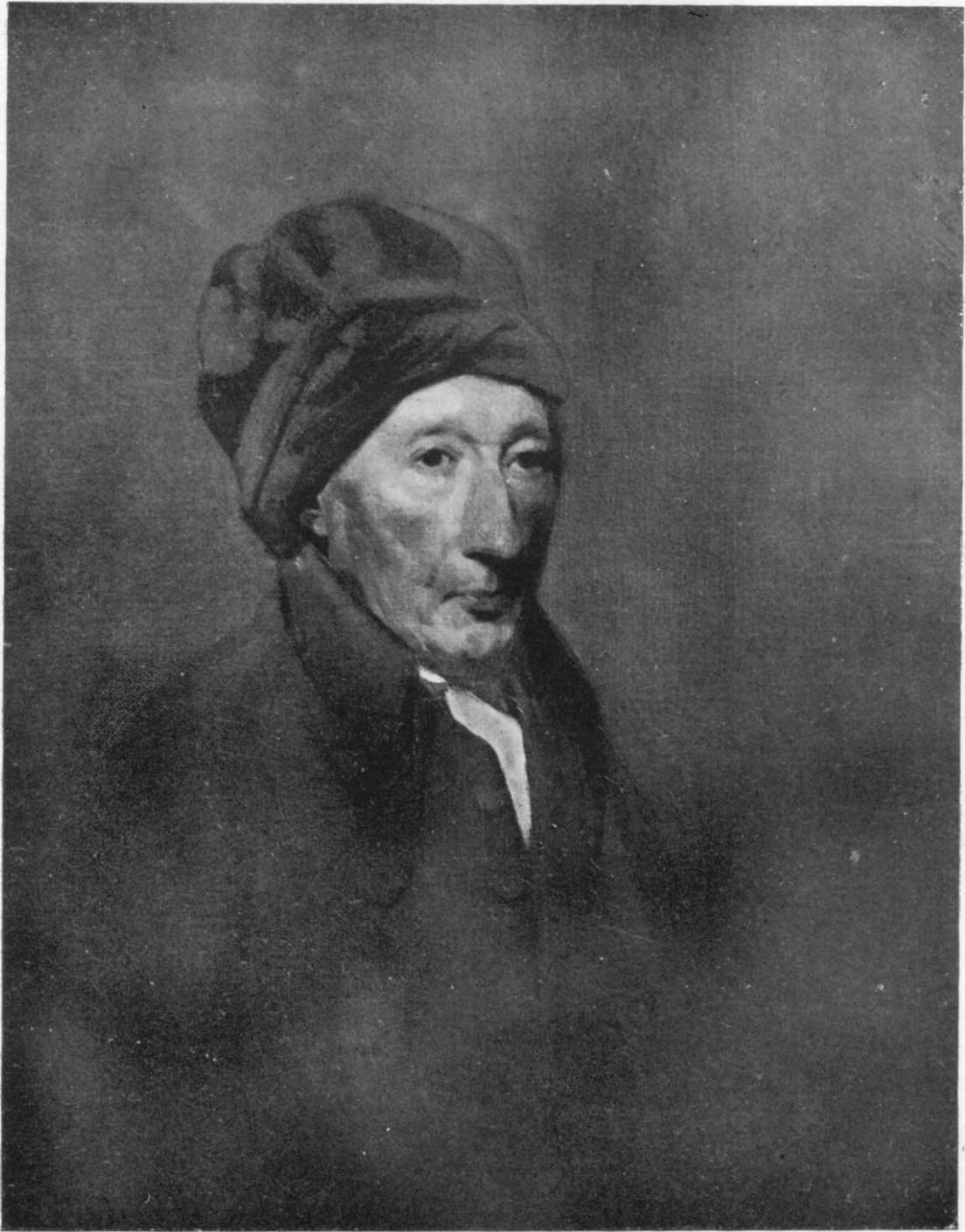


# SCOTTISH MEN OF LETTERS IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

## CHAPTER X

### DR. THOMAS REID - DR. JAMES BEATTIE

Away in the North lived a society of which Edinburgh knew very little. With Aberdeen communication was slow, tedious, and uncomfortable; on horseback a man might spend five or six days on the road, and coaches would take as long, with the risk of axles breaking down, and the certainty of passengers being wrenched and rattled in the ruts and bogs. Aloof from the world, the people had their own ways, fashions, and manner of speech, and the University was attended only by youths from mansions and from crofts of the North. Simon Fraser, Lord Lovat, when he was at College, had as class-mate the threadbare lad, Thomas Ruddiman, who lived on oatmeal. In later years Lord Erroll competed in the classes on equal terms with sons of stocking-makers and herring-curiers. In the early part of the century, when there was great poverty in the land, the colleges were sorely pinched for money. Regents had miserable pittance to live upon, although they had to teach subjects which six well-endowed professors in a modern University would hardly undertake. Colin Maclaurin, the brilliant youth, who, at nineteen, had been appointed professor of Mathematics, was glad to leave the poverty-stricken post, and become colleague to Professor James Gregory in Edinburgh, though Gregory drew the salary for seventeen years, and left his friend only the scanty fees. Depressed by penury, education was feebly fostered, and in 1709 the King's College students, in youthful irritation, audaciously pronounced their professors "useless, needless, headless, and defective." A curious light is thrown upon the impecunious state of this seat of learning by a minute of the University in 1738, in which it is stated that "the want of an accomplished gentlewoman for teaching white and coloured seams is the occasion of several gentlemen's sons being kept from college, their parents inclining to send them where they might have suitable education for their daughters also." Such a pathetic state of matters they sought to remedy by engaging a worthy woman to teach the required "white and coloured seams," lavishly advancing her for the ensuing year the sum of £12 Scots. This incident of an ancient university



DR. THOMAS REID

From the Painting by Raeburn in Glasgow University.

## SCOTTISH MEN OF LETTERS

requiring to keep its students together and to advance learning by giving £1 sterling to settle a seamstress in the town, presents a curious picture of an impoverished age.

### DR. THOMAS REID

In the Manse of Strachan, in Aberdeenshire, Thomas Reid was born in 1710. The parish was at that time a dreary, treeless district; far and wide stretched the moorland, with patches of fields, in which grew the meagre crops of farmers who lived in poverty. Over it swept the keen, healthy breezes of the upland, playing, or, more seriously, blustering, round the thatched manse in which dwelt Mr. Lewis Reid, the descendant of a long line of ministers. He had married the daughter of David Gregory of Kinnairdy, who was the father of twenty-nine children, three of whom became distinguished professors in Oxford, Edinburgh, and St. Andrews, and supplied through their descendants men eminent in science for over a century. The minister of Strachan lived for fifty years among a people who were keen as their east winds, and uncultivated as their thistle-filled crofts. They eyed askance the good man when he foretold weather by the aid of a barometer - an instrument unknown in rural districts - which had been given him by his brother-in-law, David Gregory, the famous Professor of Astronomy in Oxford. One summer, as harvest was drawing to a close, he saw the mercury falling in the glass, and warned his neighbours by the river to remove their crops from the low ground. Two old ministers, who disregarded his advice and lost their crops, in the Presbytery demanded that he should explain how, by honest means, he could possibly foretell a flood when there was not a cloud in the sky. [M'Cosh's *Scottish Philosophy*, p. 95.]

