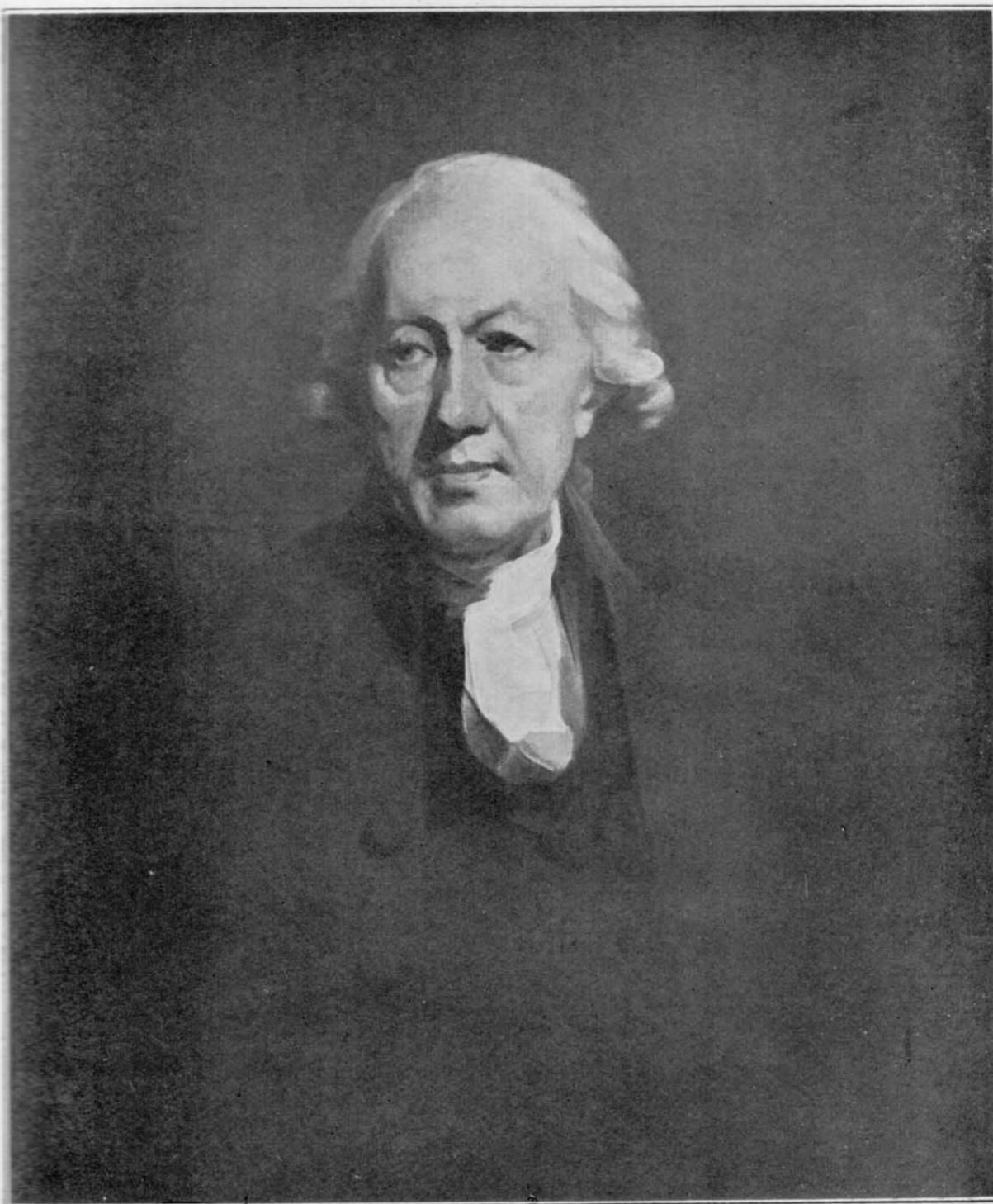


SCOTTISH MEN OF LETTERS

CHAPTER III

JOHN HOME

THE first public appearance of John Home, the author of *Douglas, a Tragedy*, was in the '45, when he played a part suited to his fine heroic vein. Edinburgh was full of excitement; the rebels were at hand, and a wonderful band of 400 or 500 volunteers was raised to defend the city - an awkward squad of students, law-clerks, domestically-minded citizens, possessed of fluctuating courage, to whom the firing of a musket with closed eyes with aim into space was an agitating effort. As the fire-bell rang for the brave guardians of hearth and home to march forth, supported by two regiments of dragoons, they mustered with trembling hearts - their wives and mothers protesting with tears that their husbands and sons, to whose necks they clung, were too precious to be slaughtered by Highland villains. When the order to march to the West Bow was given, officers complained that the men would not follow, and the men murmured that the officers would not lead. The dauntless spirit of those doughty patriots is exemplified in the legend of the writing-master who protected his manly breast by two quires of paper, whereon was written: "This is the body of John Maxwell; pray give it Christian burial"; but even he slunk into his lodging as the feeble forces passed his door in the Lawnmarket, and remained in the bosom of his family. Among the more ardent set was John Home, divinity student. Convivial tradition was wont to tell of the adventures of him and his comrades on their way to join Sir John Cope; of their calling at every ale-house to drink in a chopin of "twopenny" or mutchkin of brandy confusion to the Pretender; of their sleeping comfortably the night before the battle in a manse, only to wake up and discover that the fight was over: that the volunteers had fled before a violent charge of Highland cavalry, consisting of three or four gentlemen with their servants, in full pursuit. [*Scott's Works, Periodical Criticisms*, xix. 309; *Carlyle's Autobiography*.] More effective was John Home as lieutenant in the Glasgow volunteers, when he was present at the



JOHN HOME

From the Painting by Raeburn in the National Portrait Gallery, London.

JOHN HOME

battle of Falkirk, and his warlike career was closed by his being cooped up in Doune Castle, whence he and some comrades escaped by making their bed-clothes into ropes. He was a susceptible youth, full of fine romantic sentiments, and addicted to very heroic utterances, which afterwards he expended chiefly in his plays.

He had been born in Leith in 1722, where his father was town-clerk, and he had been educated in Edinburgh College. It was not a military career that lay before him, but, as with many of his brilliant associates, the peaceful profession of the church. The old fanaticism was dying out in Scotland; a new order of clergy, taught by a more rational philosophy in the universities, and moulded by the tone of society, were preaching a religion in which there was less dogma and more morality than of old; and if their sermons lacked unction, they had no fanaticism and much sanctified good sense.

