

The fates which preside over the publication of some books are as inimical to success as one's dearest enemy could wish. It is not always the intrinsic worth of a work that floats it into public favour, but more frequently rather, its accidental confluence with some whim of the moment which dominates public taste, so that on the hobby-horse of the hour the Smiths, Brevals, Ralphps, and Arnalls, ride omnipotent into the market, while a work of undoubtedly sterling merit sinks unnoticed into oblivion. The poem which we are about to bring under the consideration of our readers, and which has been pronounced by John Hill Burton to be "one of the best national poems of that age" (1688-1748), fell dead from the press through lack of public appreciation, and may be said to exist for us to-day, through the accidental circumstance, of its having been aptly quoted, by an eminent literary man of the succeeding generation. The title page of this remarkable volume is as follows:—

“Albania: a Poem, Addressed to the Genius of Scotland. Dedicated to General Wade, Commander-in-Chief of His Majesty’s Forces in North Britain.

But ah ! too little known to modern times,
Be not the noblest passion past unsung,
Devotion to the public !

Thomson’s Liberty, Part V.

London: Printed for T. Cooper. MDCCLXXVII. [Price One Shilling]”.

It consists of a small thin folio of 22 pages, which was then issued with the following advertisement:—“The above poem was wrote by a Scots clergyman some years ago, who is since dead. The fine spirit of poetry which it breathes, its classic air, but, above all, the noble enthusiasm he discovers for his country, cannot fail to make it agreeable to such as have a taste for that simplicity of nature and that beautiful diversification of epithets which constitute the principal excellence of antiquity”.

The song, however, of one inspired by a “noble enthusiasm for his country”, seems to have fallen on the ears of a generation who cared little for it. As Hill Burton observes, it was received with such neglect that no one thought of asking about the author, until the lapse of nearly a century rendered it impossible to discover him. As far as poetry was concerned, England was under the spell of piquant poetical satire, Scotland under that of a masterly inactivity, slowly awakening to the strains of Allan Ramsay. That the poem should fall flat in England was not to be wondered at; to be Scotch was to be mean; and there is no doubt that the feeling which prompted the author of “A Perfect Description of Scotland” to say that “the men of old did no more wonder that the great Messiah should be born in so poor a town as Bethlem in Judea, than I do wonder that so brave a prince as King James should be born in so stinking a town as Edinburgh, in lowsie Scotland”—was still common in the south. Patriotism, that noble spirit which fired every line of “Albania”, was running in both countries into the deteriorated sham which Johnson described as “the last refuge of a scoundrel”, or was being openly condemned as “a too partial and confined spirit”. The whole condition of the public mind, from

one cause or another, was completely unappreciative, and the poem sank—dead. Aaron Hill alone among contemporaries takes notice of it; this may be accounted for from Aaron's interest in Scotland, if not in Scotsmen. He seems to have worked, for behoof of the York Buildings Company, an estate on the banks of the Spey, where he tried to carry out a pet project of clearing wood to furnish timber for the navy; and had even before that, tried to work his patent for extracting oil, which was to rival olive oil, from the nuts of the native beeches. The first scheme failed, owing to the Highlanders refusing to risk their lives on the rafts; and history is dumb as to the success or failure of the "patent oil". His commendatory verses may, however, have been the outcome of his acquaintance with, and admiration of, the editor who wrote the poetical dedication to General Wade, rather than his appreciation of "the muse that warmed the youthful song" of the author. Hill, however, unlike the majority of his countrymen, had no national antipathies. Indeed, in his poem to the editor, he deprecates the patriotism which "makes home seem sweetest", and in his advocacy of a complete cosmopolitanism, seems to forget how great a factor in social progress, as well as in poetical inspiration, love of country has proved in every people. An enthusiasm for humanity is a fine phrase, but a diffuse sentiment; it rolls grandly and expansively from the mouth, but lacks intensity in touching the heart. Men cannot at will, get rid of that law in their nature which links time and place to emotion and feeling, making them one in the mental structure. And until they can do so, that spot of earth where one has lived and loved, where all the endearments of family life have been experienced, where common political interests have been vindicated, and social institutions reared and nourished, will have claims on our affection, which our nature compels us ever to keep in the foreground. Of course, if it happens to come about that men live only by a kind of sufferance—that one can find no home, the wanderer no "resting place where hope and memory meet"—that life becomes a game of misery with many variations; then, love for country, or for any other object, gets sapped at its foundations, and becomes an impossibility. It is this fact of home, home life—

some fixity of tenure to a spot of God's earth—that lies at the bottom of human well-being; and the people who lose hold of *that*, not only lose their patriotism, but will be sure to find themselves, on the highway of life, a set of civilised nomads, engrossed in the struggle for mere individual existence.

