

PETER BUCHAN.

FRONTING the title-page of one of his crudest works, and looking out upon you with all the self-importance which the

folded down Byronic shirt-collar and flowing mantle can add to his thin, dark phiz and commonplace head, may be seen the figure of PETER BUCHAN, a man of considerable genius, and one whose name has long since become inseparably connected with the ballad literature of Scotland. When we say that he was a man of considerable genius, we do not mean poetical genius, for we are afraid that anything approaching such must be denied him; but rather that he possessed a happy inventiveness, which, joined to his facile craftsmanship and skill in using tools, enabled him to overcome difficulties which would have completely blocked the progress of a less endowed man. Indeed, the more we know of Peter Buchan the more convinced are we that he was a mechanical genius of the first order, lost to society through that fickleness and want of purpose so readily begot by having too many irons in the fire. Born at Peterhead in 1790 of parents fairly well to do in life, he used to amuse himself, and probably deceive himself, in after years by tracing his descent on his grandfather's side through the Buchans of Rathy House, Crimond, back to the Comyns, Earls of Buchan, renowned in Scottish history; while in his grandmother, "Bonnie Peggy Irvine", he discovered a daughter of the ancient house of Drum. Be this at it may, Peter did not need to "stand for fame on his forefathers' feet", for after years discovered that, mid all the hardships and disappointments that crowded his life, he had done something more to merit the gratitude of his countrymen than having shown them

a successive title, long and dark,
Drawn from the mouldy rolls of Noah's Ark.

His father, who was factor or superintendent of some concern in Ross and Sutherlandshires, held by a London firm, appears to have handled the family reins with a main eye to number one, young Peter being left to pick himself up pretty much as best he might. When little over twelve years old he engaged himself to an ingenious jack-of-all-trades, who was at once machine-maker, brassfounder, and tin and copper smith—an event which no doubt determined in a measure the versatile turn for all sorts of work which Peter soon after began to show. After an attempt to get to sea, baulked by his father refusing him

funds for an outfit, he appears to have had no settled mode of living, but turned his hand to whatever he found to do. While in this precarious condition of having no regular employment, he, with the true instinct of genius, fell in love, got married, and contrived, by his handiness in making musical instruments, by engraving, and in other odd ways, to keep things fairly smooth for himself and his plucky helpmate. In 1814 he published his first book, a volume of songs and verses, which met with a bad reception—a result not to be wondered at. He, however, had invented and made a copper-plate press, and now, turning from the disappointment consequent on his failure as a poet, he, at the instigation and under the patronage of Mr. James Arbuthnot, concocted a plan of starting a printing press at Peterhead. He went south to Edinburgh and got introduced to the Earl of Buchan, who took a hearty interest in his scheme. Through a friend, he entered a printing office at Stirling, where, after ten days' experience he picked up enough of the typographic art to enable him to compose and print a song as a specimen of his workmanship. With this he returned to Edinburgh, raised £50 to enable him to purchase materials; and so he started the first printing press at Peterhead. Undaunted by the lack of sympathy and support shown by his fellow-townsmen, he persistently set himself to the perfection of his trade appliances—constructed a new press (the "Auchmedden"), and printed "The Annals of Peterhead", a work which he says "was chiefly composed standing at the case, and was never in manuscript". The six engravings which accompany it as illustrations are also his own work. After issuing his "History of the Keith Family", "Scarce Ancient Ballads", "Gleanings of Scarce Old Ballads", and perfecting an invention for recording the number of copies thrown off by his press (none of which paid him as they ought to have done), he left Peterhead and its printing establishment for a situation in London, which, however, a break down in his health caused him ultimately to resign. He once again returned to his home, and betook himself to collecting from the mouths of the peasantry the ballad lore of the North. The result of this protracted piece of work he embodied in 1828 in his two volumes of "Ancient Ballads and Songs of the North of Scotland", a collection which met with a