In 1746 John Home was ordained minister of Athelstaneford, as successor to the Rev. Robert Blair, whose poem of *The Grave* had earned no little fame for the parish. Poetical taste seemed to be infectious, for the young minister was full of literary ardour. As he angled in the East Lothian streams, he thought more about his poems than about his trout; when he returned to his home he wrote down his verses, and even on the backs of sermons scribbled his lines. Though his presbytery had once to censure him for being out of his parish for months [*New Stat, Acot, Scot*, "Athelstaneford."] he proved a good minister, popular with his people. He had his friends near him - Carlyle at Inveresk, full of life and social interest; Robertson at Gladsmuir, busy with his History; and at his lodging in the village - for he never lived in the manse - there often met a merry, clever set of moderate ministers, to take the dulness from country life with talk of the doings of Edinburgh and jokes at the "high-flyers." As he was reading Plutarch one day, Home, who loved the romantic, was stirred by the stimulating pages to set about the composition of a tragedy; for it was an age when heroic plays were in vogue; when playwrights poured forth their preposterous Cleones, Zangas, Barbarossas, and Mahomets; and when actors in grotesque costumes played them in appropriate fashion. When the play was being written, many were the consultations with his friends over it. At Minto House, Lord Kames, Oswald of Dunnikier, and Sir Gilbert Elliot would sit after dinner revising it with the author; for to them the production of a drama was a strange and

SCOTTISH MEN OF LETTERS

great experience. At last it was finished, and the sanguine minister set forth to London on horseback with pistols in his holsters, to defend from highwaymen the precious manuscript in his saddle-bags at the cost of his life.

He interviewed Mr. Garrick, manager of Drury Lane, and submitted his production, entitled *Agis*, all the more confidently that Mr. Pitt, to whom he had got an introduction, had given it praise. The little manager, from his height of five feet three inches, surveyed this Scotsman, nearly six feet high, who explained his errand in northern accents, and with his affable manner Mr. Garrick bade him leave the manuscript for perusal, and sent it back regretfully declined. [Mackenzie's *Life of Home*.] To the tomb of Shakespeare in Westminster Abbey the disappointed dramatist resorted, and with swelling breast wrote some mighty lines: -

Image of Shakespeare! To this place I come,
To ease my bursting bosom at thy tomb.

And informing the "image"

That day and night revolving still thy page,
I hoped like thee to shake the British stage,

he concluded with the insane desire -

Let petrification stop my falling tear,
And fix my form for ever marble here.

