they would scour away across the field, throwing up their heels, and almost leaping over one another; and again returning, they would peer into the den, where sat the minstrel, like Orpheus of old, and snort forth their applause.

In person, William Nicholson is said to have been above the middle size, and, if anything, rather handsome, but not robust-looking; while the conformation of his eyes, and the bushiness of his eyebrows, gave him a strange appearance at first sight. For some years previous to the death of the bard his harp was silent, and little was known of him beyond his native parish. He died at Kildarroch, Borgue, 16th May, 1842, and was buried in the lone, picturesque graveyard of Kirkandrews, beside the “sounding sea” :—

“ No farther seek his merits to disclose,  
Or draw his frailties from their dread abode,  
(There they alike in trembling hope repose),  
The bosom of his father and his God.”

J. G. CARTER, F.S.A. (Scot.)