

## WILLIAM SCOTT.

AT a time when every burgh, yea almost every clachan, in Scotland was at fever heat over the rejection of the great Reform Bill by the House of Lords; when Whig and Tory alike were on the tiptoe of eager expectancy, “reform or rebellion, which” ?—when every other idea in men’s minds was dominated by the political situation—WILLIAM SCOTT, a quiet, plodding citizen, past middle life, was carefully correcting for public perusal the sheets of a very quaint and original volume of verse. Not altogether undisturbed by the eloquence which his fellow-citizens poured along the slopes of the Broadhill—for William was a reformer—nor dull of ear either to the in-

dignation which from press and platform burst on Ross of Rossie when the enthusiasts, who in thousands had huzza'd him from Bridge of Dee to Castle Street, took to venting the venom of their spleen on the turncoat M.P.—for William loved political consistency—he nevertheless stuck to his proof sheets, finished and published his “Poems, Chiefly in the Buchan Dialect”, to find that, though spiced with a few very good political songs of a semi-radical type, a volume of Buchan poetry had little chance of success in a generation absorbed in political bush-whacking.

William, whose parents belonged to the district of Old Deer, was born in 1785, and began, in his tender years, the work of life as a herd laddie. He came to Aberdeen, about the close of the century, probably to learn his trade—that of a tailor. Speaking of Aberdeen in one of his poems he says:—

That is the place, an' thereabout,  
 When early sense began to sprout,  
 An' childish notions leave my snout,  
                   An' nae till than  
 I just began to find it out  
                   I was a man.

There fu' mony a youthfu' day  
 I've p'ay'd an' spent my time away;  
 An' hardly kent, if I may say,  
                   My head from tail;  
 Nor car'd for ony thing a strae  
                   But claise an' kail.

Here he remained till 1811, when, no doubt with the intention of bettering his position, he set off for London, where he remained till about 1814, when he again turned up in Aberdeen, and wrought for many years as a journeyman to Deacon Cantley, one of the most respectable merchant tailors of his day. The Deacon, who was one of the signatories to the famous “Looking to” document (see Kennedy, Vol. 1, p. 369), when the town became bankrupt in 1817, was a man of considerable ability, though looked upon as somewhat singular by those who only knew the outside of him. He not only was a bit of a musician, but made fiddles, ground lenses for optical instruments, and constructed an oblique mirror, which was a great treat to the boys who frequented his house. He was also a

bit of an electrician, having made and used, in these early days of the science, an electrical machine, which, as well as an Æolian harp that he had, was a source of some amusement to his friends. When this worthy died in 1828, William Scott, who had conducted the business (in Rettie's Court, Broad Street) for some time, took it up on his own behalf, but, from what cause we cannot tell, did not succeed, for shortly after he threw the needle aside, and opened a grocery shop in Justice Street, and was there when the volume we have mentioned above was published in 1832. An old citizen, who knew him well, used to speak of him as "a bachelor who lived in Rettie's Court—a straight, active, reddish-haired, pock-pitted man, slightly over middle size, with a decided abhorrence of the growing taste for 'English' as against the use of the mother tongue". Some time after the issue of his volume, which was not a success financially, he sold out his business and went to America, from whence he returned again, and at Old Deer took to the tailoring business once more, and died there at a pretty advanced age.

His little volume of poems, now very rarely met with, contains many excellent samples of the hodden-grey muse of our country side, and abounds in admirably graphic pictures, of a kind of life and manners fast becoming numbered among the things that were. His subjects, mostly taken from incidents in, and observations made in his own life experience, are wrought out with a fidelity which readers of a refined taste could sometimes dispense with; but, even then, with a power and pith peculiar to those only who have acquired great facility in the use of our norland doric. He rarely seeks to rise above the measure of the homely and the narrative, casts no inspiring glamour round the realities of life, nor finds in idealised Strephons or Chlorises a channel for the utterance of sentimentalities he never felt. The Sandys, Jamies, and Geordies, the Jeans, Kirstys, and Jennys of everyday life in all the bald, unsophisticated plainness of human nature as seen in our rural districts almost a century ago, work and court, gossip and sing in his pages with a heartiness and verve truly refreshing. A poet in the high sense of the word he was not, although he caught and fixed the living manners of his time

with all the exactness of a photograph, for a stroke of imagination or a play of fancy can be found in his pages only in the most rudimentary condition.