Having thus eased his "bursting bosom," disappointed but not despairing, Home retraced his steps to the North, to find boundless sympathy from his friends, solace in his fishing-rod, and occupation in his parochial visits, his sermons, and his poetry. In spite of his unlucky experiences, his ambition to produce a great drama was not crushed, and he found another subject for a tragedy as one evening he heard a young lady sing the old ballad of "Gil Morrice" to its tender music. For four years he laboured at a play based on the ballad. He was ever consulting friends, who heard his reading without a murmur, while ladies listened with tears and admiration. He would often ride

JOHN HOME

to town to get the advice of Blair or Robertson or Lord Elibank. Carlyle copied part of the manuscript from his friend's execrable handwriting, and law-clerks transcribed the rest. When it was finished, his friends were delighted; David Hume was in raptures, pronouncing that it surpassed Shakespeare and Otway at their best; while Lady Hervey (Pope's "Molly Leppell") wept over it like a child. To London friends looked for a fitting introduction of such a treasure. Dr. Alexander Carlyle describes the eventful journey: how on a cold February day in 1755, when the snow covered the ground, he and some friends escorted the budding dramatist on his way to submit his great work to Garrick; how Home, always slovenly, started on his horse with the bulky manuscript stuffed in one pocket of his greatcoat, his shirt and nightcap in the other. The companions, more thoughtful than the author, stopped at a manse and secured a valise, in which the minister as synod-clerk kept his records, to carry the wardrobe and the play. At Wooler they parted company with valedictory cheers and wishes for his success, and Home trotted off on "Piercy," his favourite galloway, which was to bear him on his journeys for many a year. [Carlyle's *Autobiography*, p. 303; Mackenzie's *Home*, p. 36.]

The great manager was seen; but again the mortifying verdict was given that the play was not suitable for the stage. With swelling breast, once more the discomfited playwright ambled home, to gain renewed sympathy from his friends, who denounced loudly English stupidity, barbarity, and jealousy. [Carlyle's *Autobiography*, 304. A ballad at the time appeared in Edinburgh - a parody of "Gil Morrice":

When Garrick had a' Douglas read,
He glowered with baith his een;
And stamping with his foot, he said,
Sic damned stuff ne'er was seen.

Notes and Queries, Jan. 1866.]

With unbroken admiration, they declared that: such a work should not be lost to the world. At that time there was a theatre in the Canongate - admittance from 2s. 6d. to 1s.- in which there was an ill-paid English company, which contained two or three good actors. There was Mrs. Ward, charming and beautiful; Mr. Love, who had changed his name from Dance, not to disgrace his father, the city architect of London; and there was West Digges, a gentleman by birth, a bankrupt ex-officer in the army, a reprobate by repute, an actor by profession. Rehearsals took place in a tavern attended by Carlyle, Home, Ferguson, and Lord Elibank, after partaking of

SCOTTISH MEN OF LETTERS

a supper of pork griskins. News of the meetings of what the town called the "Griskin Club" spread about, and whetted curiosity; and on 14th December 1756 the theatre was thronged, the Canongate was crowded with sedan-chairs - for *Douglas*, by the minister of Athelstaneford, was to be performed. Mrs. Ward appeared as Lady Barnet, the name not being yet changed to Lady Randolph; and Digges personated Forman - not yet changed to Norval - in his harsh voice and pompous tone, and doubtless adorned with the huge, ponderous periwig in which he enacted Cato. [*Colman's Recollections*, i. 257.]

The curtain rose, and the national sympathies of the audience were touched by the appeal:

This night, our scenes no common tears demand:
He comes, the hero of your native land!
Douglas, a name thro' all the world renowned -
A name that rouses like a trumpet sound.

Never was there such success; men were in raptures and women in tears; the town rang with applause over the Caledonian Shakespeare; citizens and judges never before in a play-house went shamefacedly there. When all fashionable society had seen the play, and the seats and the treasury were becoming emptier, there was hawked through the streets "A Full and True History of the Bloody Tragedy of Douglas, as it is now being enacted in the Theatre in the Canongate," and the seats were filled with denizens of dirty wynds and closes, attracted by this catchpenny which Dr. Carlyle had concocted. [*Carlyle's Autobiography*, 314; *Arnot's History of Edinburgh*.]

Soon there were ominous mutterings of a coming storm. The pious, the sedate, and the clergy were scandalised. A play was bad enough, but that a minister of the gospel should write it, that ministers should go to see it, and should consort with stage players "no better than they should be," was past all bearing. Certainly the respectable Messrs. Carlyle, Home, and Ferguson were in strange company with Gentleman Digges - a bankrupt and libertine, who lived down to his reputation by afterwards allying himself with Mistress Bellamy by a mock marriage, while his own wife was living, and by finally running off with an Edinburgh merchant's wife! The presbytery issued a solemn admonition - with a preamble about the growing irreligion of the day, as evidenced by neglect of the Sabbath - warning old and young against the

