

AMONG the many changes which the last sixty years have wrought on the features of industrial life in Aberdeen, none has been so thoroughgoing and complete as that which has overtaken the manufacture of textile fabrics—the displacement of the hand-loom by the power-loom. Along with this change a race of men has ceased to exist, at once remarkable for their political wisdom, sturdy independence, and pronounced individuality. Great as undoubtedly has been the general improvement of the artisan classes by the improvements in machinery, it has, nevertheless, to a great extent tended to reduce the individual to the position of forming but a part, and that an insignificant one, in a complex whole, almost annihilating that individuality, the loss of which, we have ever thought, cannot be enough deplored. The existing state of matters, however, must be accepted; but if a naturalist may lament over the recent extinction of a species of ugly birds, we may be pardoned for regretting the loss of a race of workmen who could think and act for themselves without the leading strings of boards, councils, or committees, and who were too sensible ever to mistake a restless wish for change for the spirit of true reform. If less marked than many of his class as a stickler for political rights, GEORGE SMITH, the author of “Douglas Travestie, and other Poems and Songs in the Buchan Dialect; Aberdeen: 1824”, had, nevertheless, many features of character which made him rank well among his comrades, and possessed a sufficient share of natural genius to rescue his name from the oblivion which has overtaken almost all his working contemporaries. Yet among his fellow crafts-

men of those days there were some splendid men—men on whom the heavy adversities of life lay crushingly, but whose vigour of mind and manly independence of spirit were more than a match for their evil stars.

A wave of political excitement passed over the country shortly after the peace settlement that followed Waterloo, and was felt with particular keenness in the great centres of manufacture. The general disarmament had thrown its thousands of men from army and navy into a labour market already over-stocked, while the demand for manufactured products had fallen to an exceptionally low level. Thus it came about that a grinding necessity of circumstances set men's wits on edge, and loud and clamorous rose the cry for reform on every hand. The curse of protection and a vicious bounty system were blighting every field of industrial activity. The results of the Spa-fields meeting and the Green-bag inquiry added, as it were, fuel to the burning. Secret societies rose on every hand; the air of every workshop breathed of revolution; and only by a well-concerted spy system, which betrayed the leading spirits of the movement, was the Sidmouth Government able to stave off for a time the claims of political freedom. In Scotland the hand-loom weavers played a noble part in this forward struggle, for out of their humble ranks came the martyrs who at Stirling and Glasgow suffered for the cause of reform. While for a time victory ostensibly lay with the oppressors, a spark had been struck that fired every weaving shop east and west with a spirit of Radicalism so logical, so uncompromising, so defiant in attitude, that even long after men's ideas had broadened to the standard of '32, Radicalism was a name to terrify withal. We can look back to some of these political hotbeds in Aberdeen, and recall the fire and declamation of not a few of the veterans who, in their younger days, whisked their shuttle at "The Weavers' Rigg", where George Smith sang of "Anither taxie an' a pension".

Newspapers were costly in those early days (the duty on every copy was reduced from fourpence to one penny in 1836, and only totally abolished in 1857), but the shop clubbed for them. *Cobbett's Register* was a special favourite, and on Saturday afternoons its arrival was the signal for "calling a

bar" to hear the news of the week, and discuss whatever items called for special attention. The educative influence of this system was of no small moment; nothing escaped notice; while the interchange of opinion and the outspoken criticism did much to sharpen their wits and to give clearness to their ideas. With these knights of the shuttle there was no ~~clo~~ture save that imposed by the necessity of having their "cut" delivered within pay hours at the wareroom; and the exceptionally hot-headed were kept in sufficient check by the extempore lampoons of some rhyming shopmate. Some of those whom their craft looked up to as leaders in political matters were well-read men—the works of Bentham, Mackintosh, Price, and others who had helped to probe the foundations of political truth, and secure the basis of political freedom, having been specially mastered by them. It was no easy matter to throw dust in the eyes of these men, conversant as they were with first principles. Through the froth and mist with which party organs made it their business to obscure any subject of moment, they could see the drift and tendency of things with a clear eye. If we might summarise the Radicalism of these pioneers, it might be roughly stated as an unqualified demand for the removal of all those hindrances to human activity, those blocks to human freedom, which party legislation had set up and fostered. It asked nothing of Government but to get out of the way, and leave men to work out their own destiny, free from the stumbling-blocks and restrictions of class enactments. We often seem to hear one of those old Radicals saying, in these days of grandmotherly Governments, with their pauperising nostrums of *free* libraries, *free* education, and *free* everything, except personal freedom—"We don't want these things; we can do all that for ourselves if you would cease to rob us for the upholding of Royalty, pensions, sinecures, and the thousand and one other legalised parasites that fatten on the poor man's taxation. It is a poor, a killing compensation, which, after extorting from us our little all, gives us leave to go upon the rates to make up the deficiency your overdone system of government has caused. No! Leave us in the honest possession of what we can earn, and we will stand upright in the eyes of the world—men, capable of

discharging all the duties which humanity and society require of us”.

