

J A M E S   B E A T T I E.

FOREMOST among those men who, rising from the shades and obscurity of rural life, have shed the lustre of true genius and the influence of a noble life over the city of their adoption and country of their birth, stands James Beattie—"the chastest minstrel of the Scottish grove". The details of his life are so well known to every class of readers that a brief recapitulation of its leading points is all that we deem necessary in introducing our notice of his poetical career. Born at Laurencekirk, 25th October, 1735, he entered a bursar at Marischal College in his fourteenth year, graduating A.M. in 1753. Successively teacher at the parish school of Fordoun, and Grammar School, Aberdeen, he was, in 1760, through the influence of the Earl of Erroll, appointed Professor of Moral Philosophy and Logic in his *Alma Mater*. From that period on to 1793 he published a series of works metaphysical, critical, and poetical, which, for the time being, at all events, gave him a celebrity second to none of his contemporaries. His society and conversation were courted and esteemed by the learned and humane all over the country; his works were patronised and rewarded by Royal favour and bounty, and, when the grave closed over him, it might well have been said, that no finer literary genius had ever been laid to rest under the green-sward of St. Nicholas.

If, however, the public career of James Beattie, the outward side of his life, was bathed from first to last in the sunshine of prosperity, the inner or domestic side was blighted by

calamities as untoward and dire as could well fall to the lot of mortal man to bear. His wife, through hereditary taint, was, during a long series of years, a lunatic of the most distressing kind, while his two sons, the very props of his life, with fine endowments, full of the brightest promise, in the first blush of manhood, it was his lot to see carried to an early grave. Childless and cheerless, for a few short years he moved in the routine of a retired life, till premature dotage opened the door to death, and he was laid beside his two sons in St. Nicholas Churchyard, in August, 1803.

Long before the publication of "The Minstrel", Beattie was known as a poet of some note. A story even goes that, while a mere schoolboy at Laurencekirk, he was known among his fellows as "the poet". No doubt, the natural bent of his genius lying in that direction, exhibited itself early, but nothing can positively be asserted about his devotion to the muses till, after his college career, he settled down as schoolmaster and precentor in the parish of Fordoun. This district, a perfect heaven for a young poet, lies on the southern slope of the Grampians, and is particularly rich in that variety of scenery which has ever been considered as congenial to the development of poetical genius. Essentially a bookish man, shy, retiring and diffident, Beattie instinctively fell into solitary communings with nature. Away on the heathery knowes, in the lonely glens, by the woods, waters, and craggy mountain steeps of that district, at night and morn, he saturated his spirit with those views and aspects of nature which, in later years, and with all the exquisite delicacy of acquired art, he wove into his finest poetry. Indeed, it may be said of this period of his life, his outer and inner experiences at Fordoun, that it laid the foundations of his subsequent poetical greatness. About this time he began to send occasional contributions in verse to the *Scots Magazine*, then a famous field for young bardlings trying the strength of their wing. From 1756 to 1760, many of the pieces, which afterwards appeared in the first edition of his poems, met the public eye in the pages of that magazine, in a more or less immature form. After his settlement in Aberdeen as teacher in the Grammar School, a higher phase of literary ambition took possession of him, for the recluse dreamer, the

retiring country dominie, soon found himself in a circle of society eminently fitted to fire a young man's literary aspirations. "The Wise Club", as it was popularly called, a kind of bastard successor to the "Theological Club" of Skinner and Campbell celebrity, had newly started to life with Reid, Gregory, Skene, and others for its backbone. They met in a tavern every second Wednesday at five o'clock, where, after the discussion of whatever literary or philosophical subject happened to be on the card, any little asperities of temper were wisely smoothed down by the creature comforts, which "mine host" duly set before them from eight to ten p.m. This blending of the fare of good fellowship with the feast of wit could not fail to add to the stability of "The Wise Club", which for a long series of years was the centre of the higher intellectual life of the district. Into this society Beattie soon found his way—indeed, from what we know of his genial nature and acute critical powers, one might say that he naturally gravitated to such a centre. It was here that the nest egg of the Scottish school of philosophy was laid, an event which subsequently led to a world of cackling; but we must not digress. Before Beattie became wholly absorbed in the metaphysical mazes of that celebrated discussion, he had made up his mind to gather together his contributions to the *Scots Magazine*, repolish them, and along with some others then in manuscript, throw them into book form. Proposals for the publication of these by subscription were duly laid before the public by the leading booksellers, and met with such a fair reception as set the printers immediately to work. While his book was passing through the press, however, he was lifted out of the Grammar School into the University, a stroke of good fortune that gave to the anticipations of fame which he might have hoped for from his contemplated publication a sort of secondary importance. In due course his volume was issued, in February, 1761—"Original Poems and Translations, by James Beattie, A.M. London: Printed and sold by A. Miller, in the Strand, 1760". It was dedicated to James, Earl of Erroll, and was received by the critical organs with warm commendation. Nevertheless, Mr. Beattie was not satisfied, his sudden good fortune and growing fastidiousness of taste making him somewhat ashamed of his