JOHN HOME

soul-ensnaring performances of the stage. This was greeted by lampoons by wits and wags; but several presbyteries proceeded against offending ministers within their bounds. One chicken-hearted offender got off with suspension for a month after his plea that he had attended only once, and had endeavoured to conceal himself in a corner "to avoid giving offence"; while Carlyle of Inveresk encountered a libel by his presbytery, in that he did keep company and familiarly converse with West Digges, also with Sarah Ward, in the house of Henry Thomson, vintner in the Abbey, persons of bad fame; and that he did appear in an unlicensed theatre, did behave disorderly, and did witness a tragedy in which the name of God was profaned and taken in vain by mock prayers and tremendous oaths, as "by the blood of the cross" and "the wounds of Him who died for us on the accursed tree" - words which were taken from the old ballad "Gil Morrice." [In his defence to his presbytery, Carlyle states: "I have once or twice dined in a tavern with gentlemen of good reputation, when Mr. Digges was of the company. I have heard great part of the tragedy of *Douglas* read or repeated at Mr. Digges's house, where Mrs. Ward and some others of the actors were present. I have two or three times called on Mr. Digges along with the author of *Douglas*, and was witness to some conversation about the performance; but neither on these nor on any other occasion did I converse with Mrs. Ward farther than in assenting or not to any remarks that were made on the tragedy. Nor did I eat or drink in her company, as some articles in the charge seem to imply. I was present at the theatre with ten or twelve gentlemen during one rehearsal of *Douglas*. I afterwards saw that performance once represented; places being engaged by a company of my acquaintance, I was admitted to a seat with them - as is very common in a crowd, with some difficulty and pressing." (from Dr. Carlyle's Papers).] The chief culprit soon saw that his sin was past all redemption, and ultimately resigned his charge, having two days before delivered his last sermon, which drew tears from the congregation.

Success came at last in England. The play was accepted by Rich, the manager of Covent Garden Theatre. It was no preternatural discernment on the part of that illiterate worthy, who had been the most famous harlequin and pantomimist on the stage, but whose finest leap was from being an acrobat to a theatrical manager, in which capacity he arranged dresses and scenery admirably, and ventured to "larn," young men to act, though unable to speak two lines with decent pronunciation, or one sentence with decent grammar. [Davies's *Life of Garrick*; Tate Wilkinson's *Memoirs*, i. 119, iii. 72.] He had sense enough to listen to advice from high quarters. The voice of the Duke of Argyle - Home's friend - was powerful with his nephew, Lord Bute, whose influence in turn, through the Prince of Wales, could move Mr. Rich to take the worst play ever concocted. Sir Gilbert Elliot spoke everywhere this new

SCOTTISH MEN OF LETTERS

drama, and soon Lady Hester Pitt and Lady Mary Co were busy disposing of tickets with irresistible blandishments. [*Elliots, and the Family of Minto*, p. 340 (for private circulation).]

One night in March 1757 the house was full, and as “silver-tongued”. Barry acted young Norval, the audience saw nothing ridiculous in that man, over six feet in stature, gorgeous in lace, white puckered satin, and capacious powdered wig, [*Account of English Stage*, iv. 495.] personating a poor stripling shepherd lad, who should have been in Caledonian rags when he announced -

My name is Norval. On the Grampian hills
My father feeds his flock, a frugal swain.

Peg Woffington, who in her harsh voice and Irish brogue was Lady Randolph, was then emaciated, worn, and ill on that stage from which she was to vanish tragically a few weeks later. When, acting as Rosalind, she spoke the epilogue, “If I were among you, I would kiss as many of you as had beards that pleased me,” her tongue became paralysed, and with a loud scream she tottered from the stage - to linger for three weary years a palsied woman.

Douglas was successful - though it only ran a usual nine nights at first. On the third night the Duke of Cumberland handed twenty guineas to the elated author, his pride not objecting to take what an author out-at-elbows would blush now to have offered. [*Family of Minto*, p. 340.] Society found a charm about the play which struck a finer note than the turgid dramas which were fashionable at that time; there were true touches of nature, a chord of human tragedy, a vein of poetry, which, though the play does not appeal strongly to us to-day, made it, by contrast with the bombast and fustian then in vogue, deserving of the honour it won. The fastidious Mr. Gray wrote to his friend Horace Walpole that the author of *Douglas* “seems to have retrieved the true language of the stage, which has been lost for a hundred years, and there is one scene (between Lady Randolph and the stranger) so masterly that it strikes one blind to all its defects.” It was played with success in Ireland; and Thomas Sheridan, the manager, munificently sent from Dublin a gold medal - worth £10 - as a mark - of admiration of the author. This Dr. Johnson stigmatised in his sweeping way not merely as a

JOHN HOME

piece of impudence, but an act of folly in rewarding a play “without ten good lines.” English praise was high, but the enthusiasm of Scotsmen was boundless. The drama was proclaimed “the first of English tragedies” - though really and chronologically it was only the first of Scottish tragedies. The delighted dramatist absorbed the flattery and believed it all. He had not that modest self-estimate shown by Dr. Samuel Johnson, who, when he was informed that young Mr. Pott, the poet, had pronounced *Irene* “the finest tragedy of modern days,” growled out, “If Pott says so, Pott lies.”

