

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH.

ALEXANDER ANDERSON was born in the village of Kirkconnel, Dumfries-shire on the 30th of April, 1845. He was the son of James Anderson and Isabella Cowan, of whose family of six sons and one daughter, he was the youngest. The place of his birth is not Kirkconnel in Annandale, the scene of the tragic ballad of Fair Helen, as has sometimes been imagined; but Kirkconnel in Nithsdale, a village of little more than a single street built on each side of the highway, with the long, straight line of the Glasgow and South-Western Railway on one side of it, and the head waters of the Nith winding past it on the other. The house in which he was born is still pointed out to interested visitors, in what is known as John McLatchie's Entry, in the main street of the village; but the house which was built by the hands of his father, who was a quarryman, and in which the family afterwards resided, stood in an opening between the main street and the railway embankment. Since the poet's death it has been demolished, and an extension of the adjoining buildings now occupies its place.

When the boy was about three years old, the family removed to Crocketford, a village in the lower end of Galloway, where, in "its circle of sunny land," he passed the days of his childhood, and, in "the old, dark, humble school-house, that stood by the little stream," he received the ordinary elementary education obtainable there. At this time of his life he did not show any special aptitude for, or love of, learning, except that he took a great delight in acquiring

proficiency in writing; and that he became an excellent penman, surviving examples of his early compositions very clearly show. He was also fond of drawing, and enjoyed a local fame as a colourist, becoming a member of an academy of youths, every one of whom was in duty bound to provide, at stated periods, a sketch to be criticised by the others. These criticisms being often expressed in terms more pungent than pleasant, the results of their devotion to art were not always conducive to the preservation of peace among the brotherhood. Looking back to this time, from maturer years, he says: "I can still see myself trudging to school, satchel on back, and stopping now and then to see if my masterpiece was not receiving any damage in its transit."

While he was receiving the ordinary education of the old school-house, he was also unconsciously being moulded by those influences which are so difficult to define, but which in after years are so fair to look back upon. Writing of this period, to an old school-fellow, and recalling scenes and incidents in which they had both participated, he says:—

"For boyhood, like sweet love's first prime,
Has spells that are divinely given;
And all the light that crowned that time
Fell somewhere from a rent in heaven."

As he had now transferred his devotion from painting to poetry, and was able to rhyme with facility, every notable incident, or odd phase of character which came under his notice that he deemed worthy of the honour, he recorded in rhyming epistles, or satirical verse. Very few of those early productions, however, have escaped the fiery ordeal to which they were ultimately subjected.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

At this time also he began to become familiar with the world of books, and to revel in literature of the most sensational character. Living and moving in an atmosphere of romance, he read novels, plays and books of adventure, among which the works of Fenimore Cooper held a prominent place. As he had a healthy mind, he did not come to any harm through living with the noble savage. His own view was, that as these men lived with nature, to that extent, at least, their influence was beneficial. This was but a phase of youth that soon passed away, and, as his mind expanded and matured, he sought for companionship of a more intellectual order.

When about sixteen years of age he returned with his parents to his native village of Kirkconnel. There for about two years he found employment in a quarry, after which he entered the service of the Glasgow and South-Western Railway Company, as a surfaceman, on that portion of the line adjacent to the village. It was while employed in the quarry and on the railway that he began that course of self-culture which so greatly influenced his future career, and the results of which are so evident in all that he has written. All his leisure time, even his meal-hour on the slope of the railway embankment, was now devoted to study, and to the reading of the best authors. Among these Wordsworth, Tennyson, Keats, and Shelley were his favourites, and, like most young poets, he also came for a time under the spell of Byron. As a result of this course of reading, a strong desire to extend his education by the study of languages took possession of him. By persevering effort in this direction, with the aid of "Cassell's Popular Educator" and a French Grammar, it was not long before he acquired a knowledge of French sufficient to enable him to read the works of Racine and Molière. The ambition to be able

to read the works of the great masters in their own tongue led him on by the same means to the study of German and Italian. At a later period he added to these the study of Spanish, that he might be able to read the masterpiece of Cervantes in the language of its author. Along with these he had also a slight knowledge of Latin and Greek. While, by his persevering efforts, Anderson had in this way acquired what might be called a working knowledge of these languages, he made no claim to exact scholarship. His own estimate of his attainments was a very modest one; but it enabled him to say: "Now, I can appreciate, in my own way and in their own tongue, the mighty voices of Goethe, Schiller, and Dante." His knowledge of these authors, and of the languages in which they have written, might be imperfect, as in the circumstances it could hardly fail to be; but it was a possession that gave him great pleasure, and became to him a source of genuine inspiration.