production. One can scarcely see a good reason for it, but so much did this feeling grow upon him, that all through his life it is said he bought up and destroyed every copy he could lay his hands upon. The work is now very scarce; Bower, his biographer, writing in 1804, says it is "one of the scarcest works in the English language". This is a considerable overstatement, pardonable in "Budsie", who was a good school-master but a poor bibliographer. One peculiarity about this book, pointed out by a writer in *Notes and Queries*, and which enhances its value to local collectors, is worth noting before we turn to its contents. "In comparing it", says that writer, "with other works printed at Aberdeen, it would appear to have been in reality printed by *Francis Douglas*, and not by 'A. Miller, London'. A badly formed 'b', which will be seen in page 13, line 6 from the top, is also found in other Aberdeen books, and the ornaments in the so-called London edition are found in 'The Whole Duty of Man', published by Douglas in 1756". The truth of this suggestion is verified by the existence of copies with the following imprint:—"Aberdeen. Printed by F. Douglas, and sold by him for the benefit of the Author, and in London by A. Miller in the Strand. 1761". The different water-mark of its paper, however, shows this to be a second title-page, substituted in certain copies for the earlier London one.

Of the twenty-four pieces which the volume contains, seven only appeared in his next publication; while, in the last edition of his poems, which he revised and corrected in 1784, five alone were deemed worth preservation. Judged in the light of his later work, few will find fault with his judgment. For, though many of the rejected pieces have sufficient merit to lift an author into the immortality possible on the lower elevations of Parnassus, yet there is very little in them to indicate the coming excellence which was achieved in the first book of "The Minstrel". His friends, in their large-heartedness, sought to compare his translations with those of Dryden, but, however literally incorrect Dryden may be, he is always eminently readable: we cannot say as much of Beattie's translations. Speaking of them himself in after years, anent his son's condemnation of *free* translations, he says—"On this principle he



Beattie's sympathies and tastes, however, lay outside the pale of this sort of thing altogether; and though his kindly regard for the success of Ross's venture led him into it for once, he never returned to it again. His tendency to look upon the use of the vernacular in speech or writing as something indicating a low taste, was one of his weaknesses, a little bit of the pedant that had somehow or other crept into his composition, but readily forgivable in one of such varied genius and large-hearted humanity.

It is generally supposed that Beattie's great poem was composed in intervals of relaxation during the composition of the "Essay on Truth". At all events we find him, in 1766, writing to Dr. Blacklock of having begun such a poem, &c., and, in 1767, he gives him the plan of it—calls it "The Minstrel"—says he had written 150 lines, and "was not dissatisfied with it". In 1770 he published the "Essay on Truth", and "The Minstrel" (book I.) in 1771. He now became the literary lion of the hour. Theologians and others, to whom Hume and his speculations had been a constant bugbear, were almost beside themselves with delight, and clamorous in their praises of the essay; while the cultured few who had little aptitude for metaphysics, but a keen relish for poetic art, recognised and welcomed in "The Minstrel" the truest note of poetry that had been struck since Gray had given to the world his famous "Elegy". When we look back now on the great body of contemporary opinion which sought to rest Beattie's reputation on his achievements in philosophical speculation, we can see how completely time has reversed its judgment. The space occupied in his memoirs by matters relating to "The Essay on Truth" gives but a faint indication of the vast opinion which held him forth as the great philosopher of his generation. The hum of praise which met the first book of "The Minstrel" was drowned in the applause which greeted the vanquisher of error and scepticism. But the "Essay on Truth" was not the book, nor was Beattie the man to refute Hume. To-day that essay is as dead as if it had never been written, but "The Minstrel" has borne its author into the airs of immortality. The cause of this is not far to seek. He was a born poet, and, as such, was every whit the same child of imagination and sentiment in