Such was the type of men among whom George Smith lived and moved for wellnigh fifty years; and although personally he never could become earnest enough to be absorbed, as some of them were, in these political discussions and speculations, he nevertheless enjoyed them, in his own quiet way, and was ever ready to play dry-shaver to those whose zeal seemed to carry them too far. He was born at Huntly, in 1770, and came to Aberdeen while yet a young man, some years before the close of the century. He plied the shuttle in various parts of the town, but was a notable figure among the old worthies who wrought at the Weavers' Rigg in the Sand Hole, as that part of College Street was then called where White's Square and Hogarth's curing work afterwards stood. For over thirty years, he was in the employment of one firm—Leys, Mason, & Co., of Grandholm,—whose city warehouse occupied part of the site of the present New Market. George was early known as a rhymster, and being at no time averse to “the cup that cheers”, if it sometimes inebriates, his quaint, home-bred wit, his keen sense of humour, his native drollery and good-heartedness, made his company much desired and appreciated. He was a fugleman in Finlason's Volunteers a regiment about 800 strong, raised in 1803. While there, he became acquainted with Alexander Robb (the deacon), then a young man, also addicted to rhyming. Their friendship continued for many years, and among the miscellanies appended to “Douglas Travestie”, a few of Robb's effusions will be found thrown in—doubtless in order to swell out the booklet to something like a decent size. Their paths in life were divergent, however; the future deacon was rising, in so far as “warl's gear” was concerned, and fast drifting to Toryism; Geordie, a poor “dowlas” weaver, with a considerable “thrum” of Radicalism in him, was struggling with a dying trade, barely able to make ends meet. His family had grown up, got scattered here and there, and finally, when the mother died, George, then a frail old man, went to live with a son in Glasgow. He died there on 27th February, 1860, aged 90 years.

The little volume which he laid before the public in 1824, though it contains only a fraction of his rhymings, has always been well spoken of as a sample of our northern vernacular. He never laid claim to being a poet in any sense, beyond the loose one which applies the term to any rough-and-ready rhymster who seeks to clink his story in a hamely jingle of verse. Yet there are unmistakable traces, in many of his compositions, of no small insight into human nature, of a keen sense of the grotesque and humorous in human affairs, and a power of pithy expression always refreshing to those who take a pride in their mother tongue. Of the "Douglas", it was said in the preface—"There is only one thing concerning it of which we can be sure, and that is, that it is entirely new; for, though the original facts are all preserved in point of sense, yet the lingo is so far distant from the original, that none but a true Caledonian will ever be able to trace the connection". Of the truth of this, witness the well-known scene in the second act, where young Norval's account of himself is thus rendered:—

Enter Lord Randolph and a Young Man, their swords drawn and bloody.

Lady R.—He disna shak' for naething, I can see.
Fu's a' the day, guidman? what's been adee?

Lord R.—Gif I be weel, gie ither fouk the thanks;
As for mysel', it ne'er was in my shanks
To red my feet o' yon unchancy scrape,
Sin' e'er I turn'd my cutty in a cap;
But here's a loon (ye'll own he's little mair),
He's highlan' bleed, I'll bail, that's standin' there.
As I was dandrin' down the seggy burn,
Just whare the fitgate tak's the lefthan' turn,
Four gallows-lookin' scoundrels gripe me there,
Danes, I conjectur'd, by their yellow hair;
An't wartna' for that loon, that ye see wi' me,
They'd shortly made a cauld a—s'd Randolph o' me.
Now, wifie, turn an' gie the lad his due;
Tell him we thank him, that's for me an' you.
I labour'd sair to learn his name mysel',
But what it was the callant wadna tell.
Yet I maun ken, afore we farther speid,
Wha 't was that sav'd me frae a broken head.

Young Man—What wad ye ken, a simple country herd,
Wha's teeth, you see, is langer than his beard;

But this I'll say, an' carena by wha hear't,
That in a fray I never yet was fear't,
Nor wad I wish a better sport to see
Than knappin' crowns the lee-lang simmer's day.

Lord R.—Nae mair about it; twenty words in ane:
Lat's hear your name, an' count upon a frien';
Ye're nae a beggar's brat, I'll gie my aith,
An' mair, I see ye're mettle to the teeth;
It's been your weird to do some doughty deed
Ere ever coat or sark gaed o'er your head.