During this period of self-culture the faculty of rhyming was kept very much in abeyance. This was partly due to a growing conviction of the worthlessness of much that he had written, and partly to the nature of his daily toil not being favourable to the cultivation of the art of poetry. But in 1864 the death of a beloved brother, at the early age of 26, awoke the poetic faculty which had been lying dormant. The memory of this brother, to whom he was devotedly attached, is embalmed in a tender and impassioned poem—"To One in Eternity"—which was included in the poet's first published volume. Another tribute to this brother's memory was a series of "In Memoriam" poems, which in later years he did not care to publish.

Anderson's first appearance in print was made in the columns of *The People's Journal*, Dundee, to which he contributed some verses, in reference to the Rev.

Fergus Ferguson's attack on the character of Robert Burns during the celebrations of the centenary year. This poem, like the episode which called it forth, seems now to have passed out of remembrance. In 1869 he appeared as a prize-winner, in the Christmas Number of *The People's Journal*, with "A Song of Labour," a poem in the same measure, and following a similar train of thought, as that which gave its title to his first volume, but which is not a part of it. He was also the winner twice successively, in 1871 and 1872, of the first prize for the best poem in *The People's Journal* competition, with the poems of "The Dead Mother" and "Rachel"; and of the second prize in 1870, with the poem of "The Dead Child."

It may have been about this time, or possibly a little earlier, that he became the village satirist, and wrote about the "Holy Willies" of the neighbourhood with a sharp and scathing pen. Some examples that have been preserved show that, in spite of the writer's kindly nature, he did not err on the side of leniency in dealing with the faults and failings of the "unco guid."

The first real recognition of Anderson as a poet was due to the keen literary discernment of Mr Andrew Stewart, sub-editor, under the late Mr David Pae, of *The People's Friend*, Dundee. The poem which at once attracted his notice was "John Keats," with the now familiar pen-name of "Surfaceman" attached. This was the poet's first contribution to the *Friend*, and it was printed in No. 16 of that Miscellany. Mr Stewart was so much impressed by the manly ring of the verse, and its great superiority to the poetical contributions which he generally received, that he entered into correspondence with the author, and was astonished to find that the writer who showed so much nobility of heart and mind, such a wealth of imagery, refinement

of language, and a degree of culture that is usually associated with halls of learning, was in reality what his pseudonym implied—a “surfaceman,” and toiling contentedly with pick and shovel on the railway. In this way began a warm and life-long friendship between the poet and Mr Stewart, and a connection with *The People's Friend* that lasted during the whole of his active literary life.

Having now become a prolific writer, in addition to his numerous contributions to *The People's Friend*, he also found time to contribute poems to *Chambers's Journal*, *Good Words*, *Cassell's Magazine*, *The Quiver*, and other Miscellanies. This naturally led him to resolve on taking the risks of authorship and—to use his own words—“gratify a long-felt wish to see the ‘children of my brain’ housed under the boards of a neat volume.” This desire was realised in 1873. Encouraged by the hearty reception given to his poems, and reassured by the many kind letters which reached him through the hands of the editor of *The People's Friend*, he yielded to the solicitations of his friends, to “venture upon the ocean of literature in a trim built craft of his own construction.” The result was the issue of his first volume—“A Song of Labour and Other Poems”—a neat book of 200 pages, printed at *The Advertiser Office*, Dundee. The longest poem in the volume, “A Song of Labour,” is “Respectfully dedicated to my fellow-workers with pick and shovel everywhere.”

The book received a most hearty welcome, and so successful was it that the whole edition was bought up in less than a fortnight, largely by the help of the contributors to *The People's Friend*. It was favourably received by critics, and reviewed in a friendly spirit. It was seen that a new poet had arisen with a distinctive note in his song; with a genuine power, that was sweet,

true, and tender in its degree—one who was capable of expressing his own thoughts with vigour and cultivated taste, and from whom work of higher quality might reasonably be expected.