When Home, anticipating prosecution, prudently resigned his living, he was taken up by Lord Bute. His lordship was not yet known as a statesman, but as a favourite of the Prince of Wales, and especially of the Dowager Princess Augusta. Reserved, proud, and cold to his equals, he could condescend to charming affability to men of lower estate. A man of scholarly tastes, his library was magnificent; a patron of letters and science, he was ready to get pensions and distribute favours to literary protégés. There was a magnificence in his person; and in that picture by Allan Ramsay which portrays him to posterity there is a distinction in his robes, drawn aside to display his leg well posed, which Sir Joshua Reynolds copied with envy in his portrait of the Marquis of Rockingham. The world might deny the strength of his brains; none could deny the beauty of his limbs. Meanwhile, cold and haughty as he might be to others, to John Home he was the most affable of patrons and friends; he had nothing but kindly words for “dear John” or “dear Johnnie,” who had a gushing admiration which satisfied his lordly vanity, and who served him as secretary and factotum with boundless assiduity.

Garrick soon saw he had blundered in not taking *Douglas*, though the world was sure he had rejected it because there was no part of sufficient prominence for himself. He began to court the favourite of the powerful courtier, and they became intimate friends - none could resist the charm of Home’s genial manner and nature - and he was ready to receive from the popular dramatist the very piece which a few years before he had summarily refused. He read *Agis* now in quite a new light, was impressed by its beauties, avowed there were acts written more like Shakespeare than any author ever did, [Fitzgerald's *Life of Garrick*, i. 376.] and mentioned that Mrs. Garrick had wept over it. *Agis* was performed: the house was crowded, the Prince of Wales was present three times, and Scotsmen wrote home

SCOTTISH MEN OF LETTERS

jubilantly of its success. But there were others who spoke with abominable frankness - not merely the snarlers who lampooned every Scot and sneered at any favourite of Lord Bute. "I cry to think it should be by the author of *Douglas*," wrote the well-disposed Mr. Gray, not moved even by the best acting of Garrick in Iysander, clad like a Venetian gondolier to represent a Spartan chief. It ran eleven nights and then dropped exhausted. All the same, the author made £500 or £600. Truly, with its dull scenes, its Spartan politics, its tedious declamations, the play is intolerable. No doubt Henry Mackenzie says the more he read *Agis* "the more he liked it"; posterity has not tried to acquire the taste by reading it once. Another drama, the *Siege of Aquileia*, in which Garrick and Mrs. Cibber did their best, won for its author more money and fresh fame.

No mortal now can go over any of Home's laborious tragedies except *Douglas*; and one may apply to them the verdict which the Marquis of Wellesley passed on Dr. Johnson's Latin verses - "All of them are bad, but some of them are worse than others." We need not, however, superciliously laugh at Home's defunct tragedies, for they admirably suited the taste of the age. All dramatists gave the same sort of produce for the stage, and society, strange to say, admired it. They must have had a very vague sense of the ludicrous, else the bombast of Zangas, Zenobias and Zaras, Cleones and Tancreds would have moved them not to tears but to laughter. That age saw nothing grotesque even in the garments their actors wore - in Mrs. Yates as Boadicea wearing not the rudimentary garments of the Britons, but farthingales, vast hoops, and high nests of powdered hair. They never smiled at seeing Othello played by Spranger Barry in a complete suit of English regimentals and gold-laced, cocked hat; or at seeing Garrick as Macbeth resplendent in a court suit of scarlet and gold, sometimes with a tail-wig like an attorney, at other times with a periwig fit for a Lord Chancellor. Thomas Sheridan was thought appropriately apparelled as Macbeth in the uniform of an English general. In the enthusiasm of his youth, Jackson of the Edinburgh stage determined to make his *début* in London as young Norval, and provided himself with a kilt, and dirk, shield, and broadsword taken from the field of Culloden; but his manager, Garrick, afraid of the rancour prevailing against Caledonian ways and men, and probably thinking the guise supremely absurd, forced the aspirant to relinquish either his garb or his part. It was in 1774 that old Macklin, playing

JOHN HOME

the part of Macbeth, first introduced the adoption of supposed contemporary costume, dressing his company in the fancied garb of old Gaul, and he himself appearing - as the orchestra played the march of the Coldstream Guards - in a "Caledonian habit." Unfortunately the veteran, with his huge ungainly figure, stumping on the stage, was said more to resemble a Scotch piper than a prince of the blood. [O'Keefe's *Recollections*; J. Taylor's *Records*, ii. 12; Jackson's *Hist. of Scot. Stage*; Davies's *Dram. Miscellanies*.]