To return to our poem, however. We have said that it fell flat—author, editor, and poem alike forgotten—till a third Scotsman, greater than either, Dr. Beattie, quoted it as an illustration in his “Essays on Poetry and Music” in 1783. The fine passage there given (on invisible hunting) soon called the attention of literary men to its merits.

Inquiry was made everywhere, but no copy of this obscure masterpiece could be found. Years after “Scott was struck”, says Dr. Burton, “by the powerful description, pointed out to him by Leyden in a dingy scrap of printed poetry accidentally picked up at a stall, of the superstition of the ‘Spectre chase’” (a fragment, evidently, of Beattie's Essays). But when Leyden, in the autumn of 1800, passed through Aberdeen on a holiday tour, he determined, if possible, to learn more about that fine piece of nervous verse, and for this purpose enlisted in his service the sympathies of his friend Professor Glennie. Through him “he (Leyden) so far gained”, says Sir Walter Scott, “the friendship of the venerable Professor Beattie, that he obtained his permission to make a transcript from the only existing copy of the interesting poem, entitled ‘Albania’”. This copy of Dr. Beattie's, long supposed to be unique, is now in the Dyce and Forster collection at South Kensington, and bears the following manuscript inscriptions and autographs:—
 “To the Right Hon. the Lord Pitsligo.” “J. Beattie, Aberdeen.”
 “John Leyden, Edinburgh, to Richard Heber, Esq., Westminster.”
 Other copies, however, have turned up since then, a second copy being in the same collection as Dr. Beattie's; and Dr. Laing, writing in 1837 to Mr. Dyce anent the Heber copy, says—“I return your copy of ‘Albania’ with many thanks. In wishing to see it, I imagined the fugitive pieces at the end of the volume would be along with it; and this is the third time I have been disappointed, as I sent an order to buy the volume at Heber's, but somehow or other it was overlooked. You must know that *I also* have a copy, but I wished to have got

the volume—first, to have given the ‘Albania’ to a friend, who would love it as much on Leyden’s account as you may on Beattie’s; and, second, to have secured the ballads, &c., for my own collection of such things. I am glad, however, the first has fallen into your hands, as it is undoubtedly very uncommon. Sir Walter Scott had one, which he prized highly, and till your’s cast up I imagined it had been the one used by Leyden.” In a postscript he adds—“I wish you could throw some light on the authorship of ‘Albania’”. The excessive rarity, as well as the undoubted excellence of the poem, induced Leyden to include it in a small volume of “Scottish Descriptive Poems”, published in 1803 (a volume of verse not so well known now as it deserves to be), but nothing concerning the author has ever been unearthed by the many industrious antiquaries who have directed their attention to the subject, beyond what little may be gleaned from the poem itself and the editor’s advertisement quoted above. From internal evidence it is apparent that the author if not a native was at least a residenter in Aberdeen when the poem was written; for, when speaking of coal as an item of Scottish industry, he says—

Such also *we* in high Devanha burn
Glancing on marble hearth,

where the first personal pronoun stands contrasted with the “they” of Montrose, Edina, Glasgow, and other towns. Again, as the poem published in 1737 was written “some years ago”, and the author at the time of its composition declares himself to be twenty-four years of age—

Shall I forget thy bounty, who, born of thee,
Now twice twelve years, have drawn thy vital air,

it has been conjectured that he had been born sometime about 1706. The advertisement calls the author “a Scots clergyman”, but, after a diligent search in Dr. Hew Scott’s “Fasti”, we have been unable to fix on any one whom we could say was even likely to be the author of a piece like that under consideration. We are therefore certain that he never was a “placed minister”, but that in all likelihood he was a licentiate, whom death overtook before he obtained a settlement, and who confided his

poem to his friend in London, with what hopes we know not, for here all conjecture ends.