In 1875 Anderson issued a second volume, "The Two Angels and Other Poems," with an appreciative biographical sketch by the Rev. George Gilfillan. In this sketch the simple facts of the poet's life are related, and a judicious appraisal of the man and his work is given. "We believe," says Mr Gilfillan, "a purer and simpler-minded man does not exist. He sends on his passions rushing with the trains—he retains in his own bosom and home the peace which passeth all understanding." This little book of 232 pages, published by Messrs Simpkin, Marshall & Co., received as cordial a welcome as that which was given to "A Song of Labour." In his new volume, the poet's supreme ability as a delineator of child life was abundantly evident. The fine touches of nature, the pawky humour, and pure pathos of such poems as "Jenny wi' the Airn Teeth," "Cuddle Doon," and "Jamie's Wee Chair," at once won for their author a warm place in Scottish hearts, and made his name a household word in Scottish homes. In this connection it may be interesting to note that "Jenny wi' the Airn Teeth" was Anderson's first poem illustrating this particular aspect of child-life, and that it was written at the suggestion of his friend, Mr Andrew Stewart. On every page there was evidence that the poet had made a distinct advance in the cultivation of his art. The purity and elevation of sentiment, and the delicacy and refinement of expression, attracted special attention. With "In Rome, A Poem in Sonnets," the author essayed a higher flight than any he had yet attempted. In choosing such a theme he challenged comparison with the great masters. That a young railway surface-

man should grapple with such a theme is in itself remarkable; but that he should have done so with such a large measure of success is more remarkable still. At the time those sonnets were written the poet had never seen Rome; to him a visit to that city was as yet a "vast desire," not a realised ambition. If the contents of the book showed the fine qualities of the poet, not less did his letters reveal the sterling unaffected character of the man. Writing to a friend at this time, of how he spent his leisure hours among his favourite books, with his friends dropping in now and then for a quiet chat, he says:—

"What more have I to wish for? I have the great rush and whirl of the world going past me in the trains through the day when at my work, and at night the cool healthy calm of my native village."

Writing to another friend, he says:—

"Poets are a strange lot, and I am beginning to think that 'Tis only noble to be good.' Better to have a little high, firm manhood than the gift of poetry coupled with a mean intellect."

In 1878 "Songs of The Rail" appeared. The book was published by Messrs Simpkin, Marshall & Co., and bore the inscription: "Dedicated to my Fellow-workers on the Railway." In a prefatory note the author defends himself from charges brought against him of exaggeration and over-drawing in his poems of railway life. In reply to these charges, he remarks: "Nearly all my railway poems are founded upon facts, and not a few of them upon incidents that have taken place upon a line on which I work. There are others founded upon accounts of railway accidents, seen in glancing over the papers in my leisure hours; while others, again, have for basis communications made to me by railwaymen with whom I came in contact in my daily work. I will frankly admit, however, to having



"Surfaceman," 1878

From a Photograph

taken advantage now and then—although in a very slight degree—of the licence usually allowed to verse writers, of altering details in order to create a more complete whole.” In a few words more he expresses the hope, that the book “may interest my fellow-workers on the railway, and heighten in some degree their pride in the service, however humble be their position. I trust that its perusal may lead the engine-driver, among others, to look upon his ‘iron-horse’ as the embodiment of a force as noble, as gigantic—a force which has opened up for commerce and industry a thousand paths that otherwise would have remained undiscovered: a power destined beyond doubt to be one of the civilisers of the world.”

“Songs of the Rail ” was a selection of poems on railway subjects from the author’s two previous volumes, with a few additional pieces. It contained a portrait of “Surfaceman ” as he appeared at his daily employment, standing on the railway slope, with a pick and shovel beside him.

In 1879 “Ballads and Sonnets ” was published by Messrs Macmillan & Co. This volume was to a great extent made up of selections from the first two volumes, which had been long out of print. This publication was very much a concession to the wishes of the poet’s friends, who were in some degree responsible for the selections made; but it also contained a number of new poems written in the author’s happiest vein. It was dedicated, in three sonnets, to Archibald Cameron Corbett, Esq., who had been to the poet one of the best and kindest of friends. With this gentleman, so well known as Member of Parliament for the Tradeston division of Glasgow, and afterward as Lord Rowallan, Anderson had at different times visited the English Lake district, Belgium and Germany; and at this time had but recently returned from Italy, after having

visited Florence, Pisa, and Rome. The dedicatory sonnets recall the visit to the Wordsworth country, and a longer series at the end of the book commemorate the tour in Belgium and Germany. The first place in the book is given to "In Rome: a Poem in Sonnets." It must have been very gratifying to the author, that, though this poem was written long before he ever thought of seeing Rome except in dreams, he found it was so true to the reality in every respect that, on his return, he saw nothing to alter except a line or two, where he refers to Keats and Shelley as "Two of great England's singers, lying each by each"—the fact being that separate graveyards contain the dust of the two poets. When Anderson was leaving for Italy, a lady in London, who knew of his deep admiration for Keats and Shelley, gave him a case of violets to plant upon their graves. This loving tribute the poet reverently paid, and, on his own part, procured in Rome a lily of the Nile which he planted on the grave of Shelley.