Thomas Reid entered Marischal College when he was only twelve years old, and in Aberdeen he found himself among his pleasant Gregory kindred. At that period Marischal College was an ugly, dilapidated, shabby building, which through poverty and neglect had fallen into decay. In one dark room Reid joined a little group of some thirty students, who formed the class of the regent, the Rev. George Turnbull. [Ramsay's *Scotland and Scotsmen*, i. 470.] This able man, long forgotten, is yet somewhat memorable. For the modest remuneration of £40 he taught the whole range of human knowledge which was requisite for a university curriculum. He was specially notable as a metaphysician and moral philosopher, and he taught a system in which his own insistence on "common-sense" in philosophy was much in harmony with the mode to be adopted by his pupil Reid in later days. Turnbull grew

## DR. THOMAS REID

tired of bad pay and of learned drudgery, and quitted Aberdeen for England, where he ultimately entered the English Church. Laboriously, voluminously, and almost annually he wrote books on philosophy and art, which the world received with provoking indifference. He was, however, to obtain an unkind immortality in an unlooked-for way. If we look at Hogarth's picture of "Beer Street," we see a porter drinking copiously from a mug to refresh his exhausted frame, after depositing on the ground a heavy load of five ponderous folios intended for the trunkmaker; and on the back of one of these we read the title: *Turnbull on Ancient Painting*. This was one of the numerous works of Reid's old Aberdeen regent. Such was not the sort of immortality poor Turnbull expected.

Years passed by, and after undergoing a six years' course of Divinity, Reid was licensed to preach in 1729, and after a further nine years at Marischal College, where he was keeper of the library, on a salary of £8 sterling, he was presented to the living of New Machar, twelve miles from Aberdeen. [Stewart's *Life of Reid*.]

The people there, being, like those of his native parish, of dour nature, were jealous of what they considered their Christian rights of choosing a minister and would not sign "the call." They had been incited to refuse by Mr. Bisset, a former minister of the parish, a notable firebrand, with big, ungainly person and huge black wig, who, preaching at the "moderation of the call," in his obstreperous voice stirred up the parishioners against cringing to the great, on the servile maxim, "I am for the man the laird is for." The presentee in consequence was received with opposition, his wig and hat were pulled off in the fray, the precentor is said to have fled before the tumult, and soldiers with drawn swords kept order in the kirk at the ordination. [Ramsay's *Scotland and Scotsmen*; Fraser's *Thomas Reid*; M'Cosh's *Scottish Philosophy*, p. 273.] A self-willed, austere folk were those at New Machar, who had hauled Reid's predecessor before the Presbytery on the charge of having heinously powdered his wig on the Lord's day.

The career thus inauspiciously began lasted fifteen years, during which the minister so thoroughly won the affections of his people, that when, amid tears and lamentations, he departed for the professor's chair in Aberdeen, one of them said: "We fought against Mr. Reid when he came; we would have fought for him when he left." [Stewart's *Life of Reid*.] Yet he had no popular gifts to tickle the rustic ears; no hot gospelling to warm their rudimentary emotions; no muscular activity in the pulpit to excite their admiration. The affection was for the man rather than the preacher, who read "slavishly," who would treat his flock at times to the dry pulpit dialectics of Tillotson, or the moral discourses of the non-conformist Evans - which

## SCOTTISH MEN OF LETTERS

were famous in their day, but are unreadable in ours. Yet he was a man of deep feeling; and it is told that, when dispensing the Lord's Supper, in the fervour of his appeals tears would fall down his cheeks as he addressed the communicants. A private dedication of himself to God, when his wife was dangerously ill, which by some chance is still extant, gives a curious insight to his heart. He craves Divine mercy to bring his wife from the gates of death; he confesses his sins in not stirring her up to Christian virtues, in not taking sufficient pains in the upbringing of his children and servants, in being negligent in preparations for public services; and he winds up with a quaint arrangement with his Maker: "I do promise and covenant through grace to turn from my backslidings, to express my thankfulness by a vigorous discharge of my duty as a Christian minister, and master of a family, and *by an alms of ten pounds sterling to the poor in meal or money.*" [M'Cosh's *Scot. Philosophy*, p. 419.] This is a mode of pious bargaining common in the dedications and "personal covenants" of these old times, which is indeed as old as the days of Jacob, when that Israelite indeed, who was not without guile, chaffered with Jehovah to serve Him if he would keep him in food and clothing. But, after all, we feel it is a shabby thing to spy on Mr. Reid's devout privacy, and to be an eavesdropper in his secret prayers.

Fifteen years passed by, he married, and in time the little manse became noisy and cheery with sounds of children's voices; he studied, and his bookshelves became filled with works on science and philosophy; he botanised; he gardened; he dabbled in farming, being stimulated by his friend the energetic old Sir Alexander Grant of Monymusk, who spent a lifetime in draining, enclosing, and planting his estates. It was in 1745 he first broke forth into authorship by an *Essay on Quantity*, which was read before the Royal Society of London, on the application of mathematics to moral problems, in refutation of a theory of Hutcheson's.

At length the final bent was given to his study and his life-thought. One day he read the little volume, *A Treatise on Human Nature*, by David Hume, which had come out in 1739. It was barely known in the North, but by this quiet country minister it was to be called out of unmerited obscurity and to become an epoch-making work. Reid had hitherto been captivated by Berkeley's speculations. But as he read Hume's *Treatise*, "suddenly what he thought was firm land seemed to be changed to a mirage; what to him had been a reality now seemed all a dream"; for that *enfant terrible* of twenty-five, pressing home the Bishop's arguments remorselessly to their conclusions, seemed to prove that we know as little of the existence of mind as of matter, that we are only cognisant of a succession of ideas

## DR. THOMAS REID

or impressions, according no evidence for body or soul, for matter or spirit. After committing intellectual suicide, Hume, as we have seen, professed himself at first dismayed at the consequences to which his reasoning inexorably led him: "I am affrighted and confounded with the forlorn solitude in which I am placed by my philosophy." Similar consternation did the reading of this treatise now cause the minister of New Machar, who had hitherto seemed to be living in a well-ordered universe." [*Inquiry into the Human Mind* (Introduction).] I find that I have been only in an enchanted castle. I had been imposed upon by spectres and apparitions . . . I see myself and the whole frame of nature shrink into fleeting ideas, which, like Epicurus' atoms, dance about in emptiness." Dumfounded at the seemingly irresistible conclusions drawn from his once cherished Berkeleian speculations, he resolved to reconstruct the shattered faith, and to find a basis on which he could build proofs of the existence of a self, a mind, an external world, and free-will.

Leaving him to his philosophical studies, we follow him in his public life. In 1751 he was appointed regent in King's College, Aberdeen, and he and his family left the old manse amid parochial lamentations, and in a few weeks were housed in a dwelling facing the College Chapel, rented from the College, with its low thatched roof, shaded and sheltered by the trees around it. He had, as regent, to teach moral philosophy, logic, pneumatics, natural philosophy, with hydrostatics and astronomy - a course which took much out of the professor without putting much into the students. Reid did not complain - indeed, he encouraged the absurd old system of "Regenting," which was then abolished at every other University. He also persuaded the authorities to resume the old plan of students living and boarding within the college. Reid comforted anxious parents by assuring them that their sons were secure from temptation by being shut up within its safeguarding walls from nine at night till six o'clock in the morning, while the professors, watching them from the windows, could scrutinise the doings of their scholars every hour of the day. [*Stat. Acct. Scot.*, "Hist. of Aberdeen University"; Dunbar's *Social Life in Morayshire*, p. 6.] No wonder the King's Collegians soon sighed after the freedom of their brethren at Marischal College, who could live and lodge anywhere in the town. At a period when religious life was still sombre in southern counties, when worldly entertainments were regarded by "high-fliers" as morally and spiritually unwholesome, it is pleasant to find in the less austere Aberdeen that regulations were made for the encouragement of dancing among the students - to use Mr. Reid's words - "as giving graceful motions, and above all, manliness and confidence." Unfortunately, the dancing classes were robbed of all delightsomeness, by the partners not being fair damsels

## SCOTTISH MEN OF LETTERS

of the city, but rough and raw fellow-students, from farms and stocking factories, whose motions, however “manly,” could not be “graceful,” as they practised reel and minuet and country-dance, with steps laborious and heavy clattering of thick-nailed shoes, to the accompaniment of a fiddle.