Of the poem itself, though it may in its general features be spoken of as a descriptive poem, yet we rather look on it as a series of poetical outbursts, bits of patriotic declamation in fine nervous verse, linked together by an inventory of the natural productions and material resources of Caledonia, with allusions here and there to local practices and superstitions, but without any systematic method in treating its subject as a whole. Indeed, it looks like a rough sketch, filled in and finished here and there. It opens with the following invocation to the genius of Scotland :—

O loved ALBANIA! hardy nurse of men!
 Holding thy silver cross, I worship thee,
 On this thy old and solemn festival,
 Early, ere yet the wakeful cock has crowed.
 Hear! goddess, hear! that on the beryl flood,
 Enthroned of old, amid the waters sound,
 Reign'st far and wide, o'er many a sea-girt spot,
 Oh smile! whether on high Dunedin, thou
 Guardest the steep and iron-bolted rock,
 Where trusted lie the monarchy's last gems,
 The sceptre, sword, and crown that graced the brows,
 Since father Fergus, of an hundred kings:
 Or if, along the well-contested ground,
 The warlike Border-land, thou marchest proud;
 In Teviotdale, where many a shepherd dwells,
 By lovely winding Tweed or Cheviot brown:
 Nor ween I now, in Durham's lofty spire
 To seek thee, though thy loved St. David's work;
 Nor where Newcastle opes her jetty mines
 Of coal; nor in strong Berwick; nor in Man
 That never dreaded plague; nor in the wilds
 Of stony Westmoreland: all once thy own.

Hail, land of bow-men! seed of those who scorned
 To stoop the neck to wide, imperial Rome.
 O dearest half of Albion sea-walled!
 Hail! state unconquered by the fire of war,
 Red war that twenty ages round thee burned;
 To thee, for whom my purest raptures glow,
 Kneeling with filial homage, I devote
 My life, my strength, my first and latest song.

Then, telling of the ties of birth and home which bind him to his country, he passes on to speak of how she is

. . . by the softening sun beloved,
 Rejoicest, he with unfulfilled desire
 Delights not only on thy face to dwell
 In amorous smile, the live-long summer's day,
 But looking back from the Atlantic brine,
 Eyes thy glad slumbers with reflected beam,
 And glitters o'er thy head the clear night long.

And not only the sun, but the very sea woos her shores, and brings a plentiful harvest to repay the industry of her sons; the various items of which, from the "tyrants and monsters" which occasionally visit her bays, to the luxurious fare which crowns her industry, are detailed with a loose and negligent, but, at the same time, charming ease. The same may be said anent his inventories of the material productions of Scotland, in which, according to an eminent critic, the most humble domestic elements are handled with "a beauty that reminds one of the lobsters and flounders in the Raphælite arabesques". The appearance and death of the whale, one of the "tyrants" of the deep that glories in his "brutal might", is given thus:—

How different he! that, of enormous size,
 Lords o'er the coast of Ross, gigantic King!
 Behold at high noon, glorying in his strength,
 He rides the dreadful deep, in search of prey.
 While young and old, with dint of idle steel
 Incessant, vie his hugeness to assail:
 In vain he, though with numbers thus beset,
 Defies the circling rage of little men;
 Yet short his glory! for, whom now no strength,
 No wicked wit of men combined, can daunt;
 Him, soon mere casual winds, and tempests wild
 Shall daunt, and hurry to inglorious death,
 Dashing on rocks, while from his riven skull,
 White spermaceti issues, fat and strong:
 And now thrown out, before his foes he lies
 Dead on the shore, extended far and wide,
 Yet frights, even laid so low, the astonished crowd.

Then passing on to an enumeration of the food fishes, &c., which frequent our coast, he proceeds thus:—

But with such monsters, Nature not throughout
 Has scared our efforts, and embroiled the deep;
 Instead of that, our industry she tempts,
 Presenting easier prey and sweeter food.
 And hence the loving sea thy eastern coast
 Supplies with oysters soft, and lobsters red;
 And turbot, far requested for his white
 And mellow flesh, sea-pheasant often named:
 And bearded cod, and yellow ling. Nor now
 Can I rehearse the kinds of mackerel streaked,
 Omen of dearth, if too abundant found.
 Nor angel-fish, viviparous, and broad,
 Hung up in air, and seasoned with the wind;
 Nor perch, whose head is spangled red and blue,
 Foreboding woeful wars, as fishers ween;
 Nor ravenous seal, that suckleth on the shore
 Her hairy young, unawed by eye of man;
 Her snorting oft, at sun-set, on the coast
 Of Angus, fruitful land of vital grain,
 The wanton damsel mocks, and children join
 Insultant, to provoke with rustic names:
 Sudden awak'd, she starts, with uncouth gait
 Gleaning their steps, and now with either hand,
 Gathers, and throws full fast stone after stone;
 Blind with revenge, nor mindful of her end,
 Though near; for now her neck the hissing ball
 Hath pierc'd, from well-aimed musket shot unseen.
 In vain, alas! thou homeward hastest back;
 Mad to have risked thy life with artful man,
 On land, to thee strange element, where now
 Thou agonising liest a monument
 For others not to dare their sphere beyond:
 While children, from their flight returning, gaze
 And wonder at the shaggy monster's form.
 But now the thronging peasants share the flesh,
 From which, for nightly lamps, they drain the oil;
 Though utmost Thule's long-liv'd sons reserve,
 For winter meals, such unluxurious fare.