his philosophy that he was in his poetry. He had a large head, but a still larger heart, and shrank from the disturbance of current opinion, mostly for fear of anticipated consequences. He was less occupied with what is true than with what he deemed safe; and viewed doubt, that initial step to all the intellectual conquests of our race, as the cope-stone of human sin. In short, he was, as we have said, a poet who for the nonce turned philosopher; his excellent faculty of verbal criticism enabled him to make plain to men of ordinary capacity many of the absurdities which imagination had conjured up round the stronghold of the enemy—he passed round that stronghold, and then looked as if he had taken it.

Metaphysics, however, lie only incidentally in our way, and we gladly quit the portals of its barren subtleties and enter the more fruitful field of poesy which lies before us in “The Minstrel”.

The plan of that poem, originally suggested to its author by the preliminary dissertation on the old Minstrels in Percy’s “Reliques”, is thus given by himself in a letter to his friend Dr. Blacklock:—“I propose to give an account of the birth, education, and adventures of one of those bards. . . . My hero is to be born in the south of Scotland; which you know was the native land of the English minstrels: I mean of those minstrels who travelled into England and supported themselves there by singing their ballads to the harp. His father is a shepherd. The son will have a natural taste for music and the beauties of nature, which, however, languishes for want of culture, till in due time he meets with a hermit who gives him some instruction, but endeavours to check his genius for poetry and adventures by representing the happiness of obscurity and solitude, and the bad reception which poetry has met with in almost every age. The poor swain acquiesces in this advice, and resolves to follow his father’s employment, when on a sudden the country is invaded by the Danes or English borderers (I know not which), and he is stript of all his little fortune, and obliged by necessity to commence minstrel”. Of this plan little more than half was carried out by the author, but in what he accomplished he has dowered our literature with a poem unrivalled as a

masterpiece of elegance, refinement, and taste. Other hands have tried to finish the poem on the lines laid down by the author, as we will notice further on, but have met the usual fate of such attempts, and only cause us to regret that Beattie did not finish his original design himself. Edwin, the minstrel, is well known to be, at least in his early career, a poetical embodiment of the aspirations, feelings, and sentiments which dominated the young life of the bard himself. Edwin's youthful wanderings bring us in fancy back to the dreaming recluse of Fordoun:—

Lo! where the stripling, wrapt in wonder, roves  
 Beneath the precipice o'erhung with pine;  
 And sees, on high, amidst th' encircling groves,  
 From cliff to cliff the foaming torrents shine;  
 While waters, woods, and winds in concert join,  
 And Echo swells the chorus to the skies.  
 Would Edwin this majestic scene resign  
 For aught the huntsman's puny craft supplies?  
 Ah! no; he better knows great Nature's charms to prize.

And oft he traced the uplands, to survey,  
 When o'er the sky advanced the kindling dawn,  
 The crimson cloud, blue main, and mountain grey,  
 And lake, dim-gleaming on the smoky lawn;  
 Far to the west the long long vale withdrawn,  
 Where twilight loves to linger for awhile;  
 And now he faintly kens the bounding fawn,  
 And villager abroad at early toil.—  
 But, lo! the sun appears! and heaven, earth, ocean, smile.

And oft the craggy cliff he loved to climb,  
 When all in mist the world below was lost.  
 What dreadful pleasure! there to stand sublime,  
 Like shipwreck'd mariner on desert coast,  
 And view th' enormous waste of vapour, tost  
 In billows, lengthening to th' horizon round,  
 Now scoop'd in gulfs, with mountains now emboss'd!  
 And hear the voice of mirth and song rebound,  
 Flocks, herds, and waterfalls, along the hoar profound!