Home was now a prosperous man and a successful writer, a useful friend of the great Lord Bute, at whose bidding he was pleased to be, and possessed of a comfortable income. But though living in London, he consorted chiefly with Scotsmen, for the feeling was keen against the North Britons. Lamponers, pamphleteers, men of fashion laughed and sneered at them; and Lord Bute's ascendancy with the King intensified the animosity, owing to his patronage of his countrymen, and his flattery by patriotic parasites. Scotsmen in London retaliated contempt for contempt. Yet in spite of these international sentiments they would meet on quite pleasant terms. At the British Coffee-House - which was kept by Mrs. Anderson, a clever, pleasant Scotswoman, sister of Dr. Douglas, who became Bishop of Salisbury - all true Scotsmen, foregathered. Thither gentlemen from Edinburgh were sure to find their way, for in national dialect they could talk of their people and their grievances to their patriotic hearts' content. So much was this tavern the recognised resort of men from the North, that it is said that when the Duke of Bedford [Gibbon's *Letters*, i. 201.] was soliciting the votes of the Scottish peers in 1750, he put all the letters in one enclosure, addressed to the British Coffee-House. A Scotsman was ever loyal to his countrymen in London. If he wanted a publisher for his book, it was to a Scots printer or bookseller he took it - to Strahan, Andrew Millar, or John Murray; if he needed a physician, it was to a Scots doctor he carried his complaints - to William Hunter, or Pitcairn, or Gusthard, to Sir John Pringle, or Fordyce, or Armstrong. Garrick asserted that the Adams, though liberal-minded architects, employed only Scottish workmen; and bantered James Boswell, saying, "You are, to be sure, wonderfully free from nationality, but it so happens that you employ the only Scotch shoe-black in London." [Boswell's *Johnson* (ed. Hill), ii. 325.] John Home shared the national prejudices, and expressed his opinion of the Southrons with freedom on his first visit. He wrote to Carlyle, that though the chop-houses were good, the

SCOTTISH MEN OF LETTERS

people were “execrably stupid, and their men of learning are such shallow monsters that I am obliged to be on my guard lest I should seem to insult them.” Really the author of *Douglas* was too fastidious. As to the poor Londoners, their very appearance in the eyes of John Home - then smarting under the rejection of his *Agis* - was despicable. “The mien of the English, even in the resorts of fashion, I think but poor. I observed it to Smollett after walking at High Mall, who agreed with me.” [Mackenzie's *Life of Home*, p. 134.] This bland feeling of superiority was comforting to the despised Scots, who grumbled over the English, and made pleasant little fortunes out of them. Home eventually had no cause to rail at them: they went to his tragedies when they were played, and bought them when they were published. In 1760 he collected his three great dramas and published them, with a dedication to George III., who settled on Lord Bute's secretary a pension of £300 a year, and three years later the post of Conservator of the privileges of Campvere was given him, with no duties to perform and a further salary of £300 to receive.

What and where is Campvere (or Kampenveer)?

In Holland, on the banks of the Scheldt, are the remains of a town which centuries ago was a centre of life and trade. In those days ships filled its port laden with merchandise; the streets were alive with busy crowds, vocal with the hum of tongues of many lands; men of wealth lived in stately houses, with old Burgundian architecture, furnished with splendour. Amid the voices of the Dutch population were heard the tones of the Scots folk, who had formed a colony there, ever since in the sixteenth century special “privileges” were granted to Scotsmen to trade with Campvere in wool, which was the staple, and all Scottish traders were required, under penalty of confiscation of goods and ships, to load and discharge at that port. There Scots settlers formed an important community, sending officials to Court, and represented by elders to the General Assembly. How changed is that once thriving town to-day! On its old ramparts the cattle graze; in its empty streets the grass is growing; where once were rows of stately homes are trees, with a ruined house standing here and there marking where once rich Scots and Dutch merchants had their mansions. There is the Stadt-house, with dormer windows, quaint façades, and rich woodwork; and within are the benches, covered with the old dark red cushions whereon once grave councillors sat. There are the majestic church, which could hold twenty