Young Man—My name is *Norval*, brook it weel or ill;
My father herds his sheep ayont the hill;
A cautious carle, fond o' gatherin' gear,
An' guides the thing he has wi' unco care;
Yet guid's he wis, he had a thrawart scheme
Wi' me; he held me hollin' on at hame—
For I had heard o' mony a bloody racket,
An' lang'd to see the place whare crowns were cracket;
Can' luck at length, just fuish the thing about,
In spite o' daddy's teeth, that let me out.
I watna gif ye notic'd just yestreen,
As braid's a *brander bannock* was the moon;
Twa three nichts back, afore she just was fu',
She lightet to our town a katterin crew,
Wha, rushin' on, came flaught braid to the glen,
An' scour'd aff a' thing bigger than a hen;
The shepherds flew like spien-drift to the hill,
An' left the plunderin' knaves to tak' their will.
I gather't odds o' fifty kibble birks,
Thinkin' may be to save a twa'r three stirks,
An' teeth an' nail pursu'd them in their rout,
An' soon o'ertook them, trachel'd wi' the nout:
Pell mell we yokes, like ony baited bears,
We stood our grun' an' faith the lads stood theirs.
I had a bow, an' twa'r three stumps o' arrows,
Auld tho' it was, it hadna mony marrows—
Wi' a' my maught the trusty tree I drew,
An' shot the katrin's leader through and thro';
Syne took his bulziement, an' aff I set,
An' this is them ye see me wearin' yet.
Whan I came hame, ye'll judge, I took it ill
To think o' hirdin' sheep upon a hill;
But as the king had summon'd lord an' baron,
To meet him some gate on the burn o' Carron,

A neighbour loon an' I cam aff oursel's—
 Yon whaupie-mu'd fleip that took to his heels;
 An' just as luck wad hae't, came up, ye ken,
 To red yon cully-shangy ye was in.
 Guid speed the wark, it's gi'en my name a heise,
 An' is a deed I'll voust o' a' my days.

Douglas' soliloquy in the wood, with which the fifth act opens, is one of the most successful passages in the piece.

Doug.—The middle o' the how; this is the place;
 Here stan's the aiken tree, the king o' trees.
 A bonny leesome nicht, as e'er I saw;
 The moon's as white's a new-blawn wreath o' snaw.
 Meevy nor mavy, now, ane wadna hear—
 I 'maist cou'd count the starns, they're a' sae clear.
 The win' scarce shak's the dewy leaves frae dreepin'—
 The very burnie snores as it were sleepin'.
 This is the hour whan guests and boodies rin,
 An' dead folk's wraiths, they say, come back again,
 To tell their frien's what secrets they may have,
 An' a' thing that gaes on by-south the grave.

“Douglas travestie” may be called a protest against the theory of “gentle blood”, which the worthy minister of Athelstaneford believed in as firmly as did an infinitely greater man—Sir Walter Scott—so that when, as in its pages, we hear lords and ladies conversing in a vulgar, plebeian dialect bristling with quaint and uncouth colloquialisms, or when the language of emotion seems drolly mixed with phrases peculiar to the chaff and banter of country clodhoppers—we must not run off with the notion that the man who could do such a thing with a tragedy, so rich in passages of rhetorical poetry as Douglas, must necessarily have been a man of low taste. No, no. The thing that stuck in George's throat, and went against the whole grain of his nature, was that idea of “noble blood” on which the entire play turns, and he did what he could to make it appear ridiculous. The key to the whole affair is found in the Epilogue—

Now, sirs, ye've seen our Douglas thro' an' thro';
 What think ye o' the stroud? 'tis far frae new—
 Aft has't been rous'd, an' made a muckle sough,
 An' for conceit, the thing is well enough:

But what provokes me, an' provok'd me aye,
 Is that confounded sycophantic way
 O' blawin' up the great, an' ca'in' them guid,
 Forby that whim o' whims, their better bluid.
 Lat's grant that nature, in some partial mood,
 Should signalise a chiel by strength o' blood.
 Is't true, for this, she ne'er sic gifts affords
 To any but distinguish'd sons o' lords?
 This might hae pass'd in our young Norval's time,
 Whan mixing great wi' sma' wad been a crime;
 But, now, we'd 'maist think shame sic tales to gie
 To still a greetin' littleane on our knee.
 Wi' a' the rant about this shepherd loon,
 Auchlunkart's herd had mair wit in his croon
 Than twenty Norvals ever could display:
 Compar'd to him, his noble bleed was whey.
 What's this? ye'll say; compare great Douglas' heir
 To dull mechanics—this we scarce can bear.
 Weel, here we drap it, since the noble soul
 Is charter'd by his birth-right to be dull.
 Here, by the bye, I deviate from my strains;
 'Tis blood they boast, they lay no claim to brains.
 But what's the neist pretence o' noble bleed?
 Hum! bide'l I mind me—doin' noble deeds.
 Weel, what are they? ou' fightin' wi' the sword:
 The cairds can fight an' d—n like ony lord.
 Wha wishes noble deeds to see or hear
 Will get them thick enough in Laurence-fair.
 At Waterloo, a pickle highland herds
 Fought till they conquer'd—what mair cou'd your lords?