His principal poem, "Winter, or the Farmhouse", delineates the whole daily round of life and work as he had seen it when a herd laddie in the Buchan district. It opens at early morn, when

The hind bestirs himsel', while through the door  
 The growlin' win' mak's monnie a piteous snore;  
 He gaunts an' gapes, an' rubs his drowzie een,—  
 Pits on his breeks, an' then his hose an' sheen;  
 An' while he hears the win' return wi' thuds,  
 He cries to Jock to gather ti' his duds,—  
 For sic a nicht o' snaw, I sairly doubt  
 Ye never saw sin' e'er ye had a snout:  
 At ilka crack the win' lats o'er the house,  
 Ye wid maist think the devil had win loose.

He drives the bar off the "cham'er door", to go to the barn, where his morning's work of threshing has to be performed, but—

The losh be here! he says, I'm smor'd wi' drift;  
 I think in faith the sna's abeen the lift.  
 'Od bless me, Jock, get up, for a' the fun,  
 Or we'll be smother'd here as sure's a gun.  
 Syne baith yoke ti' an' sheel wi' a' their might  
 To clean the door, an' mak' it something tight.  
 Straight to the barn door they cut the sna',  
 An' clear their passage clean frae wa' to wa'.  
 But through the sna' the ploughman yet maun stamp,  
 An' get a coal afore he light his lamp.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Jock.*

"'Od safe me, man, ye hae been lang awa',  
 I thought ye'd smor'd yersel' amo' the sna'".

*Geordy.*

"Apon my word, I am amaist dane out;  
 An' O! my shin, I geen't a waefu' clout.  
 Some careless buckie left a bucket fu'  
 That hat my shin, an' made it black an' blue;  
 It tumblt ower wi' sic a dreadfu' din,  
 The water gilpit to my vera chin".

The lamp now lighted an' the door made fast,  
 The sheaves laid down, an' a' thing fair at last  
 The lusty ploughmen yoke to wark wi' ease,  
 An' roun' their heads the whirlin' supple flees;  
 They yark the yielding grain frae aff the strae,  
 Till Phœbus luminates the coming day.

After the women folks are astir, the scouring of milk pails, the general cleaning up of the house, and the birr of the spinning wheel go on apace—while Jean carries off to the threshers, their morning allowance of cakes and ale. The chaff, the banter, and the frolic, which goes on in the barn between her and the men, are roughly rustic and to the life. Meantime the goodwife, having discharged her immediate duties as far as preparation goes for the kye and hens, enquires after the herd. Willie Scott himself, be it remembered, represents this humble character in the rural drama:—

*Goodwife.*

“Fare’s that woof, to gae an’ meat the kye?  
 He’s nae up.—Nae up—weel that is a ly.  
 Gae haste ye, Jean, an’ pit him to the gaet,  
 Its time that he were up at ony rate”.

The feckless herd stans monnie a dolefu’ din,  
 An’ aye he’s wrang wi’ athing, out an’ in.  
 He feeds the nout, an’ keeps their houses clean,  
 Wi’ watery nib, an’ nieves as caul’s a stane.  
 His duds o’ breeks are fairly split in twa,—  
 The knittal braks ahin, an’ down they fa’.  
 Amo’ the sharn aft he tines his sheen;  
 Through dubs an’ dirt he puddles o’er the e’en—  
 Feet ever weet, and heels for ever bare,  
 An’ for himsel’ he hasna sense to care.  
 I was the herd mysel’, an can maintain  
 The truth o’ athing that I here explain.  
 So fan I’m dress’d, an’ on my riven sheen,  
 I get my orders fat maun a’ be deen.