splendid reception, brought their author thoroughly into public notice, and secured for him a prominence among our ballad collectors which has not suffered through the lapse of time. In 1831 he removed to Aberdeen for the better convenience of three of his sons, who were then students at Marischal College, and took up his abode in a house in Canal Street, which he dubbed "Helicon Hill". He got inveigled in some law processes, which we have never been able to get at the core of; and ultimately had to sell off his library, rich in curious and rare books, to enable him to pay twenty shillings in the pound. This disaster broke him down terribly, and in after years he used to say that "his blood ran cold at the mention of Aberdeen", and that "the pettifogging Aberdeen lawyers fleeced him of over £700". Considerably dejected in spirits and with very little in his purse, he went to Glasgow in 1838, made personal acquaintance with Motherwell, whose friendship and correspondence he had long enjoyed, and there issued and sold the small autobiographic sketch from which we have gleaned most of the foregoing particulars. His father, who appears to have been a particularly stingy old fellow, had acquired some little property, and Peter, in the downcast circumstances in which he now found himself, took consolation from the fact that (as he said) "I am heir to my ungracious father, who cannot live for ever". In due course old Buchan did die, and, we suppose, that it was with part of the funds then forthcoming that Peter bought the small property in Stirlingshire, which he named Buchanstone. Prosperity, however, was doomed to smile on him only by fits and starts. A lengthy lawsuit with the superior, who claimed the minerals on his estate, ended by Peter selling out and taking up his abode with a son then living in Ireland. During all these years of domestic unsettlement and disquiet, he had still been busy gathering ballads, and in 1854 he set out for London with two manuscript volumes which he had prepared for the press. While there he was overtaken by a sudden illness, which in a few days proved fatal, for he died on the 19th September, and was buried in Norwood Cemetery. His manuscripts passed through various hands, and the greater part of their contents have long ago found their way to the public; notably in "Scotch Traditional Versions of Ancient Ballads",

issued by the Percy Society, and in the "Illustrated Book of Scottish Songs" edited by Dr. Charles Mackay. They are now, we believe, in the British Museum; but the manuscripts from which the volumes of 1828 were selected are in the possession of Mr. D. Scott, Peterhead.

We must now turn our attention to the verses by virtue of which Peter Buchan is enrolled among the Bards of Bon-Accord, his productions in other lines lying somewhat outside the scope of our work.

His juvenile offering at the Muse's shrine is a very *jejune* affair indeed. It consists of a small 12mo volume entitled "The Recreation of Leisure Hours; being Original Songs and Verses, chiefly in the Scottish Dialect. By P. Buchan, jun., Peterhead. Edinburgh: Printed for and sold by the Author. A. Clark & W. Mortimer, Peterhead, and all the principal booksellers in Scotland. Oliver & Boyd, printers. Price Two Shillings". It is embellished with numerous rough but rather effective wood engravings, and, as far as outward form goes, is a tasteful production. A first glance belies the title page, for the "Songs and Verses" are not "chiefly in the Scottish dialect," but in extremely bald and limping English. The preface is of the usual apologetic character, and is dated, "Peterhead, March, 1814". "An Evening Walk in Autumn, 1812; or a Descriptive View of the Beautiful Banks of the River Ugie", is ambitious, but there is no fear of mistaking the Buchan goose feather for "the pencil of a Claude Lorraine or Thomson's pen", which he sighs for:—

I then sat down, where Ugie's stream did steer
 Its winding course, still posting by so clear;
 The banks o'erhung with hazels, flow'rs, and trees,
 With foliage green, to please the busy bees;
 The useful herbs are here in numbers grown
 (But, like all earthly things, they'll soon be flown);
 Their heads bow down to kiss the bubbling stream,
 And see their beauties, and the golden gleam;
 The spangled trout is on alert to watch,
 Springs from his bed the thoughtless fly to catch;
 The angler now upon a cliff doth stand,
 And pendant, angles o'er the bubbling strand,
 With fly or worm, the finny race beguiles;
 He thus betrays them with his cunning wiles.

An ancient structure now in ruins stands,
 The once famed beauty of the Scottish lands,
 Romantic Pictish, built in Gothic form,
 That long hath stood the vast impending storm ;
 It Reginald possess'd, where greatness stood,
 Deserted now by all, but ravens' brood ;
 The Craig it's called, where foxes breed their young,
 And screech owls screaming loud their midnight song.
 The lime and stone, as one, hang o'er its brow
 (Terrific-like for strangers it to view) ;
 While some, with violence, from the top do fall,
 And spread the stream, that bubbles by the wall.
 The shepherd swain, from off the mountain steep,
 Drives home his charge, the bleating snow-white sheep,
 Conveys them home, in safety to their fold,
 His careful dog behind, sagacious, bold ;
 The browsing cows, from off the verdant braes
 I us'd to haunt, to spin my minstrel lays,
 And to select the beauties of the place,
 (But weak my muse, and humble is my verse).

Quite true, Peter ! It will be observed that there are numerous gems in the foregoing, not the least amusing being the song of the screech owl, and that remarkable architectural order, "Romantic Pictish, built in Gothic form" !