The publication of "Ballads and Sonnets" by a firm of eminent London publishers could not fail to introduce the poet and his work to a wider circle of the English reading public; and, containing as it did a fair representation of the varied themes by which the author appealed to the hearts of his readers, it allowed of a better estimate being formed of his merits as a poet.

In October, 1880, Anderson left Kirkconnel for Edinburgh, having obtained an appointment there, as assistant librarian in the University Library. This change of circumstances gave great satisfaction to his numerous friends, who had long grudged to see him spending his golden prime, and exhausting his energies with pick and shovel, in the hard and exacting toil of a railway surfaceman. Now that they saw him placed in more congenial surroundings, they believed that in his new position he would find much that was agree-

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

able to his personal tastes; while by his talents and acquirements he would be well qualified to perform the duties attached to it. Anderson had already made many friends in Edinburgh, and to them his appointment was particularly gratifying. He liked the city for the opportunities which it gave him of social intercourse and intellectual enjoyment; but he did not delight in "the sweet security of streets" as Charles Lamb did.

It was a cause of regret to his friends that city life did not seem to stimulate Anderson's poetical ardour, or quicken his impulses towards a literary career. He printed a small collection of translations from Heine for private circulation, but he could not be prevailed upon to publish another volume. The regret of his friends was hardly justified by facts, for, during the ten years following his removal to Edinburgh, his poetical contributions to periodical literature were both numerous and important, while the desire to write well remained as strong as ever. But, though living as he now did, in close touch with all that was best in the artistic and literary life of the capital, and mingling freely with it in a social capacity, it was quite evident that the city did not inspire him. He found his inspiration still at Kirkconnel, amid the breezy uplands dominated by Corsencon and the Kirkland Hills, and where traditions of the Covenanters still linger about Glen Aylmer and the Vennel Burn. The holiday seasons found him back again beside his native woods and streams, or on the hillside listening to the low sweet voices of Nature, with his favourite bird, the lark, soaring and singing in the blue sky above him.

In 1883 he became Secretary to the Edinburgh Philosophical Institution. Whatever advantages this position afforded him, the responsibilities and the engrossing duties of the position left him little leisure to

follow his favourite pursuits; and in 1886 he returned to the more congenial atmosphere of the University as sub-librarian.

In December, 1891, the poet was entertained by his friends to a Complimentary Dinner in the Douglas Hotel, Edinburgh. On this occasion he was presented with his portrait in oils, painted by W. S. MacGeorge, R.S.A. The chair was occupied by Sheriff Aeneas Mackay, and the presentation was made by the Rev. John Lamond. Mr Anderson replied in a poetical address, which will be found, under the title of "The Portrait," in the present volume.

In 1900, the death of his friend Mr Andrew Stewart, Editor of *The People's Friend*, was a great blow to the poet. Theirs was a unique friendship, that had endured for thirty years without the slightest jar. Of this sad event he wrote: "Mr Stewart was my soul's brother, and ours was a long, long friendship without the slightest hitch on either side. I never had a blow like it." He also wrote the following verse, with which he associated the writer of these notes:—

"We lay this wreath upon thy grave, O friend!
 Symbol of that we wear within our heart;
 The one will fade, the other still keep green,
 Until we, too, shall be as now thou art."

It always seemed to those who knew Anderson most intimately that he was never quite the same man after the death of his friend, and as if the shadow of his great loss lay on much of what he wrote.

His contributions to periodical literature now became less frequent; but he still remained faithful to his first love—*The People's Friend*. His last contribution—"The Quick and The Dead"—appeared in its columns in 1905, and it was probably the last poem that he sent

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

to the press. During the thirty-six years of his connection with this Miscellany he contributed to its columns considerably over three hundred poems.

Some years before his death Anderson was appointed Chief Librarian, he having been acting in that capacity for some time previously. This recognition of his services gave him genuine pleasure, and he, the most modest of men where his own merits were concerned, found delight in the thought, that, beginning life as a railway surfaceman, he had attained to the position of Librarian of Edinburgh University. But he also felt that, like so much in life, promotion had come too late to yield the full satisfaction that it would otherwise have done. His health by this time had become seriously impaired, and the feeling that he was an old man was daily growing upon him.