JOHN HOME

times the present population of the deserted city, and the empty Scots Haus, with arched windows and decorated gables, as it stood 300 years ago. The commerce has gone; the people have vanished; the port, spoiled by encroachments of water and sand, is empty - a silence, impressive and oppressive, reigns over that dead town, which seems haunted by the ghost of a buried past. Such is Campvere to-day. [Havard's *Heart of Holland*, pp. 167-184.] It was not more flourishing when John Home received the sinecure office of Conservator of its Scots privileges, for there were no longer Scots or privileges or commerce to conserve. The Conservator, however, had the privilege of being a representative elder for Campvere in the General Assembly of the Kirk of Scotland, though of Scots Presbyterians not one remained; and even to this day the place has the right (which there is nobody to exercise) of sending an elder annually to the mother kirk. Year by year, when the Assembly met, John Home would come, as member for Campvere, and take his fluent, though not brilliant, part in its debates, supporting his moderate party, while the "Highfliers" sneered at the man who, ousted as a minister, returned as an elder.

Great was the delight of old friends when he came from London and for a while gave his cheery presence at their suppers. Greater still when he gave up the sunshine of Court, and the operation of dancing attendance on his affable but exacting lordship, and bought the little property of Kilduff; near his old parish in East Lothian. The affection of his old parishioners showed itself when he set about building his new house, for they insisted on carting stone and wood and lime to help their old minister. He was eager in his youth for military affairs; now we find him joining the Fencibles, and scandalising grave elders and brethren by appearing in the sombrely - attired General Assembly in the brilliant scarlet uniform of a lieutenant. "This," sneered one of the members, "is only the farce after the play."

[Ramsay's *Scotland and Scotsmen*, ii. 555.]

Now he became part of Edinburgh society. A welcome addition he proved, with his hearty laugh, his unfailing good-humour; and he was happy once more in the company of his old friends Hume and Blair, Ferguson and Robertson. He and Hume enjoyed a banter, and a favourite subject was their names, which were pronounced alike, and had been spelt the same till the historian changed his paternal surname of Home to "Hume." When jocularly he proposed to end the dispute by drawing lots, "Nay," quoth John,

SCOTTISH MEN OF LETTERS

“that is an extraordinary proposal, for if you lose you take your own name, and if I lose I take another man’s name.” The literati dearly loved a gentle pleasantry. When they were discussing the case of a man of high character who had lapsed into crime, John Home interposed: “I can easily account for it, by the kind of books he was reading; for in his pocket were found Boston’s *Fourfold State* and Hume’s *Essays*.” At which jest, however, the philosopher looked sore displeased. Home’s exuberant praise of everybody and everything was not empty flattery, but sheer good-heartedness; and even his vanity over his achievements was likeable. Carlyle tells how “he came into a company like a sunbeam into a darkened room; his excellent temper, unaffected cheerfulness, his absence of everything like reserve or formality, giving light to every eye, and colour to every cheek” [Carlyle’s *Autobiography*, pp. 232, 268.]; and “when he left the room, the company grew dull and soon dissolved.” His hospitality was unbounded; “his purse had no strings,” and he was the resource of all who needed help [Mackenzie’s *Life of Home*, pp. 7, 14.]; always believing the best, he would allow in a friend neither a fault nor an ailment. “He never,” Dr. Robertson used to say, “would allow that a friend was sick till he heard of his death.” Many poor plays may surely be pardoned to one who himself played so fine a part in life as he. But it must be owned there were a good many to pardon, and there were more yet to come. There was *Rivine* - a name taken from Ossian, then in full fame - which Garrick pronounced an “original and a noble performance,” and put on the stage with the title of *The Fatal Discovery*. Owing to the popular feeling against Scotsmen at that time, it was thought prudent to avoid all prejudice by having it ascribed to a young Oxford student, who attended the rehearsals, and surprised the actors by the philosophical calmness with which he allowed the piece to be cut and carved. It was successful; the theatre was filled from pit to gallery, to see Garrick at his best; but unluckily Home grudged the success in which he got no glory, and avowed himself the writer. Whereupon, at this “fatal discovery,” Garrick and Home had the mortification to see the audience dwindle and the exchequer empty. After all, the fate of the play was worthy of its merits. There is a repetition of the sonorous sentiments, even of the scenes and plot, which had done duty in *Douglas*. Walpole laughed cynically, as was his wont. “Somebody asked me what prose Home had ever written; I said I knew of none but his poetry.” Two more plays Home was still to produce. The Barrys gave life in 1773 to the

JOHN HOME

now forgotten *Alonzo*, and the dramatic career ended in 1778 with *Alfred*, - which no actors could galvanise to semblance of life.