In the Aberdeen College at that time were men of some note. Dr. Blackwell was still lecturing on Greek and writing in English, as he had done for many a year in his cocks-combical way. His *Essay on Homer* and his pompous *Court of Augustus*, highly respected in their day, have gone the way of poor Turnbull’s *Ancient Painting*, to the trunk-maker, without a Hogarth to immortalise their names. There were also regents of dulness profound, estimably droning out their Latin lectures, under the bland delusion that they were forming the minds of a new generation. The hard-worked, ill-paid professors had their little entertainments - their clubs, their supper-parties, their holidays in summer, when they “took the sea,” and drank the waters at Peterhead Wells; or, greatly daring, went on a trip by sea to London, to see sights and celebrities; and they took horse for Edinburgh, to have their wits burnished up by the newest topics, and their wives’ wardrobes supplied with the newest fashions.

Every alternate Wednesday afternoon would be seen going to the “Red Lion” five or six figures well known in Aberdeen, clad in the sedate blue cloth, bushy wigs, and full cocked hats. The big heavy, tall figure of Dr. John Gregory, Professor of Medicine, would appear with the thick-set form of his cousin Dr. Reid; and the stout slouchy body of Dr. James Beattie, teaching Moral Philosophy at Marischal College, would walk there with Professor Campbell, a little man with benign face and catholic soul. They were on their way to the Philosophical Club. A frugal, sedate company of six or eight met at five o’clock, read and debated essays till eight o’clock, when they sat down to a modest repast, which concluded as the clock struck ten. The whole expense was never to exceed eighteenpence a head; and by written rule “any member may take a glass at the bye-table while the president is in the chair, but no health shall be drunk during that time.” [Forbes’s *Life of Beattie*, i. 31; M’Cosh’s *Scot. Philosophy*, p. 227.] Philosophy, science, laws, history, and religion were discussed by those gentlemen, who were more or less acquainted with such questions, seeing that, as regents, some taught their students subjects ranging from Logic to Astronomy. Each chose his special question for discussion, and the books which they published afterwards were the results of their weekly gatherings. There they propounded theories afterwards published in Professor Gerard’s *Essay on Taste*, Dr. Beattie’s work on *Moral Truth*, Dr. Oswald’s treatise of *Common Sense*

## DR. THOMAS REID

in *Religion*, Dr. George Campbell's *Lectures on Rhetoric*, and Dr. John Gregory's *Comparative View of Man and Animals*, in which the philosophical physician discusses everything from suckling to religion, from teething to melody.

Much they spoke of David Hume's political and philosophical essays at the meetings; and the efforts of these cautious but perplexed Aberdonians were directed to extricating morals and metaphysics from the quandary in which the audacious philosopher had laid them. Dr. Reid wrote to Hume with engaging frankness: "Your friendly adversaries, Drs. Campbell and Gerard, as well as Dr. Gregory, return their compliments to you respectfully. Your company would, although we are all good Christians, be more acceptable than that of St. Athanasius, and since we cannot have you upon the bench, you are oftener than any other man brought to the bar, accused and defended with great zeal but without bitterness. If you write no more on morals, politics, or metaphysics, I am afraid we shall be at a loss for subjects." [Burton's *Hume*, ii. 155.]

Besides debating Hume's opinions in his Club, Reid had now completed an *Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, in which he combated the theories in the sceptic's *Treatise on Human Nature*. It was no easy matter, however, as Beattie afterwards discovered, to get a work on Philosophy published. Mr. Andrew Millar, the eminent London bookseller, when visiting Aberdeen, was sounded on the matter. Of course such books were pronounced a "drug in the market," and the public naturally do not like drugs. He pronounced metaphysical works to be bad bargains for booksellers - works on which "he and his brother tradesmen had lost a vast deal of money." However, for the sake of a friend and a countryman, he was persuaded to risk it; and for the sum of £50 the author parted with his manuscript, telling his friends with charming simplicity, "I think it very well sold," although it was the fruit of twenty years' study. This manuscript, through his friend Dr. Hugh Blair, he had submitted to David Hume, in order that he might correct the style, although the work energetically attacked the heretic's own opinions. There was a fine naïveté in the proceeding. It resembled a certain sea-fight between English and Dutch ships, where the powder of the former running short, they sent a flag of truce to the enemy offering to buy more ammunition, and the commercially-minded Dutchmen struck a bargain, and the fight was forthwith renewed. Till that time the good-natured sceptic knew nothing of his opponent, and he received the parcel with natural reluctance, expecting a humdrum refutation, by a scandalised minister of the Gospel, of a treatise which he had himself discarded, and wished to be forgotten. "I wish parsons would confine

## SCOTTISH MEN OF LETTERS

themselves to their old occupation of worrying one another, and leave philosophers to argue with temper, moderation, and good manners," he peevishly remarked. [Burton's *Hume*, ii. 158.] But the manuscript having been read, he found in the author a fit antagonist; for here was no violent assault on infidelity by a preacher of the Gospel who forgot charity in zeal for the faith; but a calm, acute philosophical treatise. Nothing could be finer than the courtesies exchanged between these two philosophers - divine and deist. "Your system," wrote Dr. Reid, "appears to me not only coherent in all its parts, but likewise justly deduced from the principles commonly received among philosophers - principles which I never thought of calling in question until the conclusions you drew from them made me suspect them. If the principles are solid, your system must stand; I agree with you, therefore, that if this system shall ever be abolished, you have a just claim to a great share of the praise; both because you have made a distinct and determinate work to be aimed at and have furnished proper artillery for the purpose." [Burton's *Hume*, ii. 155.] This is admirable in tone and honesty. Very similar to these chivalrous polemics was the manner in which Principal Campbell wrote, and Hume received, the *Dissertation on Miracles*, which disputed his views, and the courtesy with which was revised Principal Leechman's *Discourse on Prayer*, which the author submitted to the prayerless philosopher.

The *Inquiry* was published in 1764. It is the work of a cautious Aberdonian, as hostile to a paradox as to a bad bargain. Reid seeks to reconstruct human knowledge against philosophical arguments on plain common-sense, or plain practical judgment. "Common-sense holds nothing of Philosophy, nor needs her aid. Let my soul dwell with common-sense." [*Inquiry* (Introduction).] Hitherto he had accepted the usual view that we have no immediate knowledge of an external world - only mediate, through our sensations. He had even once adopted the whole system of Bishop Berkeley, [*Intellectual and Active Powers*, Essay xi. ch. x.] who argued that not only have we no direct perception of a material world, but there is no material world to perceive. On reading Hume's *Treatise* he had seen with dismay how far these views, which are meant to vindicate theism, could, when logically carried out, lead to blank agnosticism. For Hume, agreeing that we are cognisant of ideas only, argued that we had as little evidence for mind as for matter, having no consciousness of the existence of either. Reid sought to confirm human convictions in the existence of an external world; and this he does, by insisting that our common beliefs are valid, that the mind has an immediate perception that its sensations of external objects are real, that from this intuitive belief there is no

## DR. THOMAS REID

appeal. All the reasonings of philosophy are considered futile against common-sense, which affirms an external world, free-will, and causation. It may not be a very subtle refutation of idealism or agnosticism, but with its vigour and acuteness it proved a good working, hard-working system. Here was a practical philosophy of which it could not be said: "It was a good horse for a stall, but a sorry jade for a journey."