He now bemoans our neglect of the gifts which Nature thus brings to our shores, while other nations, alive to the value of our fisheries, reap a harvest which might be all our own:—

Thus, CALEDONIA! thee rich ocean courts,
 Presenting his most useful gifts to thee;
 But thou secure, a land of yellow grain,
 Grain! which bleak Norway woos with all her firs;
 And inly full of glory overprized,
 The main sea rough and hoar, disdainest coy;
 Unenvied, while the Belgian still purloins
 The treasures vowed to thee, and of thy sloth
 Full glad, in many a pitchy keel, bears off
 To distant shores, these more than orient pearls;
 Nor nauseates lucre's scent, from fishy steam.

Why wilt thou thus, too lofty heroine!
 Shrink from the clasping ocean's fond embrace;
 For thee he feeds the salmon silver-scal'd
 Which you, into his watery pastures wide,
 Each autumn send to graze; though slim, and gaunt,
 They enter his domains, yet soon restored,
 The whitest fat their entrails overwraps.
 But they, impatient of their happiness,
 Returning, such strong love of native soil
 Attracts them to thy silver-channelled streams;
 Jump the steep wave of Spey's careering flood:
 Strait, watchful fishers spread the meshy snare
 That floats with many a cork, and mars their play,
 Whole shoals involving, that now thick, and fierce,
 Beat the green bank, indignant of their fate.
 In salt embalmed, they thence are carried far
 O'er the green sea, of lordly messes prime,
 To cheer the six-week fast of Spanish peers:
 Or into France, the sprightly land of wine,
 To give the goblet more exalted soul.

It is, however, in such passages as those in which he breaks out in praise of her daughters, that our author reaches his highest level:—

How glory I in thee, O native land!
 Well pleased in all thy rivers, and thy hills,
 O'er which I travel fearless, though alone,
 And though unarmed, by robber unassailed.
 Chief will I glory in thy generous sons,
 Pride of the martial and the lettered world;
 And in thy fair-limbed daughters, o'er whose cheek
 Breathes blooming nature, sprightly beauties breathe;
 Of azure mild their eye; the sighing loves
 But just disclose the roses of their lips:
 White as the driven snow their polished teeth;

Their parted bosom, with luxuriant youth
 Heaves wild; and full proportion crowns the whole:
 Nor more adorned in body, than in mind;
 Of taste refined; of graceful manners plain;
 Of warm unspotted faith, and feeling heart;
 Whom household cares delight, the best of mates.

In describing the denizens of our native wilds, our author is exceedingly happy in the terse and telling touches by which he differentiates each species:—

The lakes and mountains swarm with copious game;
 The wildgoose gray, the heathcock hairy-legg'd,
 White soland, that on Bass and Aisla build;
 The woodcock slender billed, and marshy snipe,
 The free-bred duck, that scorns the wiles of men,
 Soaring beyond the thunder of the gun;
 Yet oft her crafty fellow, trained to guile,
 And forging love, decoys her to the snare,
 There witnesses her fate, with shameless brow.
 Why should I here the fruitful pigeon name,
 Or long-necked heron, dread of nimble eels,
 The glossy swan, that loaths to look a-down,
 Or the close covey vexed with various woes?
 While sad, they sit their anxious mother round,
 With dismal shade the closing net descends;
 Or, by the sudden gun, they fluttering fall,
 And vile with blood, is strained their freckled down.

In Shetland's grassy holms, the mining tribe
 Skulking, is there well pleased to breathe obscure,
 Regardless they of what low bustling men
 Concert in clamorous camp, or palace high;
 But what avails their unambitious care,
 If the fierce ferret spies the vaulted cell,
 And rushes headlong in to seize the prey?
 At once the subterraneous state alarmed,
 Shrieks out all over, whither shall they fly?
 Caught in their inmost chambers, where they slept
 Vainly secure. The assassin fiery-eyed,
 Winding up all their mazes, through and through,
 Spreads desolation o'er the feeble race.

Here need I name the wind-outstripping roe?
 Or branchy-horned hart, that strays unowned
 In woody Ross, or Athol, nurse of hinds;
 Behold! in utmost wilderness he wons,
 Far off from men, content with humble fare.