In Edinburgh Home settled in 1779, and there was no companion so cheerful as he. David Hume, his dearest friend, had been the first of that brilliant coterie to die, and make a blank that was never filled. In time the famous clubs of his youth expired, with their bright talk, their buoyant patriotism, their copious claret; and a new generation gradually sprang up, amid which the old men - Carlyle, Robertson, Ferguson - continued in vigorous age. As year by year, on the Edinburgh stage, was enacted the favourite *Douglas*, the public looked with respect on the white-headed man with the kindly face, who never failed to be present in the box reserved for him, listening to the plaintive air of "Gil Morrice" which was for generations played as the curtain rose - and ladies wept before the play began. [Wilson's *Memorials of Old Edinburgh*, i. 128.] Every great actress felt that in that piece she must display her powers and excel her rivals. Old play-goers - the most reminiscent and garrulous of beings - loved to talk of actresses whom they had seen as Lady Randolph - the grandeur of Mrs. Barry, the splendour of Mrs. Yates, the cleverness of that "pretty baggage" Mrs. Bellamy, and the majesty of Mrs. Siddons in her sable body and train and white ruffs. They would recall how, when old Norval (Henderson in wig and knee-breeches) described that he found the babe in the basket on the river ("nestled curious the infant lay"), the Barry uttered the cry, "Is he alive?" with piercing maternal shriek, and the audience caught their breath, while the Siddons spoke the words with soft, low tones, and thrilled them to their bones. It was as Lady Randolph that Mrs. Barry, forgetting her age and discordant voice, challenged the rising fame of Sarah Siddons in London; and it was in that character Mrs. Siddons chose to make her last appearance on the stage in 1819 - no longer handsome and shapely, but unwieldy, infirm, and seventy years old. Yet when young Norval exclaims, "As you excel all women," the audience, applying the lines to herself, burst into thunders of applause. [Fitzgerald's *Lives of the Kembles*, i. 157; ii. 1, 191; Boaden's *Life of Siddons*, i 50, 76.] Sir Walter Scott has avowed that the cliff scene between Lady Randolph and old Norval, in which the preservation of Douglas is discovered, "has no equal in modern, and scarcely a superior in ancient drama." With that the shade of John Home may be content. [Only one phrase lives as a quotation: "As women wish to be who love their lords."]

SCOTTISH MEN OF LETTERS

What changes had the venerable dramatist seen! In 1756 his first play had been condemned as godless by the kirk, and ministers punished for witnessing it; in 1784 the same play was lauded by the clergy, and the General Assembly was almost deserted when Mrs. Siddons played Lady Randolph - for the pit of the theatre was black with ministers, like a corn-field with crows.

In 1778 Home had begun to gather materials for a History of the Rebellion, of which much was expected; but it did not appear till 1802, when, being dedicated to the King, all reflections on the Duke of Cumberland, and much that might be piquant, was courtier-wise omitted. All were disappointed with the work; some were angry, but others kindly remembered that the author was old. Years ago, when acting as officer of the Fencibles, he fell from his horse, and got concussion of the brain, and he never was the same again. His mind became duller and feebler year by year. [Mackenzie's *Home*, p. 67.] Still there were many gatherings at his house in Hanover Street, where the old gentleman was full of kindly garrulity and gentle pleasantries. One day especially was remembered, when there sat down seven guests at the table - five of them nearly as venerable as the host himself, who was eighty-four - and the least ancient of them, as in bachelor parties, acted as "boots" to ring the bell when required during the repast. There were the national dishes which had long gone out of fashion, and the claret served in the tankards; and as they talked of times and comrades long ago dead, "the subjects of conversation might be compared to that held by ghosts, who, sitting at the midnight table, talk over the deeds they had done and witnessed in the body." [Sir W. Scott's *Prose Works*, xix. 391.] How changed all this from those bright earlier days when, as his friend Carlyle says, "he was truly irresistible; his entry into a company was like opening a window and letting the sun into a dark room." John Home and his wife were getting very old. Never had worthy Mrs. Home been a brilliant companion at her best; yet is it really true that when David Hume asked Home why he had married Miss Logan, with atrocious naïveté he replied, "Ah, David, if I had not, who else would have taken her?" [Caldwell *Papers*, ii. 179.] The last glimpse of the household we get is at a visit Sir Adam Ferguson paid to them. He told the aged couple of the Peace of Amiens just made, and the frugal old lady thoughtfully propounded this question of domestic economy, "Will it mak' onie difference in the price o' nitmugs (nutmegs)?" [Chambers's *Journal*,

JOHN HOME

1855, Reminiscences of Sir Adam Ferguson.]

On 5th September 1808, at the age of eighty-six, Home died, having survived his friends and his intellect. One likes to think of him as he is pictured in one of Raeburn's portraits, sitting in his arm-chair, with the pleasant face, the comfortable figure, the far-away look, becoming to a poet's pose, as he appeared when in his younger years he was the life of all good company.