In his later years he became very much of a recluse, and was constrained by failing health to withdraw from those scenes of social intercourse that he had formerly found so congenial, and where his presence had always been so welcome and attractive. He attended to his duties at the University till within a week or two of his death, but it was evident that he was doing so in much weakness and suffering. He died on the evening of Sunday, the 11th of July, 1909. He had often expressed his desire that when the end came he should be buried in the churchyard of his native village—"Among familiar names to rest, and in the places of his youth."

Three days after his death this desire was given effect to. In deference to the wishes of his relatives, the funeral was a private one; but, along with those connected with the family and a few old friends in the village, it was attended by Professor Eggeling, as representing the Library Committee of Edinburgh University, and Mr Alexander Kennedy, of Kenmill

House, Bothwell, who afterwards acquired the copyright of the poet's works.

It is beyond the scope of these notes to attempt any critical estimate of Anderson's merits as a poet; but a few points may be briefly touched on. It was quite in accordance with the ordinary course of things that "Surfaceman" should write "Songs of the Rail" with a fulness of knowledge, and a power of vivid description, and thereby make for himself a name in a comparatively new field of poetic enterprise. With his poems of child life, so remarkable for their sweetness and simplicity, their pawky humour, and tender pathos, the case was different; for these domestic poems, with their fine touches of human nature, and which give such charming glimpses of simple household ways, were written by one who was all his life a bachelor.

His poems of Nature are all the result of close observation, and are inspired by a deep love of his subject. They show a thoughtful mind and a lively fancy; while the element of human interest is seldom absent. He contrasts the joyousness of Nature with the sadness that clings to human things—that feeling which finds such poignant expression in the Book of Job, where the man of Uz bemoans the frustration of his hopes, and the fewness of his days: "Thou prevailest for ever against him, and he passeth: Thou changest his countenance and sendest him away." In his reflective moods, the poet often quoted these words.

In his early years, as already stated, Wordsworth, Keats, Tennyson and Shelley were among his favourite poets. In maturer years he may have reconsidered the position of Tennyson, and Shelley may not have held the same place in his esteem that he once did; but his devotion to Wordsworth and Keats never waned.

He had a high admiration for the work of Burns

as a poet, especially for his epistles and love songs; but the indiscriminate adulation of the birthday celebrations did not appeal to him. One of the most congenial of companions, and most faithful of friends, he did not give his confidences to everyone—not even in his youthful days in his native village. This trait of character made it difficult for him to accept the sentiments expressed in “A Man’s a Man for a’ That” without certain reservations.

He had a wide knowledge of literature, and a fine critical taste. He loved to linger over the felicities of Tennyson and Keats, and to quote striking passages from his favourite authors, first among whom was Scott, whom he loved to speak of as “Good Sir Walter.”

He had a fine sense of humour, and considered the gift a priceless possession; but while “his jest among his friends was free,” in his poems it generally plays a subordinate part. In company he was not a great talker, and he was seen at his best in a small gathering of the inner circle of his friends, where he had the happy knack of bringing out in conversation the best thoughts of those around him.

During the summer of the present year a memorial of Anderson was erected on the Kirkbrae, Kirkconnel. The monument, which was designed by Mr T. Duncan Rhind, architect, consists of a massive rugged block of red sandstone set on a base of the same material. Placed on the centre of the block is a bronze figure of the poet, by Mr H. S. Gamley, A.R.S.A., bearing the inscription:—

“Alexander Anderson, ‘Surfaceman,’ born 1845, died 1909. ‘He sleeps among the hills he knew.’”

The funds for the erection of the monument were raised by subscription, by Scotsmen at home and abroad.

In the autumn of last year, with two friends

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

of the poet, the present writer stood beside the family burying-place in the "Hillside Graveyard." The space on the simple headstone that the poet claimed for his own name has now been filled. After the record of those members of the family who have gone before, we read:—

“ Alexander Anderson
Poet (Surfaceman),
Born 30th April, 1845,
Died at Edinburgh 11th July, 1909,
Aged 64 years.

“ We have our day, we have our say,
Then quit the scene for ithers,
And cuddle doon amang the mools,
Where mankind a' are brithers.”

These lines inscribed on the stone were written by a friend of the poet, resident in the neighbourhood.

It was a sunny afternoon, the blue bells still lingered among the half-withered grass, and the brackens were turning brown on the hillsides; all those voices of Nature, for which the poet had such a receptive ear, were above us, and around us; but for him—and in his own words:—

His grave is green in that sweet vale
Where the fair river flows the same;
It rolls, and gathers to its tale
The added memory of his name.

A. B.

EDINBURGH, *July, 1912.*