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Did ever Norval show sic martial skill?
 We never heard o't;—na, nor never will.
 He swears he'll fight, rampages an' rins out,
 Roars like a bull, an' flings his sword about;
 Gets a wee job some gate about the wame,
 Fa's heels-o'er-head, syne rises an' rins hame—
 Seeks out his mither, pechs an' gie's a glowr,
 Tells her he's fell'd, and syne again fa's o'er.
 An' yet, here's been a story like a tether,
 An' a' his actions blawn up like a bladder:
 Mair wark 'bout fellin' ae puir maughtless loon,
 Than we hae heard for takin' o' a town.
 I grant there is baith valiant men and cowards;
 But part o' baith 'mang beggars an' 'mang lords.

Till nature tak' some whim, an' change her meed,
 Gie's nae mair stories about noble bleed.
 Our bleed's a' ane, whate'er the doctors tell,
 Binna what scurvy or the scab may spoil.
 Pick up yon beggar-man frae aff the street,
 Nae matter wha, the first ye chance to meet,
 Gie him estates, an' mak' his income clear,
 Frae ten to twenty thousand pounds a-year;
 A coach an' sax ye'll gie the carl neist,
 An' place a glitterin' star upon his breast;
 Gie him the power to crush, an' power to raise,
 An' ruin a' that conters what he says—
 An' baith my lugs, I wadna like to want them,
 He'll shaw ye noble bleed, "sufficit quantum".

It is in the miscellaneous poems and songs, however, which fill almost a half of his little volume, that the true rollicking nature of Geordie's muse is best seen. His jocund nature, never having been broken into proper habits of literary decorum, has now and again that smack of the flesh so highly relished by the natural man; there is no *double entendre* in his verses, but, when the occasion comes, there is an outspoken bluntness, certainly dipped in humour, given with all the gusto of one quite unconscious of making a breach in the conventionalities. His songs on the "Anniversary of the Marquis of Huntly's Wedding-Day" are wild as the mirth and glee they give expression to—and are only equalled in their madcap whirl by the length and depth of the potations which he sings as a necessary accompaniment. Passing over "The Twa Waters: Dee and Don", a very racy bit of rhymed dialogue in the manner of Burns' "Twa Brigs"; "Jamieson the Piper", a "smutty" story, which he had rhymed in his youth, and which, long before he published it, had found its way to the public in chap-book form, we come to his love and politico-patriotic songs. The former have considerable go in them, and, wedded as they mostly are to capital airs, would no doubt yet set the natives in a roar round a country fireside; but the best one, "What Ails You, my Meg"? has too suggestive a conclusion to make much headway in other quarters. Those of the latter class, mostly referring to Bonaparte and his doings, are capital. George, with no doubt the average share of patriotic feeling which the heroes of Finlason's Squad were supposed to

possess, found occasion for fun, where simpler-minded citizens found occasion for fear, in the rumours of invasion then so rife; and in his own pawkie, humorous way lilted not a few songs on the subject.

As we have already said, he was a great favourite with his fellow-craftsmen—his constitutional good humour, his ready wit, and the facility with which he could throw into rhyme anything which, for the time being, was of interest to those he moved among, being elements which could not fail to foster friendships. As an example we may mention that shortly after the opening of the Devanha Brewery in 1807, the celebrity of its porter and ales, as against those of the older Gilcomston, was much cried up by local toppers, and at last the virtues of their brewings got the length of inspiring some crude verses, which the new Company got printed and circulated in the tap-rooms. Sandy Robb, for the fun of the thing, threw off some verses in reply, in which the would-be poet and his “copper kettle at Craiglug” were overhauled in a spirit of satirical banter, which Sandy could work well. In order to have his revenge, the poet of Devanha (Morrison, a heckler) applied to Geordie Smith, who rather liked a job like this, and the result was a song, which was long popular, and which was certainly far superior to anything that Robb ever did in the same line. When “The Douglas” was published in 1824 our author reprinted this song, but so altered and changed that one might well say that all the pith and flavour were completely knocked out of it. We subjoin the song as originally written o’er a reaming bicker:—

Hale be that heart that likes to sing
 A wordy to divert us,
 An’ maks our sunken sauls to ring
 An’ strengthens han’ an’ heart o’s.
 Lang may your stevin rout wi’ glee,
 To woman an’ to man, O,
 The virtues o’ the barley bree,
 An’ beauties o’ Devanha.

