

E W E N   M A C L A U C H L A N .

KING'S COLLEGE, Old Aberdeen, on an early winter afternoon towards the end of last century, was the scene of a proceeding which, though of yearly occurrence, is yet an event standing out in great prominence in the story of many who have qualified themselves for the battle of life by a passage through the halls of the ancient University. The competition for bursaries

was over—the result was about to be announced—and the expectant crowd of competitors were assembled to learn what fate and their own industry had in store for them. Failure now, perhaps, marred a life-plan dreamt of for many a weary, plodding day of mingled hard physical work and mental study. Success even meant only the beginning of another stubborn battle, where many would have to fight their way onward amid poverty and privation, live in dingy lodgings, and subsist chiefly on oatmeal forwarded from home; yet sturdy hearts were beating eagerly to start on the bold pursuit of knowledge, and on the race the immediate goal of which was distinction in the class-room. Notwithstanding the crisis in their fate, youthful spirits could not be repressed, and a good deal of rough chaffing and rougher horse-play were taking place among the would-be “bejans”. Many of them were little more than boys with intellects yet in gristle, several who bore the marks of early country labour were approaching manhood, while one uncouth figure, which seemed a butt to their fun, had reached the age of about five-and-twenty. The last mentioned was an unmistakable Highlander fresh from the Braes of Lochaber, of diffident manner, awkward appearance, and dressed in such an outlandish way as naturally to excite the raillery of the others. All their gibes and jokes he patiently bore, till at last the door of the room in which the examiners were deliberating was thrown open, and the name of the awkward Highlander, the best scholar and chief bursar, was announced—*Ewen MacLauchlan*.

Such was the advent of one eminent in his day as a scholar and a poet, who wrote with equal felicity in English, Latin, Greek, and his native Gaelic, but who is now chiefly remembered as *Eobhan MacLachwinn*, the Gaelic poet. Though he never became naturalised in Aberdeen, but remained a sort of exotic, preserving the mountain flavour of Lochaber amid the academic quiet of the Old Town or the bustling, matter-of-fact life of the Broadgate, his residence between St. Machar’s and St. Nicholas’s, from the day of his success as chief bursar to that of his death, warrants his introduction into these papers.

The father of our successful bursar was a poor, illiterate weaver, whose forefathers came originally from Morven, and

who had settled down at Torracalltuin, in Lochaber, where Ewen, his youngest son but one, was born in 1775. In spite of Rob Roy's scorn for weavers, and his expressed preference to witness a bonfire of all the heddles and treddles in Glasgow in a nameless region renowned for its pyrotechnics, rather than see his sons engaged in the useful calling, we hesitate not to bestow more admiration on the lowly Lochaber shuttle-driver than on the "bold outlaw" with all his picturesqueness. For though, ignorant of books himself, he was keenly alive to the benefits of education, and strove, under difficulties we have little conception of, to give his sons all the advantages to be derived from it. The young Maclauchlans were sent to the school at Fort-William, where it is recorded that Ewen, though inferior to the others in bodily strength and excellence in athletic exercises and all out-door sports, excelled them all in the progress he made in learning. His father's poverty kept him indifferently supplied with the needful books, but where there's a will there's a way, so his class-fellows willingly gave him snatch loans of theirs in consideration of the help they got from him in their lessons. Very soon the schoolmaster was pumped dry by the young prodigy, whom we next find, while yet a mere boy, acting as tutor in the family of Mr. Cameron of Camisky. The father of his host, Cameron of Liandally, then an old bed-ridden gentleman, resident with his son, was one of those old-world, cultured Highlanders, painted with such skill by Sir Walter Scott, thoroughly saturated in Greek and Latin, and from him young Maclauchlan's desire for a classical training got a strong impulse. He afterwards filled similar situations in the families of Macmillan of Glenpean, and Cameron of Clunes, spending upwards of six years with the latter. When he first commenced to write verses we have no means of knowing, but there can be no doubt that his earliest attempts were giving verbal utterance to the wild music of his native hills. When at Glenpean it is recorded he constructed a rude violin, described to be "no bigger than a ladle", on which he discoursed sounds, sweet or otherwise, under the tuition of a piper! In after life, however, he became a tolerable proficient on several musical instruments.

His worthy father had meanwhile been busy planning how

he could compass the goal of his own and his son's ambition—the benefits of a college training. Certain wealthy namesakes of his own had the means, if they had the will, to forward the career of a kinsman by contributing something towards the necessary expenses. Ewen and his father set off on a visit to them, and gently broached their errand, to be met with a discouraging refusal. “Did he mean his son's ruin by putting such notions in his head? What was he that he must needs go to a college and try to become something better than his brothers? Their best advice was to take him home and make him a weaver. The best thing for him!” The disappointed father and no less disappointed son returned disconsolately home, and Ewen resumed his work at Clunes.