It is impossible, however, for any metaphysician to be always consistent, and sometimes Reid speaks of our knowledge of outward objects as immediate, while at others he speaks of it as being due to the medium of sensations accompanied by perception or intuitive belief in real existence outside. Sir James Mackintosh remarked to that subtle thinker, Dr. Thomas Brown, that Reid and Hume really seemed to differ more in words than opinions; to which he replied acutely, "Yes, Reid bawled out, 'We must believe in an external world'; but added in a whisper, 'We can give no reason for our belief.' Hume cries out, 'We can give no reason for such a notion'; but whispers, 'I own we cannot get rid of it.'" Dr. Reid, the commonplace Dr. Oswald, author of *Common Sense in Religion*, and the forcibly feeble Dr. Beattie - Aberdonians all - became known in England as the "triumvirate of Scottish philosophy" - an incongruous trio. Acuteness and vigour of argument are the merits of his treatise; elegance and grace are not the qualities of his style. Probably he would have considered literary decoration in controversy as much out of place as the silken tackle of Cleopatra's pleasure ship on a sea-going merchantman.

The same year in which his famous *Inquiry* was published from Millar's shop, Reid was invited to fill the chair of Moral Philosophy left vacant by Adam Smith. With regret he left his old home in November 1764, parting with friends of a lifetime, with the city and colleges, which themselves were as dear as old friends, to begin a new career in a city and among a people so different in taste and manners from those of the North. For two years - until he got into his house in the Professor's Court at the College - he was to be found in a poor, narrow wynd beyond the Drygate, inhabited chiefly by weavers, whose handlooms clattered from open doors and windows all day long. "You go through a long, dark, abominably nasty entry, which leads you into a clean little close. You walk upstairs to a neat little dining-room, and find as many rooms as just accommodate my family [of five] so scantily, that my apartment is a closet of six feet by eight or nine off the dining-room." Thus does he describe his new abode to an Aberdeen friend, and he adds with an air of surprise and triumph, "The house is new and free of bugs." Besides

## SCOTTISH MEN OF LETTERS

that, "It has the best air and finest prospects in Glasgow - the privilege of a large garden, very airy to walk in" - this was the College pleasure-grounds. All these amenities - which certainly exist "beyond the Drygate" no longer - did not, however, prevent its being infested with small-pox, which dealt mortality and ugliness among the weavers, and even infected his own family. [Reid's *Works* (Hamilton), p. 41.] Clearly his heart hankered after the old thatched home in the North, nestled among the trees, and the familiar faces in Castle Street.

He found reigning in the western city a tone of brand-new prosperity mingled with austere religiosity which were uncomfortable to him after the northern city, with old families of small incomes, who leavened society with "genteel" dignity, and with the tolerance of a region where the extremely Solemn League and Covenant principles happily had never spread. Here he found the people "without manners" or any grace (except, of course, "saving grace"), and "extremely sober." Indeed, he had to own that the only man he saw drunk was one of his brother professors. He noted that the "common people have a gloom upon their countenances," though he was not sure "whether that is due to their climate or enthusiastic piety"; and as for the clergy, "who are fanatical," "you hear from the pulpit a gospel which you know nothing about, for you never hear it." [Correspondence in Reid's *Works* (Hamilton's edit.), pp. 40. 41.] It is thus the good, pious, Moderate divine described the town of his adoption to his sympathetic friend in Aberdeen, to whom he unburdened his mind.

A professor's income, as we know, was severely modest in those days; but Dr. Reid was pleased to report that he had "touched about £70 in fees, and may possibly make out £100 this session" - for which he taught classes beginning at seven o'clock in the morning, consisting of sixty students. On the benches were sons of weavers from the Drygate and of merchants from the Saltmarket, of lairds and of ministers; youths from the far-off Hebrides; and a "great number of stupid Irish teagues," who formed a third of the students, coming over thirty at a time in ships, to qualify to be teachers, doctors, and Presbyterian ministers. "I preach to them," Reid groaned in despair, "as St. Francis did to the fishes." [Correspondence in Reid's *Works* (Hamilton's edit.), p. 43.] Poverty being usual among students, they came late to Glasgow in order to save their lodging. Among his brethren the new professor found congenial company. He was at home with Principal Leechman, the fine-hearted, tolerant head of the University, who, though silent and sedate, had a wife who loved romances, poetry, and fashion; with Moor, the Greek scholar, a man of infinite jest, over whose jokes he would ponder deliberately, as if they were mathematical

## DR. THOMAS REID

problems, and as the meaning dawned upon him, would burst into laughter when everybody else had forgotten them. He had sympathy with John Millar, the admirable Professor of Law, whose eminent works on government and philosophy were said to be only dim reflections of the brilliant talk of a man whose boxing-matches with his pupils were not more invigorating than the intellectual training of his lectures. [Cockburn's *Life of Jeffrey*, i. 10.]

Reid was certainly not a brilliant expounder, but solid, plain, and clear - reading his lectures in rich Aberdonian as closely as he had done his sermons in New Machar. There was nothing in his manner to attract; but as Dugald Stewart, in his own most pompous way, remarks: "Such was the simplicity and perspicuity of his style, such the gravity and authority of his character, and such the general interest of his young hearers in the doctrine which he taught, that by the numerous audience to which his instructions were delivered he was heard uniformly with the most silent and respectful attention." [Stewart's *Life of Reid*.] His classes increased in size year by year, and consisted not merely of raw youths, but of old students who would come year after year (especially as no fees were charged to them), with lawyers and city ministers who came to rekindle their philosophical interest. Thus he went on for sixteen years. It was a placid life he spent, almost as uniform, as untravelled as Immanuel Kant's, who was also brooding over Hume's Philosophy. The German philosopher was as regular as the big clock of the Cathedral of Königsberg: punctual to a minute he rose from bed, drank his coffee, gave his lectures, and took his walks. Every one knew that it was half-past three when Kant, in grey coat and Spanish cane in hand, stepped out of his door to walk up and down the Linden Avenue eight times, while behind him with an umbrella, lest it should rain, followed his servant Lampe - "like a picture of Providence," as Heine says. Nearly as methodical as this were the ways of his brother philosopher in Glasgow. There were, however, occasions when he would visit his cousin, Dr. James Gregory, in Edinburgh, and debate philosophical and mathematical points; and there were annual sojourns at Blair Drummond with Lord Kames. Were two mortals ever less alike than these two incongruous but fast friends? There was the tall, stooping figure of the Judge, with his keen, sarcastic face, and the short, thick-set Professor, with his solid, simple countenance, trudging side by side over moors and fields, on which his lordship was intent - the Judge with his broad humour, his rough jests, hurrying his workmen with his free expletives; the divine, sedate, polite, deferential, jogging along over shoe-buckles in bog. Then there was the return of the companions at dusk, hungry and weary and muddy, to supper and to his

## SCOTTISH MEN OF LETTERS

lordships favourite port, to talk over manure and moral sentiments, potatoes and perceptions - the host plenteously sniffing up snuff, his friend putting his quid of tobacco to one side of his cheek the more articulately to discuss the questions. Then his lordship would read out parts of his manuscript of the *Sketches of Man*, containing some passages that were extremely plain-spoken, and when the decorous professor respectfully suggested, "My lord, had you not better soften that passage!" the reply, "Deil a bit, Doctor - deil a bit," would silence the reverend guest. [Ramsay's *Scotland and Scotsmen*, i. 475.]

