

GEORGE KNOWLES.

AMONG the local fugitive poetry of this period, a lengthy fragment of a descriptive piece by a talented young son of the

Scotch Kirk deserves a passing notice. He had evidently courted the muse for the sweet pleasure it gave, and with no eye to publicity, for a generation had well nigh passed away ere his verses came to the hands of the printer, and he himself had long before that passed beyond the reach of praise or blame. The poem was given to the public through the pages of the *Scots Magazine*, with the following note prefixed:—

To the Editor of the *Scots Magazine*.

SIR,—The following poem was written by the Rev. George Knowles, minister of Birse, a gentleman of eminent piety and equally conspicuous as a scholar and a poet. He died about thirty years ago, and it is not known that any other of his numerous poetical effusions has survived the wreck of time. By giving it a place in your useful miscellany, you will oblige, sir, &c.,

R. H.

Findhaven, 14th October, 1814.

The poem, in three parts, then follows, and consists in all of ninety-six four-line stanzas in double rhymes. The author, who was born in 1749, entered a student at Marischal College, and, after the usual curriculum, was licensed by the Presbytery of Ellon in September, 1771. On the death of the Rev. Mr. Garden, who had been minister of Birse for over fifty years, Mr. Knowles was presented and ordained in 1778 as his successor in “the heather-covered kirk”. This Mr. Garden, if tradition can be relied on, was a bit of a character, well known, from his fondness for the fiddle, as “the feel fiddler o’ Kinerny”; and reputed as the author of the Scottish reel, “Jenny Dang the Weaver”, which he is said to have composed in relation to a dispute between his wife and a travelling packman. His son, Dr. Alexander Garden, an eminent botanist and zoologist, who returned to this country from America during the revolutionary disturbances, erected a monument to his father’s memory in the graveyard at Birse. Shortly after Mr. Knowles’ induction, the old kirk was taken down and a more seemly edifice built by the heritors, an event which was speedily followed by his marriage with Mary, daughter of Alexander Farquharson, laird of Balfour. His leisure hours in the quiet retreat he had thus fallen into were spent in the recreations of poesy and music, for, like his predecessor, he has left behind him the reputation of being more than a novice in the tonal art. The psalm tune,

originally known by the name of "Birse", but now "Balfour", or "St. Stephen's", is one of his known compositions, and is said to have had its origin in a tune which he heard in a dream. Like many another, however, of those who, blessed or cursed with the poetic gift, never reach the age when it is said a man is either a fool or a philosopher, but are favoured with that love of the gods which is so proverbially fatal to longevity, his earthly pilgrimage was short. After eleven years' ministry in this quiet and retired nook of the world, and while yet in his thirty-ninth year, he died, leaving a young widow and one son to mourn their irreparable loss. From "Dinnie's History of Birse", we learn that his death was sudden. "One day after leaving home on some business at Balnacraig, while walking along the area by the front door of the house, he attracted the Misses Innes's attention from the window of their sitting-room by his distressed appearance. They immediately went out and assisted him into the house, where he almost immediately expired, on the 29th March, 1789, aged thirty-nine years." His wife outlived him for over thirty years, and it was no doubt through her that the poem, we now proceed to notice, passed by "R. H." to the magazine. This "R. H." we take to be one of the Hallyburtons of Findhaven. Findhaven was bought by the fourth Earl of Aboyne, who gave it to his son by his second wife, the Hon. George Douglas Gordon Hallyburton, who sat many a year as member for Forfarshire. He sold the estate in 1804 to a Montrose manufacturer, but it was bought back again by Lord Aboyne in 1817.

The poem is descriptive of a bit of Deeside scenery which must have been quite familiar to him; but being, as we have said, a fragment, it is impossible to say what ultimate shape it might have taken had he lived to finish it and prune it of not a few crudities in conception and expression, which, in its present form, tell very much against it. The author starts on a spring morning to ascend the hill of Mortlach, one of the sentinel summits of the mountain range which divides the parishes of Lumphanan and Aboyne from Coull. After describing in general terms "the sweetest season of the circling year," he proceeds:—

See yonder hill in diverse colours drest,  
 Its bottom heath, and various shrubs bespread,  
 A thick green sward of grass makes up its vest,  
 And moss-grown rocks defend its ancient head.

In sullen majesty it sits enthron'd,  
 Begirt with mountains of inferior mein,  
 At distance vast enormous hills around,  
 That tower still higher in the clouds, are seen.

'Tis Mortlach ! loudly fam'd in ancient song,  
 Where erst the Gaelic Bard in plaintive strain,  
 Bewail'd the warrior fierce—the hero strong,  
 Who fell the subject of Death's dark domain.

With winding step we'll gain its summit high,  
 There while we rest, as seated side by side,  
 We'll fondly stretch around the wand'ring eye  
 O'er the vast landscape, scatter'd far and wide.