In 1798, a volume of Gaelic poems was published at Edinburgh by Allan Macdougall or Ailean Dall (Blind Allan,) musician at Inverlochy, afterwards “bard” to Macdonald of Glengarry. In this volume appeared several poems by young Maclauchlan which attracted the attention of Glengarry—among them translations of Pope's “Messiah” and part of Homer's “Iliad”. Young Maclauchlan was introduced to the chief by Dr. Ross of Kilmonivaig, and soon after by the kindly aid of his new patron, together with his own little savings, he was enabled to set his face towards Aberdeen accompanied by his anxious and affectionate father, who, after Ewen's success, as detailed above, returned to his loom in Lochaber with a proud and happy heart.

During his arts course he greatly distinguished himself in his classes, and gained and retained the respect of all he came in contact with. On taking his degree he entered the Divinity Hall, having, through the influence of his friend Dr. Ross, obtained a bursary in the gift of the barons of exchequer. He was also appointed assistant to the college librarian, and teacher in the Grammar School of Old Aberdeen, also custodian of the library connected with the Divinity Hall. After passing his “trials” with great success, he found the bent of his mind more directed towards a “chair” than to the pulpit—a goal he unfortunately never reached. From this time onward his life was one of incessant literary toil and scholastic labour, both public and private. He ultimately succeeded to the head-mastership

of the Grammar School, and held the offices of session-clerk and treasurer of the parish of Old Machar. He was also secretary to the Highland Society of Aberdeen, and we are told that it was his custom to wear the full Highland dress when attending its meetings, and on other high occasions. A strong mutual affection existed between him and Beattie, to whom he addressed a Latin ode, and on whose death he composed a touching elegy, and his finest English poem, "The Dream". The latter describes the apotheosis of his friend, and not only evinces his poetic talent, but also a warmth of friendship which, we are sorry to believe, is too rare. He apostrophises his deceased friend thus:—

Dear Beattie! Soul of worth! for ever gone!  
 Heav'n's Planet quench'd, ere half its glory shone!  
 Just as a grateful country wove the bays,  
 To crown thee with the well-earn'd meed of praise!  
 Ah! who could dream that fate had formed the snare  
 For Manhood's blooming prime—for worth so rare!  
 The precious lodge of that transcendant Mind  
 By all the golden stores of wit refin'd,  
 Reason's own fane—a mass of lifeless clay,  
 And those exalted pow'rs—a vapour flown away!

The head-mastership of the Inverness High School becoming vacant, Maclauchlan was induced to become a candidate. Beattie and numerous other influential friends exerted themselves to the utmost on his behalf, but the election turned on some local question, and Maclauchlan was defeated. He took his defeat much to heart, and soon after his health gave way. When the dictionary of the Gaelic language, published under the direction of the Highland Society, was projected, the editor chosen by that body, Dr. John Macleod, minister of Dundonald, immediately applied to Maclauchlan for assistance, and the latter entered enthusiastically into the work. The Society possessed a quantity of ancient Gaelic MSS., which was expected to furnish a mass of authorities for the illustration of the language. To the deciphering of these Maclauchlan applied himself, and bestowed an amount of assiduous labour on the work under disadvantages which scarcely anything but his singular ardour could have surmounted. He died, however, before his task was completed, on 29th March, 1822, at the comparatively early age

of 47, and, as is stated in the preface to the dictionary, "the Highland Society lost one of the compilers to whom they looked with much confidence and hope".

No Highlander, whatever be his position, if his friends can help it, is buried anywhere but at home. It is the wish of his heart, cherished even to the present day, to be buried amongst friends. It is not surprising, then, that the remains of Ewen Maclauchlan should be taken to his native Lochaber. At Aberdeen, every mark of respect was paid to his memory. His body was taken from the chapel of King's College and attended by the professors, the Magistrates, the Highland Society of Aberdeen, and a great number of the inhabitants some distance out of the town. Respect and sorrow were evinced in all the villages through which the body passed. Glengarry and his clansmen met and escorted the remains through his country. All classes of his Lochaber countrymen came out to meet the hearse, and, on the 15th April, preceded by the wild wail of the bagpipes, and accompanied by a large assemblage, the mortal remains of Ewen Maclauchlan were laid with those of his fathers in the God's acre amid his everlasting native hills, where he rests unmarked by monument other than the misty remembrance that clings to the memory of a Highland bard.