A quiet, laborious mind was his - as such impressing Dr. Samuel Johnson, when, in 1773, he arrived at the Saracen's Head in the Gallowgate, of which, "though wretchedly managed, the Glasgow folk are vastly proud." The professors paid their respects to the illustrious traveller, and he supped with them. "I am not much pleased with any of them," he informed Mrs. Thrale. They talked little and cautiously, for, as the obsequious Boswell remarks, [Boswell's *Johnson* (ed. Hill), v. 370.] "like their brethren in Aberdeen, they did not care to expose themselves much to the battery of his cannon, which they knew might play upon them." In other words, they were courteous and did not contradict; they had some sense of dignity, and did not wish to be bullied. Of the learned fraternity, Dr. Reid was not likely to be the most loquacious or lively. "I have no pretensions to be vivacious," the worthy man acknowledged when he was aged, and he could have said the same when he was younger. Rarely did a striking sentence come from his respectable pen; never did a brilliant saying fall from his instructive lips.

Yet this man was full of active interests and keen intellectual pursuits. Soon after he came to Glasgow he was to be seen at Dr. Black's class-room, where the chemist expounded his theory on Latent Heat, as eager about experiments, as copious with his notes, as the most ardent boy-student in the class; interested in the fine types set up in his friend Alexander Wilson's foundry, excited over Dollond's telescope just arrived at the observatory, and studying optics with eager delight. We find the good man full of observation even in places where science loses a little of its dignity. Thus he records his investigations: "A nasty custom of chewing tobacco has been the reason of my observing a species of nasty little animals. I spit into a basin of sawdust, which, when it becomes to be drenched, produces a vast number of animals three or four times the size of a louse, and not very different in shape, but armed with four or five rows of pickles like a hedgehog, which seem to serve as feet." [Reid's *Works* (ed. by Hamilton), p. 49.] As he gazes, with bent head and cauliflower wig, at these weird creatures, fit to come in a nightmare or to produce one,

## DR. THOMAS REID

studying natural history in a spittoon, he presents a curious rather than an impressive figure.

In 1780 he found he was growing old, and, getting a substitute in his chair, he retired from public duties. It is characteristic of old academic ways that this successor, Dr. Arthur, was recommended by Dr. Reid because he had heard him preach excellent sermons. Sixteen years had he lectured, and for another sixteen he was to enjoy the peaceful luxury of growing gently older. He lived in the old house in the grim court, with its friendly, familiar society, pursuing his old studies, and busy with scientific experiments in more dignified quarters than a "basin of sawdust."

He was a man of seventy-eight when he published his *Essays on Intellectual and Active Powers*, which proved that his own intellectual powers were not dimmed and his active powers were not abated - giving the results of lectures of keen observation and criticism on Psychology. Common-sense there is still used as the key to truth, experience as the solvent of all problems. He ventures on no high or deep philosophical theories. As for metaphysics - strictly so called - the name of "idea" was to him a bugbear, so protean in its shapes and meanings; so difficult to define; so impossible to translate from foreign languages; so illusive to grasp in our own. "Metaphysics," said Voltaire to Dr. John Moore, when the author of *Zeluco* visited the patriarch at Ferney - "metaphysics are like minuet dancers, who, being dressed to the greatest advantage, make a couple of bows, move through the room in the finest attitudes, display all their graces, are in perpetual motion without advancing a step, and finish at the identical point from which they set out." [Moore's *View of Society and Manners in France*, 1779, i. 271.] Not so neatly could Reid have expressed it; but something in this way he, like Hutcheson, his philosophical ancestor, felt towards abstruse problems of philosophy.

There was a fine simplicity, a sterling honesty in the old philosophical student, who in controversy was the model of courtesy, shocking thereby Dr. Beattie, who was grieved that a controversialist who professed to be a Christian should write like a gentleman. As he grew aged he became very deaf, but not less shrewd; as active at eighty-seven years as at sixty, with his short, sturdy frame, busy in his garden, keen over botany, physiology, or physics. Yet with all his energy he would plaintively say, with a kindly look on his good, plain, common-sense face, which looked like an incarnation of his own philosophy: "I am ashamed of having lived so long after having ceased to be useful." [Fraser's *Life of Thomas Reid*.]

In October 1794 he died, leaving a blameless name as a gentleman, a high

## SCOTTISH MEN OF LETTERS

reputation as a teacher, and works which were to have a powerful effect in stimulating philosophical thought in Scotland - through Dugald Stewart, his own pupil, who successfully expounded his system in Edinburgh during his life; and through Sir William Hamilton, who expounded it with vastly more learning and brilliancy, long after his death. If his influence was slight in Germany, it was for a while potent in France, after Royer Collard picked up a copy of his *Inquiry* at a bookstall on the quays of Paris. Through him Reid's philosophy passed on to Jouffroy and to Cousin the prolific.

### DR. JAMES BEATTIE

Social fame is not always the portion of the greatest; popularity is for those writers who support, by arguments which all can follow, opinions which all are holding; who say in verse things to which society can say "How beautiful!" and say in prose things to which society can murmur "How true!" The palm of literary celebrity in the eighteenth century was not given to the great writers of Scotland - to Hume for his brilliant philosophical essays, or Robertson for his admirable histories, or Adam Smith for his unequalled exposition of political economy, or to Reid for his acute, astute, intellectual work - but to Dr. James Beattie, author of *The Minstrel, a Poem, and the Essay on the Immutability of Truth*, which "avenged insulted Christianity," and greatly insulted Mr. David Hume. To search into past literature is somewhat like excavating an old churchyard. There are bones once full of vigour, skulls in which were located brains acute and brilliant, jaw-bones on which were cheeks fresh and fair, eyeless sockets from which once darted glances of perilous fascination. These remains are found in the mould in all stages of preservation or decay - some are reduced to powder, others seem marvellously intact, yet crumble to dust when exposed to the air or touched with the spade. Similar is the pathetic experience of those who unearth dead authors, dead books, dead reputations. Some are still wonderfully preserved, some have all the semblance of life till we critically touch them - dry bones which no Ezekiel could call back into life.

When Dr. James Beattie died in the fulness of years and of fame, it was meet that a solid biography - a literary tomb-stone - should be erected to his memory. His friend and steadfast admirer, Sir William Forbes of Pitsligo, an excellent man, a wealthy banker, undertook the work. [Forbes's *Account of Life and Writings of James Beattie*, 2 vols.



DR. JAMES BEATTIE

From an Engraving of the Painting by Reynolds in Aberdeen University.

## DR. JAMES BEATTIE

1806.] The result is not lively reading, though not without interest, for it preserves devoutly all the traditions of the poet from the north country which we wish to learn - and a good deal more.

James Beattie was born in 1735, in the village of Laurencekirk in Kincardineshire, of parents who, the biographer informs us, "though poor were honest" - a conjunction of virtue with impecuniosity which evidently is a grave surprise to the opulent baronet. The father kept a little shop, and was tenant of a little farm. In the parish school, which had been taught in the beginning of the century by the famous grammarian Thomas Ruddiman, the boy, amid his lessons, showed precocious literary propensities; he read assiduously Ogilby's now forgotten translation of Homer; he was addicted to the disagreeable practice of getting up during the night from his chaff-bed and walking about his little chamber in airy night-shirt to think out some poetic fancy, which he feverishly wrote down to relieve his seething juvenile brain. His companions regarded him with respect, and he would go proudly to and from school rejoicing in the title of "poet," with which his master had injudiciously dubbed him. At the age of fourteen he entered Marischal College, Aberdeen, where the pompous Dr. Blackwell, Professor of Greek, discovered that his pupil possessed the vague attribute of "genius." In 1752 he gave up studying for the ministry to become parish schoolmaster at Fordoun, at the foot of the Grampians, a poor occupation for a "genius," especially as for £10 he was expected also to act as session-clerk, to superintend cock-fights, and to lead the psalmody in the parish church. Lord Monboddo, who lived near Fordoun, was delighted to find in this young teacher one with whom he could converse on his beloved Greek. His biographer fondly tells how his hero would wander through the glens, nursing his poetic fancy; even strolling throughout the night, "contemplating the sky and marking the approach of day." [Forbes's *Life of Beattie*, i. 22.] Promotion came in 1760 to the young schoolmaster, who, after becoming teacher in the Grammar School in Aberdeen, was to his natural surprise offered the chair of Natural Philosophy in Marischal College. Truly in those old academic days strange things were done. We have seen how in Edinburgh Adam Ferguson was appointed to a similar chair, the subjects of which he knew nothing about, and had to learn in three months. Here was a young country schoolmaster placed by a patron to teach a young generation matters of which he had scarcely heard since he sat as a boy listening to his regent. At his request Mr. Beattie, feeling his incapacity for the post, was immediately transferred to the chair of Moral Philosophy and Logic, of which he at least knew quite as little.