The longest piece in the book is "The Effects of Love, a Pastoral, in three parts". It opens with an invocation and a description of a summer evening :—

O thou great king of the Arcadian plains,
 Sing thou with me love's pleasures and its pains.
 The evening's clear, the sun mild and serene,
 The shepherd swains lie stretch'd on dusky green.
 Sol's golden beams now gild the mountain's brow,
 The waving smoke doth join the azure blue ;
 The thrush's carol charms the trav'ler's ear,
 The linties sing, and swallows dart thro' air,
 Woodlarks in sylvan groves doth sweetly sing,
 While Philomel doth make the woods to ring.

Adonis, a shepherd, goes after a strayed lamb, which having found, he is on his way home when he hears the voice of song, and, peeping through a hedge, he espies his friend Daphnis sitting with his back to a rock, his flocks around him, his crook decorated with a flowery garland, and singing his love for Julia, a shepherdess. The second part tells how Daphnis set out to

visit his Julia, and finds her “in a faint, apparent dead”, surrounded by weeping friends. Daphnis’ sobs swell the chorus of grief, and Julia revives a little. Alas! it is only the flicker of the candle before it goes out—she dies in his arms, and he is inconsolable. He wanders about aimlessly and neglects his work and everything else. In part the third he is advised wisely to pull himself together, and kill his grief by attending to his deserted flock. He sets out to follow this good advice, meets Adonis, to whom he relates his woes, thus tearing open his wound afresh. It is too much for him; he dies in Adonis’ arms, and the poem ends with Adonis’ lament, and the following advice to youth:—

Ye blooming youths, possess’d of health and ease,
 Curb love, delusive love, if ye want peace;
 Thousands brave men fall victims to its shrine,
 Then do not foster love, tho’ most sublime;
 O warning take by this unhappy swain,
 The best that ever grac’d the flow’ry plain!
 Once happy, gay, and cheerful as the thrush,
 Now clos’d in death, by hopeless love—his wish:
 His bones to dust, now mouldering in the urn,
 In this vain world, again no more he’ll mourn.

We apologize for rehearsing this tragic tale in our own bald prose instead of Peter’s pastoral lines, but really——

Buchan has been more than suspected of, now and again, having a knack of finishing a fragmentary ballad which he had “collected”, and which he thought, perhaps, would look all the better of having its original rotundity restored as best he could. We do not believe that he did so; and we have no doubt that our readers after perusing the samples of his muse now before us, will completely exonerate him from any such charge. In the piece from which we extract the following stanzas, one might half suspect he has reversed the operation. It is so unlike its neighbours in the collection that it somehow brought to our mind stories we had heard of gipsies disfiguring children which they had picked up somewhere, and wished to pass off as their own. It is entitled “Earl Marischal’s Exile from Scotland”:—

From Ugie’s dear and fertile fields,
 Where joy and honour grew,
 From sultry blasts no more to shield,
 Sad, sad to bid adieu.

How sad my fate, thus doom'd to rove,
 To foreign lands I fly;
 Dependent, poor, these scenes I love,
 I leave with fondest sigh.

Tho' unknown lands I wearied trace,
 No more my hawthorn groves,
 Magnetic mem'ry points the place
 Where Ugie meand'ring roves.
 From such sweet scenes, alas, to part!
 An exile thus to go!
 The direful thought doth chill my heart,
 And paint my face with woe.

* * * * *

Then farewell, Ugie, crystal stream,
 Thy echoing banks and vale,
 No more I'll visit thee, but dream,
 And thee with sighs bewail.
 No more, among the broomy bow'rs,
 In childhood, where I've stray'd,
 I'll cull the smiling, blooming flowers,
 I'll court the birken shade.

* * * * *

Then, farewell, Caledonia, dear,
 Ye sacred scenes, adieu!
 Tho' foreign lands I wander drear,
 Yet still I'll think of you.

“Ravens Craig” is a tale of faerie: the narrator is decoyed into an “auld haunted biggin” where

Peal after peal o' mirth an' fun,
 Witches an' warlock's prance,
 Pigmies an' fairies now begun
 To lead the sportive dance.
 Auld Hornie, yont the chimla' ha,
 Did screw his pipes fu' fain;
 I by the blazing tapers saw
 There what I sanna name.

We have seen something like this in a poem called “Tam o' Shanter”, but feel constrained, however, before passing from this “tale” to extract the following delicious morsel:—

The blast sughs through the craigy rocks,
 The turf-clad cot is torn,
 The withered and the aged oaks
 And various stacks o' corn,

O'ercome wi' fatigue an' wi' fright,
 I heedless rushed on,
 An' in a cave, wi' glim'ring light
 O'erheard an' awful moan.