Maclauchlan stood high as a general scholar, but it was as a linguist he excelled. The Greek ode printed in his published volume of poems gained the prize offered by Dr. Buchanan, of Bengal, for the best ode on the subject "Let there be light". He translated seven books of the "Iliad" into Gaelic, and, besides his classical attainments, he was well versed in Oriental literature and the languages of modern Europe. He was a most successful teacher; his manners were simplicity itself; while his piety was unfeigned, deep, and, in some respects, enthusiastic. Altogether, it is to be wondered at that such a man is only remembered now by the very few who take an interest in Celtic poetry. His life was not extensive, but it was eminently intensive, judging from the amount of his attainments and the quantity of work he got through, in spite of difficulties and discouragements that would have damped the ardour of any ordinary mortal.

In noticing Maclauchlan's poetry, we must confine ourselves

to the few specimens in English which are published in the "Effusions", second edition—Aberdeen, 1816. His Latin and Greek poems are unsuited for discussion in these papers; the same may also be said of the poetry in his native Gaelic, on which his fame, such as it is, chiefly rests. His English poetry evinces much imagination and a copious, though not over-precise, command of language. There is, withal, a certain mistiness and indistinctness about it which reminds one of his native Celtic scenery, and which, like the man's own personality, evades our grasp as we attempt to fix it into something like realisable form. The seasons, and other phases of nature, are favourite subjects, and these poems, in spite of a spice of pedantic classicism and a dash of Ossian-and-water, contain many telling lines and pleasing pictures. The following, from his poem on "Morning", is a fair specimen:—

The grey dawn steals behind yon fleecy mists  
 That skirt the dim horizon. Softly mild  
 The twilight flows like amber o'er the face  
 Of Heav'n's star-glitt'ring pavement. Slow withdraw  
 The thousand thousand trembling fires that wide  
 Spangled the boundless blue. The Arctic Bear,  
 Bootes, and the Twins successive fade,  
 The Swan fair-plumag'd and the silver Lyre:  
 Red Mars, and the far-beaming lamp of Jove  
 Sink in Hesperian bow'rs. The warning orb  
 Of Phoebe, with Love's beauteous Star, grows pale,  
 By yonder piny mountain. Still as Death  
 Silence sits brooding o'er th' unmeasur'd scene.  
 Old Ocean, in his spacious plain of glass  
 Inverted shows a nether sky, with clouds  
 Amusive curling. On the sandy fringe,  
 His host of foam-white billows, sooth'd to peace,  
 With playful undulation gently kiss  
 The scarce re-murm'ring shells. Forth come the tribes  
 That nestle in the leafy shade, or haunt  
 The cultur'd fields, steep banks, and mossy rocks,  
 Mantled with fern or ivy, and wide wake  
 Harmonious melody. The soaring lark,  
 As swift she skims th' aerial region, spreads  
 Her music floating o'er the void, and leads  
 The general choir.

As an example how near he came to, or if the reader prefers it, how far he fell short of, the sublime, we subjoin one stanza

from his English version of the Greek ode above referred to; hazarding our own opinion that the ode, as a whole, has not a little of the true Miltonic ring.

“Silence ! Vast uproar ; Peace ! thou thund’ring Deep” ;  
 So spake th’ Omnific One :  
 He spake, and it was done ;  
 Fierce Turbulence obey’d ;  
 His noise loud Uproar staid,  
 And all the wild Abysses slink to sleep.  
 God said : Let there be Light ; and there was Light ;  
 Quick through th’ illimitable wastes of Night,  
 Forth-darting flash’d the golden colour’d gleam :  
 Dun Chaos trembled round his hoary caves  
 Now first disclosed by the wide-bursting beam,  
 And Horror shook the Deep through all his wond’ring waves.

In his translation of one of his Gaelic songs, “Faillirin-Illirin”, he has distinctly preserved the true Gaelic flavour, while he gives us a beautifully idyllic English lyric :—

Not the swan on the lake, or the foam on the shore,  
 Can compare with the charms of the maid I adore :  
 Not so white is the new milk that flows o’er the pail,  
 Or the snow that is show’r’d from the boughs of the vale.

As the cloud’s yellow wreath on the mountain’s high brow,  
 The locks of my fair one redundantly flow ;  
 Her cheeks have the tint that the roses display,  
 When they glitter with dews on the morning of May.

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The mavis and lark, when they welcome the dawn,  
 Make a chorus of joy to resound through the lawn :  
 But the mavis is tuneless ; the lark strives in vain,  
 When my beautiful charmer renews her sweet strain.