## SCOTTISH MEN OF LETTERS

Life in Old Aberdeen was pleasant though provincial. There were the merchants making money from linen and flannel and fish; lawyers, called “advocates,” who made good incomes from clients belonging to a most litigious race; county families, who in winter months resorted to the not too riotous gaiety of the little town, with its occasional balls, its frequent tea-parties and suppers. But the intellectual contribution to the society was chiefly made by the professors of King’s and Marischal Colleges, enlivened by a sprinkling of well-read lairds and ministers. Every other Wednesday the “Wise Club,” [Forbes’s *Beattie*, i. 31.] as outsiders called it, met at five o’clock, and after debating till eight, partook, we are told, of a “slight and inexpensive collation” till ten, when the worthy philosophers walked soberly to their respective abodes. What a contrast this “slight collation” in Aberdeen to the many festive gatherings of the convivial philosophers in Edinburgh!

In the *Scots Magazine* - the respectable paper which weekly purveyed letters, essays, poetry, and news for Scottish society - a few verses signed “J. B.” were the first product of Beattie’s pen; and in 1761 a little volume crept into existence in London - *Original Poems and Translations* - which the biographer aforesaid superlatively states “stamped Dr. Beattie with the character of great and original genius, from the harmony of his numbers, the simplicity yet force and elegance of his diction, the brightness of his fancy, as well as the appropriate sentiments through it.” What an old-world sound there is in all these carefully-arranged adjectives and phrases! Having better judgment than his biographer, the poet used in later years to destroy every copy he found. Genius is impatient, and decent Andrew Millar, the publisher, was blamed for his lack of energy in pushing the sale. Yet in 1766 another edition, with omissions and additions, appeared, and the success was considerable. Persons “of consequence” took the poet up. Mr. Gray, the poet, on his Highland tour was staying at Glamis Castle, and Beattie was asked to meet him. In passing through Edinburgh the English poet, with parrot-like face, all nose and no chin, had made a poor impression [Forbes, i. 75; Carlyle’s *Autobiography*.] being reserved, silent - “a mighty fine gentleman,” said the dissatisfied Principal Robertson. But with Beattie he was easy, frank, charming; for the professor had a wonderful gift, with his simple nature and his capacity of bestowing admiration, for winning friendship. “Mr. Gray,” records Dr. Johnson, “naturally contracted a friendship with Dr. Beattie, whom he found a poet, a philosopher, and a good man.” [Johnson’s *Lives of the Poets* - “Gray.”] They praised each others poems, lauded each other’s virtues, and Beattie in the honest exuberance of his heart could drench a celebrity with compliments.

## DR. JAMES BEATTIE

The poems of 1766 were winning praise in Scotland and in England, when Beattie, remembering that he was a Professor of Moral Philosophy, felt it his duty to defend orthodoxy against the malignant scepticism of David Hume, whose theories were a frequent subject of debate at the "Wise Club." His pious friend Dr. John Gregory, who had left his chair of Physic in Aberdeen for a more profitable chair and practice in Edinburgh, wrote to him alarming reports of the encroachments of infidelity; informing him that "materialism and atheism are the present fashion"; that "a man who expresses belief in a future state of existence is regarded as a fool or a hypocrite." "There is an insolence and daring effrontery in this which is exceedingly provoking . . . till within these thirty years the wit was generally on the side of religion. I do not remember any man of the least pretensions to genius in Britain who ever thought of subverting any principle of natural religion till of late." All this he seems to attribute to the "licentious teaching" of David Hume, who had ceased to write on philosophy many years before. The agitated Professor of Medicine indeed owns that "among Hume's disciples I do not know any one who ever read his *Treatise of Human Nature*; what was read and spoken of was anything to do with belles lettres." Who could stem the tide of infidelity? [Forbes's *Beattie*, i. 104.] "You," said Gregory, "are the best man to chastise such people as they deserve." Beattie thoroughly agreed with him. Diligently, therefore, he laboured at his work on *The Immutability of Truth*, which was to scarify wits, silence scoffers, and convince doubters, and, as his friend suggested, "warm the imagination and touch the hearts of those who are deaf to reason." The Professor was no philosopher; he knew nothing of his subject till he began to teach it, and not much even then; he disliked metaphysics, which he never could understand, and yet he essayed the task. His manuscript was read with high approval by Blacklock, Gregory, and other orthodox friends. "I want," said he, "to lay before the public in as strong a light as possible the following dilemma: our sceptics either believe the doctrines they publish or they do not believe them; if they believe them they are fools; if not, they are a thousand times worse." What could be more concise and compact than this? His friends hinted mildly that the language in which he sought to pulverise Hume and all his works might be more gentle - they might have said gentlemanly - but not one objectionable phrase would the good man modify, for he felt bound in conscience to speak "as a man and a Christian."

Strange to say, this famous work was launched on the world with difficulty. Booksellers refused it, but at last, under the persuasion of Beattie's friends, Mr. Andrew Millar consented to publish it, though only at the author's expense.

## SCOTTISH MEN OF LETTERS

Unwilling to hurt the author's feelings by this mortifying proposal, his admirers arranged quietly among themselves to pay the cost, and with amiable mendacity told him that it had been sold for fifty guineas, which, of course, they presented to him out of their own pockets. The Professor was delighted, yea, astonished, at so large a sum, which "does really exceed my warmest expectations." [Forbes's *Beattie*, i. 147.] The worthy man did not know - let us trust he never learned - the ironic fact, at which his adversaries would have been hugely delighted, that his great *Essay on the Origin and Immutability of Truth* was ushered into the world by the aid of a lie.

This was in 1770. The tone of the book was so peevishly bitter that the clamour in Edinburgh was like that of a startled rookery, and David Hume lost his placidity of temper and complained that he was not being treated like a gentleman. In England, however, it made a bound into favour. It was read by all who read anything beyond a romance; literary circles praised "its wit, its reason, its eloquence." Bishops were more than satisfied with its triumphant apology for truth; literary ladies were charmed with it - it was all "so clear," "so beautiful," "so convincing." [Doran's *Lady of the Last Century*, p. 286.] When, the following year (1771), appeared the first part of *The Minstrel*, in which he tuned his "Gothic lyre" to tell the vapid tale of the plaintive Edwin, the "genius" of the poet was sung in full chorus - though to-day one sees in pretty descriptions and pleasing reflections no trace of it. Success had followed success. The poem was the subject of universal talk. "Have you read *The Minstrel*?" was the question on all sides. At Bath, at Tunbridge Wells the circulating libraries were pestered for copies by impatient inquirers; the blue-stocking Mrs. Montagu was advising friends everywhere to buy it; and Mr. Gray, the fastidious, wrote kindest criticism and abundant laudation; in Seminaries for Young Ladies were recited the familiar lines, till every one was weary of the words:

Young Edwin was no vulgar boy,  
Deep thought oft seemed to fix his infant eye;  
Dainties he heeded not, nor gawd, nor toy,  
Save one short pipe of rudest minstrelsy;  
Silent when glad, affectionate though shy -

and so on. In Edinburgh it was greeted with little applause, for its author had railed at its beloved infidel. "A milk and water poet," sneered the not unbiassed Hume, who spoke of him as a "silly, bigoted fellow." "A piece which could not be called a poem, without beginning, middle, or end, containing a few good lines," remarked

## DR. JAMES BEATTIE

Adam Smith. [*The Bee*, 1791, iii. p. 4.] But these jarring notes could not vex the complacent bard.