What happened to the "aged oaks and various stacks of corn" in the above eery stanza, we beg to "give up".

"The Spring Returns" is, perhaps, the best of his songs, but, like the celebrated ale of Bervie, it is ill to decide:—

The spring returns, see nature smiles,
 And Ugie's banks are clad in green;
 The angler, with his cunning wiles,
 Draws forth the tenants from the stream.
 Where woodbines and the birken shade,
 And clasping ivy on each tree;
 Where lamkins kiss the pearly blade,
 Ye sylvan songsters sing to me.

Come welcome in, ye verdant Spring,
 And dreary winter drive awa;
 'Mong alehouse trees the cuckoo sings,
 And linnets on the greenwood shaw.
 The linties on the hazel bush
 Doth strain and swell their warbling throat;
 The skylark and the speckled thrush,
 And ev'ry songster adds its note.

The following is called "Epigram (!) to T. M. Tailor":—

There is a Tailor in this town,
 I for his wit wad gie a crown,
 The like o' him's no to be foun'
 In ilka part,
 Although ye'd seek the warl' roun',
 For's blythsome heart.

My frien' he likes aye merry chiels,
 Has mither-wit nae taught at squeels,
 Wi' them he'd dance strathspeys or reels
 Till like to birst,
 An' then he likes a bottle weel
 To drown his thirst.

An' honest Tam is this frien's name,
 A character that's far frae lame,
 An' o't I hope he'll ne'er think shame,
 Come weel, come woe,
 He hateth gold, an' loveth fame,
 As sure's I go.

We conclude our extracts from this volume—which have been more copious than they are worth, for the reason that the volume is rare from the book-collector's point of view, and also because it is rare to find such "poetry" published seriously and not as a joke—with a specimen of his verses in the "Scottish dialect"—

I met my love last night at e'en,
 Whare, on the willows, buds were green,
 Down by the pure and crystal stream
 An' flow'ry braes,
 There we sat down to rest our banes
 And sing our lays.

She sang sae sweet, an' sae jocose,
 Whare Ugie's stream meand'ring flows,
 And thro' the birks and hazels rows
 The bubbling linn,
 An' through the haughs, and o'er the knowes,
 Wi' cheerfu' din.

The birds sat mute wi' joy and glee,
 The mavis perch'd on hazel tree,
 An' pleasure beam'd in ilka e'e,
 The sportive night.
 I patient sat till twa or three;
 The moon shin'd bright.

Then off we cam', an' hame did steer,
 Nae diel nor warlock did we fear,
 But what was warse, I tell you clear,
 Was Lucky's scaul,
 And this, upon my saul I swear,
 Was very baul.

Although the above is the only volume of "original verse" he ever laid before the public, he yet continued occasionally to woo the muses, but never with much success. It is really astonishing to find one who had devoted such an amount of his time to the study of our ballad literature, who had a fair share of literary taste, and a keen judgment in regard to the poetical works of others, should, nevertheless, fail in acquiring such a commonplace art as mere facility in metrical expression. Yet prosy lines was a failing he carried with him to the end, even when he had added a little to the general gracefulness of his

numbers, and lessened a little the grandiloquence of his strains. Some eleven years after the publication of the "Recreations", when he issued the "Gleanings of Scarce Old Ballads" (one of the rarest and best of his many publications), some eighteen original pieces were placed among the miscellanies, "not" he says, "at the request of any officious friend, nor to expose my own folly as a follower of the muses, but that the volume, small as it is, may be as generally pleasing as possible to those readers who do not pict themselves on their attachment to every antiquated scrape, nor adepts in antiquarian lore". These, with a few songs in his drama of "The Peterhead Smugglers", and a pastoral song with a repeated burden, after the manner of Charlie Leslie's "Kempy Kaye", are the extent of his original poetical efforts.

Probably the following, from the "Gleanings", show the highest reach of his muse :—

WINTER.

Birds forsake their leafless dwelling,
 Sultry summer's gone and past ;
 Thro' yon castle-wall is swelling
 Winter's hoarse and biting blast.
 Trees are stript their native cov'ring,
 Flow'rs and foliage leave the plain ;
 Little birds at barndoors hov'ring,
 Anxious glean the scanty grain.