We are tempted to extract his description of the Highland dress and the music of the bagpipe, with an enumeration of the clans from his poem on “The Society of True Highlanders”, and also some passages from his fine “Valediction to King’s College”, but we must forbear. Knowing how common it was with poets of a pious nature to embody their devotional feelings in verse, and, by prosaic paraphrases of the Psalms and selected passages of scripture, make them much less poetical than they found them, we are not surprised to find Maclauchlan doing the same. Upwards of a hundred pages of his volume



are taken up with a "metrical paraphrase of St. John's Revelation", which, we confess, we have not the courage to read.

"Darthula's Vaediction to Albion" is a translation of an ancient Gaelic poem, of which there are several versions current in the Highlands. The subjoined translation is from a MS., dated Glenmasan, 1238, presented by Lord Bannantyne to the Highland Society. The "mellow song" of the cuckoo in the penultimate stanza may be intelligible to those highly-organised beings who appreciate bagpipe music; to ordinary mortals we are afraid it will seem a somewhat strange description of that welcome bird's rather monotonous note:—

How dear, how lovely yonder eastern shore,  
 And Albion's lakes embark'd with woodlands green !  
 From these retreats my feet would stray no more,  
 But, with my Love, I quit the darling scene !

The Isle of Drayno grac'd with verdant bow'rs,  
 The fort that tops yon cliff's o'erhanging brow,  
 The Sunian Wall, and Fingal's massy tow'rs  
 Wake in my breast Affection's parting glow.

I, with my Nathos, bid yon wilds adieu !  
 The woods and bays where Anlo roam'd of yore,  
 Now fast receding, vanish from my view,  
 And Albion's pleasing scenes return no more !

How sweet thy landscapes, Letha's winding vale !  
 How soft repose where thy smooth riv'lets glide !  
 Oft on thy heights we took the fresh regale,  
 And hills and streams the plenteous board supplied.

O lov'd Glenmasan, waste of herbs and flow'rs !  
 Fair wave thy forests in the vernal breeze :  
 Full many a day we pass'd th' unconscious hours,  
 Stretcht on thy grassy banks in careless ease.

Dear Etha's glen, where first my cot was rear'd !  
 How much I lov'd on thy tall groves to gaze,  
 When rising o'er the hills the sun appear'd,  
 And the vale glitter'd with his morning rays.

Glenurcha's ample tract, a tract belov'd,  
 By two straight ranks of beauteous hills confin'd ;  
 How glad his youthful mates with Nathos rov'd,  
 While o'er thy crags they urg'd the flying hind.

Dalruval's vale, the vale of harmless glee,  
 Where social bands around us lov'd to throng!  
 Where oft from yonder mountain's bending tree  
 The artless Cuckoo pour'd her mellow song.

How lovely Drayno with its sounding shore,  
 The sands of Avich lav'd by billows green !  
 From those sweet haunts my feet would stray no more,  
 But with my Love I quit the darling scene.

We conclude our notice of this poetical sojourner in Bon-Accord with an extract from almost the only English piece of a lighter nature which he has left, and which displays a considerable amount of rough saturnine humour. The scene is night, and the poet's rest is disturbed from without by an open-air concert energetically kept up by a company of feline artists, and from within by the combined attack on his sacred person of a whole colony of certain persevering insects, renowned for their saltatory achievements and their blood-thirsty propensities :—

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Yes, poets have phrases enough,  
 Like trowels for working in lime,  
 To plaster the smooth and the rough  
 With the tractable ointment of rhyme.

\* \* \* \* \*

Would heav'n they were here but a night,  
 To partake of our music and ease,  
 The brawling of cats as they fight,  
 And the restless attacks of the fleas !  
 How quick from the rise to the fall  
 The mewling practitioners pass,  
 And join the fantastical squall,  
 In full chorus of treble and bass !  
 Like precentors contending for palms,  
 The Bangor of Devils they swell ;  
 O Sternhold ! what elegant psalms !  
 The like never flowed from thy shell.  
 Now, up with the concert of yells !  
 Now, out with the tempest of rage !  
 Strange echoes are rous'd from their cells,  
 As the cuffing assailants engage.

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My eye-lids in vain would I close,  
To solicit the blessing of rest;  
Within and without are my foes  
Disturbing this troublesome nest.  
Let the blankets be wrapp'd as I please,  
No scheme of defence can avail;  
The merciless hosts of the fleas  
Each point of my fortress assail.  
All the space from my top to my toes  
Raves mad with the smart of their ire;  
Not an inch of my surface but glows  
With the rage of St. Anthony's fire!  
If purgat'ry's under the pole,  
Where sinners are burn'd for their crimes,  
Sure, this is the damnable hole,  
Where I'm burned for my sins and my rhymes.  
May curses on curses confound  
Your talons, your bills, and your legs!  
May the fiends of destruction be round  
To crush you, ye fellest of plagues.

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