When his popularity was at its height Mr. Beattie and his pretty wife, in the autumn of 1771, set forth for London. An introduction from Dr. John Gregory to Mrs Montagu found him a ready welcome into literary society. In Hill Street [Doran's *Lady of the Last Century*, p. 286.] the lettered Mrs. Montagu held her "blue-stocking" assemblies. It was some years since Mr. Benjamin Stillingfleet had first trod her carpet clad in the blue stockings which gave the well-known name to the ladies who affected philosophy and polite letters in assemblies which he frequented. Up the unpaved street coaches were driven and sedan-chairs borne, at great risk from the footpads that infested the district. Not far off was Mayfair, at that period the locality for butchers' shambles, for drunkenness and riot. Near it was Tyburn Lane - now bearing the innocent appellation of Park Lane - up which the frequent carts passed carrying the victims for the scaffold, while red-nosed chaplains, with characters as dirty as their cassocks, muttered their ghostly offices. The fashionable frequenters of the gay saloon could hear the shouts and revelry of the mob as they escorted the wretches to Tyburn Tree. In the "Chinese Room," with its ornaments of shaking mandarins and "fat-headed pagodas" - for it was imagined that a pagoda was Chinese for a graven image - gathered a goodly and learned company, who partook of admirable dinners, or in the evening indulged in tea and ceaseless talk. Dr. Johnson was there seated, distorting his huge body, shaking convulsively his head, spluttering over successive dishes of bohea, while around his chair clustered adoring ladies, four deep, standing on tiptoe to see and hear the great man, whose voice dominated the room with his vociferous "Why, no, sir," and his milder "Why, yes, ma'am." Sir Joshua Reynolds stood by the fireplace, with ear-trumpet alert, bearing the bland expression which the deaf always wear when they wish to look as if they heard. The esteemed but absurd person of Mr. Gibbon, in his flowered coat, was present, with the spare form of Horace Walpole. These and many more men of note - Garrick, Murphy, Richard Cumberland - were there. Among them fussed the clever, learned, and bountiful hostess, Mrs Montagu [Wraxall's *Hist. Memoirs*, i. 147, 152; Taylor's *Records of my Life*, i. 92.] with sharp face, prominent nose, and penetrating eyes, her person bedizened with diamond necklaces and adorned in every colour of the rainbow, which gained for her the name of "Iris." [Wraxall's *Hist. Memoirs*, i. 147, 152; Taylor's *Records of my Life*, i. 92.] Other ladies in the company could fairly rival her learning and her wit - Mrs Carter, the pretty translator of Epictetus; young Miss Hannah More, in the full flush of literary glory, whose drama of *Percy* now

## SCOTTISH MEN OF LETTERS

rivalled *Douglas*, and whose *Bas Bleu* was setting the world a-talking - for, as Dr. Johnson said solemnly to Dr. Beattie, "Sir, she is a most powerful versificatrix."

Into this brilliant world the Aberdeen poet and philosopher was introduced, and we can imagine how dazzled the plain man must have been by this galaxy of fashion and letters - now talking to the famous Sir Joshua and Garrick, now introduced to my Lord Bath, or her high Grace the Duchess of Portland. All so different this drawing-room from the humble parlours at home - these high-bred voices from the deplorable Aberdonian. Received with respect, even with homage, he received compliments by the bushel, till his melancholy eyes knew not where to look. In appearance he was a stout person, with a slouch in his gait, and with eyes black, piercing, and pathetic, which ladies found fascinating. Dr. Johnson was more than gracious to him, for was he not orthodox? did he not hate that rascal Hume? did he not listen with deference? In his satisfaction he forgave the professor for being a Scotsman. Beattie, writing home, told of his great doings, and reported that Johnson had been greatly misrepresented. "I have passed several entire days with him, and found him extremely agreeable. The compliments he pays me are so high that I have not the face to mention them." There was a diffident, deferential manner in the worthy poet, with a genuine simplicity of heart, that seems to have been irresistible to English people. One person, however, there was to whom the flattery of Beattie was as gall. This was Oliver Goldsmith, who became horribly jealous at the incense wafted before Dr. Beattie. Mrs. Thrale says that he went about in his foolish blabbing way saying so, so that it was no vain imagination on Beattie's part. "Goldsmith is a poor creature," the author of *The Minstrel* informed his friends at home, "eaten up with affectation and envy. He was the only person I ever knew who owned himself to be envious. In Johnson's presence he was quiet enough, but in his absence expressed great uneasiness in hearing him praised. He even envied the dead: he could not bear that Shakespeare should be so much admired as he was . . . But surely Goldsmith had no occasion to envy me," he modestly adds - "which, however, he did, for he owned it, though he was always very civil." [Forbes, ii. 267; Mrs. Piozzi's *Autobiography*, ii. 181.]

What tales Mr. Beattie had to tell of high, brilliant society he met, when he returned, caressed and flattered, to his quiet home. Two years afterwards he is in London again. The same receptions attend him. At Bulstrode he and his wife are entertained by the Dowager Duchess of Portland; presents of money are offered by Mrs. Montagu, by the Duchess, and by the Queen; he visits bishops; he is pressed by the Archbishop of York to enter the English Church and accept an ample living;

## DR. JAMES BEATTIE

he is received by the King, who praises his Essay and gives him a pension of £200 a year. When he went to Kew to present his thanks for the gracious pension, he was again complimented on such a book, which the King said he and the Queen “always kept by them” - a copy at Kew, another at Windsor. His Majesty remarked that he had heard the sale of Hume’s *Essays* had fallen off since the great *Essay on Truth* had appeared, and the author modestly replied he believed that it had. His Majesty questioned his pensioner as to the length of the prayers of Scots ministers. “Sometimes a quarter or half an hour, I told him.” The King, venturing on theology, profoundly stated “he could not imagine any thinking man could be an atheist unless he could bring himself to believe that he made himself.” This seemed to him so weighty and original an argument that he was pleased to repeat it two or three times to the Queen. It was on a later visit that Miss Fanny Burney saw him, and then she gushes over him in the usual way. “I found him pleasant, unaffected, unassuming, full of conversable intelligence, with a round, thick, clumsy figure that promises nothing either of his works or his discourse. Yet his eye at intervals shoots forth a ray of genius that instantly lights up his whole countenance. His voice and manners are particularly and pleasantly mild, and seem to announce an urbanity of character both inviting and edifying. You would be surprised to find how soon you could forget that he is ugly and clumsy, for there is a sort of perfect good-will in his countenance and his smile that is quite captivating.” [D’Arblay’s *Diary*, iii. 397, 402.] So records Miss Burney. “He is charming,” said Mrs. Thrale, who protested if she ever had a second husband she would have Dr. Beattie. It is certainly remarkable to find the man, born and bred in poverty, who had lived in a humble position, assuming a new position in society without awkwardness, from the sheer simplicity of his nature.