Tumbling clouds with silver tinted
 Stretch along the 'lumin'd sky ;
 Nature all her works has painted
 Pleasing to the gazer's eye.
 Winter spreads her snowy mantle
 O'er each cottage, hill and dale ;
 Crystal trees in clusters pending ;
 Timorous hares their lot bewail.

See yon bark on the vast ocean,
 By the rolling billows tost ;
 Up she heaves in troubled motion,
 Down again—now to us lost !
 Yet she breaks the swelling mountain,
 Spreads again the ragged sail ;
 Rushing thro' the foaming fountain,
 Braving dangers in the gale.

SPOTLESS PEGGY.

The sun danced thro' yon spreading trees,
 Where ivy twines sae finely, O;
 The gurgling rill and fragrant breeze
 Invite me there sae kindly, O.
 The glowing flowers and birken shade,
 And hawthorns blooming bonny, O;
 Such scenes aye please the am'rous maid,
 When sporting wi' her Johnny, O.

But my delight's yon hazlie brae,
 Amang the cliffs sae craigy, O;
 Where gowans spring, and linties sing,
 And dwells the spotless Peggy, O.
 Her fleecy flock she tends wi' care,
 To fountains pure she leads them, O,
 While bleeting round they kiss the hand
 That daily cheers and feeds them, O.

Nae rival there, nor crowded care,
 Shall haunt my breast sae cheery, O,
 But we shall meet with transports sweet,
 When I'll embrace my deary, O.

* * * * *

Her lovely form and modest air
 Outvies the famed Killbeggie, O,
 And Grecian nymph was ne'er so fair
 Nor hauf sae sweet 's my Peggy, O,
 In vain the artist strives to trace
 Wi' chisel on the marble, O,
 The sweetness of her glowing face,
 While Cupids round her warble, O.

Some of our readers may perhaps wonder why we have neglected to notice the completion of Tannahill's beautiful fragment, "Thou cauld, gloomy Feberwar", which Dr. Charles Rogers, in that very popular work, "The Scottish Minstrel", credits Buchan with writing. It is certainly a gem, and bears on the face of it the impress of real poetical genius. So much so, that no one acquainted with our author's verses would be at all likely to accept it as a composition of his, even though its real author was unknown, except on the strongest evidence. It first appeared, however, in the second series of "Whistle Binkie" as a contribution by the late Dr. Patrick Buchan, a

son of the subject of our sketch, and one of the best song writers of these latter days.

While we have thus had to describe Buchan's own verses as, on the whole, very inferior performances, it would not be at all right to dismiss him without saying a word or two about the collections of ballads, to the gathering and publishing of which he devoted the best years of his life. If we cannot praise him for his own poetry, we can, at least, throw our small mite into the treasury of eulogy which met his doings on the ballad field. None but an enthusiast such as he could have attempted with any hope of success a task which, to ordinary mortals, must have seemed a very fruitless one after the labours of Percy, Scott, Jamieson, and Motherwell had been laid before the world. But be-north the Grampians, especially in his own native Aberdeenshire, Peter knew that a rich vein of traditional literature lay as yet untouched, so with a perseverance peculiarly his own when set on a hobby, for ten long years he spared neither purse nor person in his endeavours to exhaust that untrodden ground. When Charles Kirkpatrick Sharpe and Sir Walter Scott perused the vast pile of manuscript which he submitted to their judgment for selection and approval, it was found that he had not only rescued many fine ballads from the oblivion into which they were fast sinking, but had also secured important variations and improved versions of other well-known Scottish ballads. His larger selection was no sooner published than it took a high position among works of its kind, and to-day no ballad collection, made in the present century, can command such a uniformly high price as that made by the "indefatigable Peter Buchan".

In private life he was a much respected man—kindness and generosity, especially towards those struggling with an adverse fate, being leading traits in his character. Indeed, we have heard, from those who knew him well, that his good-heartedness and his unsuspecting nature made him an easy prey, and helped very much to lead him into many of the misfortunes which clouded the latter half of his life.

Contemporary and posthumous fame are rarely awarded to any mortal, and if Peter in his lifetime has had the reputa-

tion, and been spoken of as a poet, historian, biographer, metaphysician, and editor, the tooth of time has made sad havoc with his laurels. If, as a poet, he has been weighed in the balance and found wanting; if, as a historian and biographer, he sometimes allowed his imagination to supply, instead of illuminate, his facts; if, as a metaphysician, he built his airy castle of reasonings more to square experience to theory than draw theory from experience—yet, when all these are forgotten, as they have long ago been forgiven, the name of Peter Buchan will be handed down to latest posterity as the saviour of the ballad minstrelsy of the north.