Let other sangsters please themsels
 Wi’ bonnie Katrine Ogie,
 Or Maggy Lauder’s blythsome reel,
 Or Donald wi’ his cogie.

Lat sickly lovers vent their waes,
 Upon the banks o' Banna;
 Be ours the task to sing the praise
 An' beauties o' Devanha.

Black be that cankard carle's fa'
 Wad spoil our comforts fairly,
 An' tear our dear, dear pot awa',
 That cheers us late an' early.
 For fear his coat sud want a clout,
 Or frettin' wives sud ban, O,
 Sma' reason's this to turn about
 The frien's o' our Devanha.

Man may abuse the best o' gifts,
 An' blessings whyles may wrang him;
 The rape that saves the sailor's life
 Wi' equal ease wa'd hang him.
 A man may tumble like a swine,
 (Defen' his cause we canna)
 But sottish man the fau't is thine,
 So dinna blame Devanha.

Had not the juice come to the grain
 By some superior order,
 Nae a' our airt, for aught I ken,
 Had e'er produc'd the porter.
 Were nature but to change her scheme
 Because o' sinfu' man, O,
 It wadna work for a' the brime
 An' barm o' Devanha.

A drap to haud our hearts aboon,
 An' lat us ken we're livin',
 I humbly hope is nae grite crime,
 An' winna bar our thrivin';
 But lat us when we drink be wise,
 An' halt as soon's we can, O,
 Enough's enough o' bread an' cheese,
 O' water or Devanha.

A great many of his impromptu verses, as well as others—travelling the rounds of the weaving shops for a few weeks—passed away with the laughter they provoked. Their author had no poetical vanity about his scribblings; besides, he was getting on in years, was finding life a harder and harder battle, and had neither time nor inclination to look after the

whim-born brats which had served their purpose in the momentary mirth they produced. The opening of one of these we remember well—possibly because the story it chronicled was considerably out of the ordinary, and was also more than a nine days' talk in the vicinity of the Bow Brig. The hero and the heroine of the ballad, "The Banchory Weddin'", which opened—

Jamie was needin' a wife,
 An' Betty was tired o' her mither;
 An' they had agreed that for life,
 They'd join their twa stockies thegether,

were James Selbie, a blacksmith on the Burnside, popularly recognised as a character under the sobriquet "Brodie", and Betty Tamson, the "ae pet bairn" of a careful neighbouring couple. Long they had courted; at last the "cries" were put in, and the blushing bride, now no longer a chicken, patiently awaited the long-looked-for day. The parents, however, not so satisfied with Jamie as Betty was, had all along resisted the union, and now, at the eleventh hour, they put her under lock and key in a back closet, and positively refused to give her up. Jamie, smarting under the indignity, communicated his case to a few of the weavers at the "Rigg" and Windmill Brae Factory, and, after being duly fortified by a dram, a large relief party sallied down to the Burnside, to rescue Betty from parental tyranny. With the assistance of a ladder the window was reached, and the fair enchantress was tenderly and lovingly lifted out and laid in the arms of her faithful "Brodie". Jamie, under the advice of his friends, set off by way of Hardgate for Banchory-Devenick, assured that Dr. Morrison would tie the knot on production of the necessary papers. Off they went, a motley crew of weavers in their working garb, and others of a nondescript order, bent for a bit of fun. Refreshments were obtained at Watson's in the Hardgate, after which they pushed on to Kirton's celebrated house beyond the Brig o' Dee. Here a fresh fortification of courage was obtained, and a section of the more respectable members of the cortege accompanied the pair to the Doctor's. He refused to have anything to do with them, so, considerably crestfallen, they returned to Kirton's. That worthy, however,

was equal to the occasion, for over a “tappit hen” he told them that, by the law of Scotland, the due acknowledgment before witnesses of their taking one another for husband and wife was quite sufficient. The form was gone through—as was also a considerable amount of Kirton’s best—and they returned to town—“a’ fu’, an’ a’ happy”. A meeting with the parents took place, and, after considerable ado, they agreed to be pleased if the pair would get Mr. Gellatly in the Shiprow to marry them like decent folk. And he did marry them: and so ended the Banchory weddin’—which was a splendid theme for the rough and ready muse of George Smith.