We now come to that passage, containing a picturesque description of a superstition once prevalent in the Highlands, as it was, and perhaps still is, in Germany, France, and other parts of Europe, which was quoted by Dr. Beattie, and subsequently praised by Sir Walter Scott in terms of considerable commendation. In treating a similar subject himself in "The Wild Huntsman" (a German legend), Scott says "The superstition seems to have been very general, as appears from the following fine poetical description of the phantom chase, as it was heard in the wilds of Ross-shire", and he quotes the lines. No doubt many of our readers will recall, when they read them, the old local stories of the tucking of drums, the apparitions of marching armies, and fearful noises of conflict, which the honest and peaceable residents by Hill of Fare and Brimmond Hill, heard before the "troubles" of the 17th century.

Ere since of old, the haughty thanes of Ross,
 So to the simple swain tradition tells;
 Were wont with clans, and ready vassals thronged,
 To wake the bounding stag, or guilty wolf,
 There oft is heard at midnight, or at noon,
 Beginning faint, but rising still more loud
 And nearer, voice of hunters, and of hounds,
 And horns hoarse-winded, blowing far and keen;
 Forthwith the hubbub multiplies, the gale
 Labours with wilder shrieks, and rifer din
 Of hot pursuit, the broken cry of deer
 Mangled by throttling dogs, the shouts of men,
 And hoofs thick beating on the hollow hill.
 Sudden the grazing heifer in the vale
 Starts at the noise, and both the herdsman's ears
 Tingle with inward dread. Aghast he eyes
 The mountains height, and all the ridges round,
 Yet not one trace of living wight discerns;
 Nor knows, o'erawed, and trembling as he stands,
 To what, or whom, he owes his idle fear,
 To ghost, to witch, to fairy, or to fiend,
 But wonders, and no end of wondering finds.

The poem, which extends to 296 lines, now closes somewhat abruptly with an enumeration of the isles which straggle along our west coast:—

ALBANIA dear, attend! behold I seek
 Thy angel night and day with eager feet,

On peopled coast, and western mountain lone,
 In city paved, and well-aired village thatched,
 From end to end of Scotland many-mined.
 Oft too I dare the deep though winter storms
 Rage fierce, and round me mad Corbrecho roar,
 Wafted with love to see Columba's isles.

There view I winged Sky, and Lewes long,
 Resort of whales; and Wyste, where herrings swarm;
 And talk, at once delighted and appalled,
 By the pale moon, with utmost Hirta's seers,
 Of beckoning ghosts, and shadowy men, that bode
 Sure death. Nor there doth Jura's double hill
 Escape my sight; nor Mull, though bald and bare;
 Nor Ilay, where erewhile Macdonalds reigned;
 Thee, too, Lismore! I hail St. Moloch's shrine;
 Inchgall, first conquered by the brand of Scots:
 And filled with awe of ancient saints and kings,
 I kiss, O Icolmkill! thy hallowed mould.

Thus Caledonia, many-hilled! to thee,
 End and beginning of my ardent song,
 I tune the Druid's lyre, to thee devote
 This lay, and love not music but for thee.

In bringing our notice of this noble but neglected poem to a close, we cannot resist the temptation of giving our readers a sample of the highly-inspired lines, in which the author's friend, a fellow-countryman, dedicates the work to General Wade:—

LIBERTY.

O Liberty! thou life-enlivening name,
 Thy forms how varying, yet thy powers the same!
 From thee the fields assume their smiling face,
 The notes their music, and the paint its grace.
 Thine are the plastic arts that mould the bust,
 And breathe its beauties o'er the dome august;
 Is there a bard who feels thy just controul?
 The muse pours all her godhead on his soul;
 She prompts the sigh, she swells the impassioned gush,
 Glows in his warmth, and reddens in his blush;
 The blush, that o'er an honest cheek streams fair,
 When mortals hug the shameful chains they wear.

These arts, O goddess! brighten from thy ray,
 By thee they flourish, and with thee decay;
 To Athens, these her truest glory gave,
 To Rome,—ere Romans conquered to enslave.

But in their rushing states, when public power
Propt the lewd wretch, or swelled the private store ;
O'er patriot zeal, when rose ambition's lust,
And jealous justice sunk to mean distrust ;
Dragged by vile lictors, where the forum raved,
When heroes bled by villains whom they saved :
Then, with the herd, the muse condemned, or praised,
And courts destroyed those arts that senates raised.