After the close of the morning’s work—the kye milked, the strae shaken and laid by, the horse baited, and other “orra” work done—breakfast comes on, and subsequent orders from the goodman anent the day’s work are given and set about.

*Goodman.*

“~~A~~ ruck maun be ta’en in this afterneen,  
 An’ that’s the maist I think that can be deen;

Come ilka ane an' carry that can win—  
The loon an' I will big the mou' within".

The fun and the daffin', the broad joke and merry trick, which accompany this operation are all retailed with a gusto which must revive, in many a Scotsman's breast, glimpses of auld lang syne almost forgotten in the press and bustle of city life. Evening now draws on, and round the blazing ingle master and man, goodwife and servant-lass, group themselves, while song and story pass from lip to lip, making short work of the long evening. Gradually the gossip turns on the weird and supernatural, a constant element in the story-telling diversions of a country fireside long ago.

The clishmaclaver now began to turn  
To things wi' nibs that loup about the burn ;  
To dancin' fairies i' the clear moonlight,  
An' fouk who had acquir'd the second sight.  
How witches ride on besoms through the sky,  
Turn in to bawds, an' dammer a' the ky ;  
Tak' aff their milk, and leave their edders teem,  
An' trail the raip, an' scutter a' the reem.  
The churn may plump fae Januar' to May,  
The butter's gane for ever and for aye.  
Witchin' the water in a bridegroom's tripes,  
An' dance in kirkyards to the devil's pipes ;  
Transform a ploughman to a horse to prance,  
An' sail in egg-doups to the coast o' France.

To harmless brownie then our thoughts extend,  
A fire side goblin', an' a better friend ;—  
Sair does he work, an' thrash, an' carry stanes,  
Ye'd hear him grenen' on his weary banes.  
An' a' for nought, just bid him claes or fee,  
He tak's the bung, an' to the hill gaes he.  
Fat like he is, I canna just decide,  
They're never born yet, that saw his hide ;  
But monnie a ane can hear him i' the dark,  
Turmoilin sair, whan he's engaged at wark.

Anither gobblin' next our thoughts divide,  
Auld nickrin' kelpie o' the water side--  
He's seldom heard, but in some evil plight,  
Fan some fay body smores or drowns at night.  
An' from whatever spot the kelpie calls,  
'Tis there invariably the victim falls.  
It's true as death, gin he begin to snort,  
Some evil tidings are in quick report.

The thevin' fairie trips beneath the meen,  
 Wi' bonnet blue, an' little doublet green,—  
 They come in bands to drive their midnight reels,  
 An' cut sic capers wi' their airy heels.  
 They borrow a'thing, but they seldom leu',  
 An' fat they tak' they never gi'e again.  
 The new-born wean, when its mam's asleep,  
 Is files exchange'd for some bit fairy geet.  
 An' ev'n the nout, fan on an angry fu',  
 They sheet to dead, or riddle a' their skin.

Supper follows, and when the auld folks retire to rest, the old, old story, which is best told in "a couthy hour at e'en", comes uppermost; and, under the warm spell of wizard love, hearts are lost, hearts are won, and affection wells up as tender and true at the Buchan peat fire as it does in the gilded saloons of fashionable life.

His second poem is of considerable length, and takes the form of dialogues between two country cronies and one or two of their friends. A great variety of topics is touched upon—but only here and there does the poem rise to the level of "Winter". The following is a very happy description of rustic behaviour before, during, and after sermon:—

Aroun' the yard in boorighs here an' there,  
 The slang gaed on about their war'ly care,—  
 The aul' goodmanses spake of quoys an' stots,  
 And staigs, and horses, an' the price of goats;  
 How beasts had sell'd in some St. Marget's fair;  
 How craps were lookin', an' what prospects there.  
 About their kye the gay goodwives contest,  
 In milk an' butter, fa' produced the best.  
 Sin' sic a hauky cav'd, how lang the time,  
 Her milk was thick, an' O! the reem was fine;  
 The tapit hen, fat bonny eggs she had,  
 Fat time she clockit, an' fat time she laid.  
 The lasses they in some convenient place,  
 Remark the fashions o' their neighbours' dress.  
 A new bit bonnet trim'd wi' flowers an' gums  
 Gi'es mair delight than a' the Parson's hums;  
 An' whiles the lads an' them brak aff in pairs  
 To smirk an' chatter at their ain affairs.