Passing onwards through the woods, charmed by “the nodding thrush”, the warbling chaffinch and the linnet's song, “the scented birch, and fragrant eglantine”, he enters the scattered village, where the busy maidens seated on the grass, the romping school boys new released from school, and the industrious dominie trimming his garden plot, are prominent features in the picture of rural life he draws.

Now, through the scatter'd village let us pass,  
 Where, far from gilded snares, and faithless art,  
 The blooming maids, all seated on the grass,  
 Pour forth their rural strains with careless heart.

Here, fondly sporting on the velvet green,  
 Relaxed a while from the fatigues of school,  
 A ruddy train of healthful boys are seen,  
 Who ply their limbs, and wisely play the fool.

While —, who trains them with unwearied toil,  
 Unbinds his anxious mind in leisure hours,  
 Turns up, with painful hand, the teeming soil,  
 And trims his garden, deck'd with various flowers.

Having ascended the hill, pointing out by the way the varied features of the widening landscape, his “ravished sight” is so overwhelmed with the sublimity of the scene that “fancy's tow'ring wing” grows feebly impotent to deal with it—

Here let the painter curse his vanquish'd hand,  
 Here let the poet drop his useless quill,  
 Far ! far ! the scenes which now our eyes command,  
 Outdo the poet's and the painter's skill.

\* \* \* \* \*

The giant mountains, tipp'd with glittering snow,  
 (Which hither by the first North wind was driven,)  
 Look down disdainful on the clouds below,  
 And prop the azure canopy of Heaven.

Rocks upon rocks in horrid grandeur pil'd,  
 With threatening mien o'erhang the trembling mead,  
 Cliffs rear'd on cliffs in huge confusion wild  
 Here strike the shudd'ring fancy almost dead.

Oh ! for the genius of this rapt'rous scene,  
 To guide the wand'rings of the 'wilder'd muse,  
 For sure some genius bright, some power unseen,  
 Here holds domain in Majesty recluse.

This invocation brings the Genius of the scene to his aid, who, after due introduction, goes on to describe how all the wild, barren ruggedness of nature was a result of the Almighty vengeance which God poured forth on the early transgressors of the Divine will ; and at the close of a goodly rhymed sermon on human depravity, bemoans the benighted, superstitious tendencies in " the headless human crew " who believe that these frowning features of nature are the work " of demons and infernal power ". As an example of these superstitions, the Genius of the scene relates the legend of Cloch-na-bhien, an item of folk-lore which in itself is excuse enough for reviving the name of the forgotten minister, and unearthing samples of his only published poem from the limbo of the *Scots Magazine*:—

See as an instance, on the airy brow  
 Of yon black hill which bounds the southern sky,  
 A huge black rock o'erhangs the dale below,  
 And seems just tumbling head-long from on high.

That rock, says vulgar fame, was plac'd of old,  
 Low in a plain with tufted heath o'erspread,  
 And thus, as our forefathers oft have told,  
 It was transported from its ancient bed.

The D—v—l and his Dame in contest fell,  
 Had wag'd infernal war for many a day;  
 At length they left the darksome depths of hell,  
 And came to yonder hill to end the fray.

Long, long, they strove, and Satan nothing gain'd,  
 His Dame still louder roar'd with frantic brow;  
 His 'vengeful wrath no more could be restrain'd,  
 And down he rush'd into the plain below.

Yon rock, itself a mountain, up he tore,  
 From its old seat on yonder shaggy plain,  
 Upon his shoulders the huge mass he bore,  
 And quickly hi'd him to the hill again.

Again the infernal fury rais'd her voice,  
 The horrid sound rung through the echoing wild,  
 Whilst rocks, amaz'd at the terrific noise,  
 Stood trembling like the goblin-frighted child.

Have at you now, you Beldame, roar'd the fiend,  
 And hurl'd the rock through the resounding skies;  
 Dreadful it fell, and crush'd his breathless friend,  
 And there entombed Her Hellish Highness lies!

With an incidental glance at Mount Keen and Lochnagar, the poem now ends abruptly with a description of the death of a mountain hare.

The above extracts contain almost all that is worth preserving of this forgotten poem. Its chief fault is its long-windedness—its tendency to sermonising—a fault not peculiar to it alone among the poetical products of the period. The rhythm, the movement of the verse, is always pleasant; while the author's keen observation of the sights and sounds of nature in the solitary grandeur of hills and woods, is marked in almost every stanza of the opening part of the poem. In some of the passages quoted, notably in the verse beginning, "The giant mountains", &c., we find traces of considerable poetical power in depicting nature's loftier scenes—traces which make us regret more and more that this fragment is all that has been rescued from "the wreck of time" of "the numerous poetical effusions" of the parson-poet of Birse.