We next find him at Oxford, receiving his degree of D.C.L on the same day as Sir Joshua Reynolds - and his name was received with applause as loud as that for the great painter, the function heralded by a laudatory oration of twenty minutes. No one admired him more than Sir Joshua - whom, by the way, he complimented, in his “*Essay on Poetry and Music*,” by associating his name with that of Raphael. He stayed with the painter at his, country house at Richmond, and met the best of literary company at his house in Leicester Square. As a further compliment the great artist painted an allegorical portrait of his friend clad in his doctor’s hood and scarlet gown, holding a copy of his immortal *Essay* in his hand. In five hours the head was painted on the canvas, and an admirable likeness it proved. There looks out from the canvas an amiable, self-satisfied face, all signs of his slouch hidden

## SCOTTISH MEN OF LETTERS

under the doctoral garb. The picture was designed to represent the triumph of Truth over Error. A female personification of Truth is vigorously thrusting down to perdition three demons - probably Sophistry, Scepticism, and Infidelity. The face of one of the figures represents Voltaire; but was the figure which covers his face in shame from the spectator meant for Hume, as people said, and as the freethinker believed? "They may call it Hume or anybody else," Reynolds said; adding, with a smile, "It is true, it has a tolerably broad back." [Taylor and Leslie's *Sir Joshua Reynolds*, ii. 58.] It is this picture which has done more to immortalise the author than any book he wrote.

While he was flattered in London, and his book was being dandled into fame, his name was not fragrant in Edinburgh. When it was proposed that he should succeed Adam Ferguson on his quitting the chair of Moral Philosophy - for Lord Hailes and Gregory and the pious magistrates were eager for the defender of the faith to uphold truth in the reckless city - the clamour of the literary set was furious. He saw that if he went there he was entering a hornet's nest; but he valiantly protested he was not afraid of any Humites. "I dislike the croaking of frogs, the barking of curs, but I fear neither. Convince me of my duty to remove to Edinburgh, and you shall see me set out immediately, as regardless of the snarling of my enemies as that of the curs who might snap at my heels by the way." [Forbes's *Beattie*.] Is the writer of this, we wonder, the man whom all in London pronounced so sweet, so amiable? Fortunately his friends did not convince him, and to the satisfaction of philosophy he remained where he was, and Dugald Stewart got the chair. He was better at Aberdeen, engaged in writing books whose names have long been forgotten, *Evidences of Christianity*, *Treatises on Moral Science*, *Poetry*, *Music*, and *Laughter*, which have long since passed into the limbo of oblivion with many of their betters.

A second and inferior part of *The Minstrel* in 1774 was received with delight (there was not another English poet living at that time, we must remember), and whenever he revisited London the same welcome greeted his appearance. In 1784, when he went accompanied by his son, possessed of a sad, portentously grave countenance, he tells how he visits Drury Lane, when *Douglas* is performed; and Astley's, to see a heifer with two heads. Bishops pressed him to stay at their palaces; and Horace Walpole, who met him at Fulham, pronounced him "quiet, amiable, and cheerful." [Walpole's *Letters*, ix. 326.] Even William Pitt lost his hauteur in his little portly presence. Dr. Johnson was now old, and had not long to live, but Dr. Beattie was delighted to find that "he had contracted a gentleness of manners which

## DR. JAMES BEATTIE

pleases everybody”; while as to his appetite, “I verily believe that on Sunday last he ate as much dinner as I have done in these ten days past.” Mrs. Siddons lost her stateliness in company with the elderly “Minstrel,” and would listen while he played Scots airs on his ’cello - the tears starting from her majestic eyes at the plaintive tunes. He even tells that she herself sang to him “Queen Mary’s Lament” to admiration, while “I had the honour to accompany her in the bass.” Curiously enough, however, the great actress, when she heard this story, declared she had never sung that song in her life. [Forbes’s *Beattie*, ii. 139; *Aldine Poets*, Beattie, with Memoir by Dyce.]

These visits to London were the triumphs of his life - flattering, charming, yet, if we believe his biographer, never spoiling him. If he took all this as his due, who could blame him? Everybody called him “great,” it would be foolish for him to deny it - almost impossible not to believe it. He would retire from the full glare of adulation of London to the obscurity of Aberdeen, where his pension allowed him the luxury of a chaise; and when he went to the Peterhead Wells - the resort of northern fashion - the poet was respectfully watched as he took his meditative walks. Above all, he was happy at Gordon Castle, where the Duchess was exuberantly attentive and he deferentially sportive, and where he read Blair’s *Sermons* aloud to the household on Sunday nights. Robert Burns, who regarded *The Minstrel* as “immortal,” sought his help and his compositions for Johnson’s *Collection of Scots Music*, some of which do not lack the true lyric notes.

In early days the good man was under the delusion that he could write with humour. His friends to whom he showed specimens at once saw that it would be a very serious matter if he persisted in thinking he could write “droll verses,” and they gave him severe discouragement; so he kept his laborious efforts to be funny for the delectation of his family. Music was his passion, and on the ’cello, flute, or organ he would play Handel or Pergolesi; and also sing his own songs to his own airs, with a voice which had survived the precentor days at Fordoun. Music seems to have been a favourite pastime of distinguished Scotsmen in those times. Even the austere seceder, the Rev. Ralph Erskine, in his little manse would play, to the dismay of his followers, on what they sadly called “a wee sinfu’ fiddle.” The mathematician, Dr. Robert Wallace, like Professor Wilkie, had his flute; Dr. Joseph Black also played the flute, and Dr. Blacklock had his flageolet, while Principal Campbell of Aberdeen, when his wife locked him up in his study, that her indolent spouse might be forced to write his lectures, would smuggle his violin in with him, and when he was supposed to be hard at work, the sounds of the surreptitious fiddle would issue melodiously from his room.

## SCOTTISH MEN OF LETTERS

Let it be sorrowfully owned that the “Minstrel” drank too much, and a great deal too often. He had certainly trials enough to send a man with his constitutional melancholy almost to despair. That pretty wife whom in former years he had proudly taken to London was becoming insane, and when he entered his house he would sometimes find that china jars had been removed from the mantelpiece and placed on the top of the door, that they might fall on his devoted head. [*Aldine Poets*, Beattie, with Memoir by Dyce.] With unwearied tenderness the good man waited on his demented wife through anxious days and sleepless nights, till her violence necessitated her removal from the home. His eldest son, possessed of precocious ability and premature gravity enough to merit the epitaph on a pious young divine, as “a truly aged young man,” had at the age of nineteen been appointed his father’s colleague in the chair of Moral Philosophy, and died at the age of twenty-two, in 1790, his literary remains being afterwards fondly and foolishly published by his father. [Dr. Beattie had a contempt for the Scots tongue as “vulgar,” and inculcated that feeling in his offspring. “He was early warned against the use of Scottish words and other similar improprieties . . . and after he grew up would never endure to read what was written in any of the vulgar dialects of Scotland” (*Remains of J. H. Beattie*, with Life by his father). Beattie himself published a collection of Scotticisms as a warning to his countrymen.] A few years later the other son also died, and the father was left alone. As he looked on the body of the dead he cried, “I have done with this world!” There are few more pathetic scenes than that of the poor old man, whose memory was gone, searching every room of the house for his lost boy, saying to his man, “You may think it strange, but I must ask you if I have a son, and where he is?” He cared no more to touch his once loved ’cello, or to turn over the pages of that music which so often at evening gatherings in Aberdeen he had played with fine expression and sung with plaintive beauty. Friends saw before them a man with memory gone, with interest in the world gone, with a body racked by rheumatism and weakened by paralysis. In August 1803 he was dead - a life of prosperity darkened at its close by tragedy - while his wife, hopelessly insane, lingered out her days in the madhouse.

His fame to-day is as a tale that is told. His prose works, so lauded in their generation, are forgotten. His *Minstrel* lingers still with a slender reputation after its days of glory, and its author is stamped with that disastrous title of mediocrity - “a pleasing poet.”