\* \* \* \* \*

The sermon comes, a braw hameo'er advice,  
 It did fell well, wi' fouk that warn a nice;

As far as I cou'd see, nae tellin' lies,  
 The fouk were onie thing but ill to please.  
 Some were gauntin'—some were soughin' weel,  
 Some snorin' out like paddocks in a peel;  
 Ane blows his snout wi' sic a fearfu' soun',  
 Till half the hytters i' the kirk goup roun'.  
 Anither lad just wauken'd frae his sleep,  
 Glowers up as stupid-like as onie sheep;  
 An than frae en' to en' o' ilka pew,  
 The sneeshin' horn maun be handit through,  
 Or some bit boxie wi' a puzzlin' kick,  
 That pauls the lasses to get aff the sneck.

\* \* \* \* \*

An' now the Parson when his job was dane,  
 Had hardly mumml'd out the word amen,  
 When down the pulpit stairs wi' haste he reels  
 As gin some goblin had been at his heels,  
 An' through the carlies he directs his speed,  
 To tell them whan he had his peats to lead;  
 His neeps wi' weeds were fairly overgrown,  
 An' in a day or two they must be hewn;

\* \* \* \* \*

Close roun' the Bellman now the carlies stride  
 To hear the roups through a' the country cried;  
 So, in a crack the body mounts a stane,  
 An' cocks his glasses on afore his een.  
 Hillo! he cries, a fine advertisement,—  
 Some days ago a Lady's mantle tint,  
 Whaever finds the sam' an' brings't to me,  
 Sall get the Lady an' the mantle tee.

In his pictures of city life as given in a series of verses quaintly entitled "The Flowers of Aberdeen", but which, had they been written to-day, and by one with less sense of humour, or less ready to detect the comedy of life than William Scott, would likely have been called "The Slums of Aberdeen"—we find the same power of minute description and racy presentation of character running through the whole series. When we tell our readers that these "flowers" are the Vennel (long since removed), the Guestrow, Sinclair's Close, and Park Lane, the dens where every variety of vagabondism then known to our "guid toun" most did congregate, they will have some idea of the field of his canvas—a canvas filled with



Vagrant lodgers—  
Wi' tinklers, knaves, pig-wives, and cadgers,  
The coarsest kin' o' Chelsea sodgers,  
Like beggars dress'd,  
In holes an' dens, like toads an' badgers,  
Here make their nest.

As a song writer he is in general less successful than in his narrative or descriptive pieces. Many of his lyrical effusions are inspired by the scenery of his native place, the banks of the Ugie; and occasionally the maids of Ugie, too, strike from his lyre notes considerably above mediocrity. We relish, however, his political lays best—for there is a ring about them at once so hearty, so sensible, and they are so seasoned with good humour too, that they win the heart of you unless you happen to be pinned to your party, right or wrong. But political verses, however good, have as a rule but a brief life. The circumstances which call them forth soon lose their importance and the verse its point; they sparkle and seem full of life at the time, but time and affairs go on, and they, having served their purpose, sink into oblivion. Unlike other forgotten things, they lose all value, except to a certain class of antiquaries, but it is otherwise with pieces such as Scott's pictures of rural life. They have few, if any, touches of what may be called the higher verbal poetry, but there is poetry in a picture by Jan Steen as well as in those of Raphael or Correggio. It is in his faithful pictures of a now utterly changed rural life that we submit William Scott's book as one of no inconsiderable value to lovers of our homely northern muse, as it is also to the student of bygone social life in Scotland.