Not only is the minstrel's spirit nourished by feasts like these at Nature's ample board, but all the legendary lore, the ballads and traditions which amuse gathered rustics round the winter fire, made "wonder and joy run thrilling to his heart". Glimpses of elfin carnival, too, were his, for

. . . . . he hied

Where Fays of yore their revels wont to keep ;  
 And there let Fancy roam at large, till sleep  
 A vision brought to his entranced sight.  
 And first, a wildly murmuring wind 'gan creep  
 Shrill to his ringing ear ; then tapers bright,  
 With instantaneous gleam, illumed the vault of Night.

Anon in view a portal's blazon'd arch  
 Arose ; the trumpet bids the valves unfold ;  
 And forth a host of little warriors march,  
 Grasping the diamond lance, and targe of gold.  
 Their look was gentle, their demeanour bold,  
 And green their helms, and green their silk attire ;  
 And here and there, right venerably old,  
 The long-rob'd minstrels wake the warbling wire,  
 And some with mellow breath the martial pipe inspire.

With merriment, and song, and timbrels clear,  
 A troop of dames from myrtle bowers advance ;  
 The little warriors doff the targe and spear,  
 And loud enlivening strains provoke the dance.  
 They meet, they dart away, they wheel askance ;  
 To right, to left, they thrid the flying maze ;  
 Now bound aloft with vigorous spring, then glance  
 Rapid along : with many-coloured rays  
 Of tapers, gems, and gold, the echoing forests blaze.

When we enter the second book of "The Minstrel", published some four years after the first book, a new complexion of affairs meets us. The pictures of nature, and touches of simple rural life, which in their chaste elegance gave an endearing charm to its forerunner, are now quite subordinate; and in the company of the hermit, who then appears on the scene, we are treated to a series of wise reflections on the general conduct of human affairs, with "ruined man and virtue lost" for dirge. Over all the eloquence and wisdom of this "ancient man" in his reflections on the mutability of earthly hopes, the uncertainties of life, the littleness and insignificance of the objects of human ambition, there is an air of melancholy, a tinge of pensive emotion, a sweet sadness, which deepen as the poem progresses. While in point of literary workmanship this part of the poem is equal to anything its author ever penned, yet we look in vain for such a stanza as

O how canst thou renounce the boundless store  
 Of charms which Nature to her votary yields!  
 The warbling woodland, the resounding shore,  
 The pomp of groves, the garniture of fields;  
 All that the genial ray of morning gilds,  
 And all that echoes to the song of even;  
 All that the mountain's sheltering bosom shields,  
 And all the dread magnificence of heaven;  
 O how canst thou renounce, and hope to be forgiven?

—a stanza which made Gray the poet exclaim, "This, of all others, is my favourite stanza. It is true poetry; it is inspiration".

It may be of interest to note the two stanzas (4 and 6 in the first edition), which, though altered in his second edition, were latterly omitted altogether,—probably more on account of the sentiments clenched in the closing lines of each, than from any inherent defect in the stanzas themselves:—

## IV.

Life's slender sustenance his only meed;  
 'Twas all he hoped, and all his heart desired.  
 And such Dan Homer was, if right I read,  
 Though with the gifts of every muse inspired.  
 O when shall modern bard like him be fired!  
 Give me but leisure to attend his lays,  
 I care not, though my rhymes be ne'er admired.  
 For sweeter joy his matchless strain shall raise  
 Than courts or kings can yield, with pensions, posts, and praise.

## VI.

Surely the female heart is much belied  
 By those who brand it with the lust of gain.  
 The generous Muses Fortune's smile deride,  
 Nor ever bow the knee in Mammon's fane:  
 For their delights are with the village-train,  
 Whom Nature's laws and Nature's charms engage:  
 They hate the covetous, and scorn the vain;  
 The parasite ne'er won their patronage;—  
 Witness the silken bards of this illustrious age.

Little remains to be said about the few miscellaneous poems of which he "was willing to be considered as the author"—"The Ode to Hope", "Retirement", "The Hermit", "The Battle of the Pigmies and Cranes", "The Hares", "An Elegy", "An Epitaph", and "Lines to Lady Gordon". Although it is

well-known that he had a considerable vein of humour in his composition, he kept its ebullition completely in abeyance except in the company and for the amusement of his intimate friends. From his letters we learn that his amusements were principally music and burlesque verse-writing; but with the exception of two of the above-named minor pieces, which are written in an easier strain than the others, the general tone of his muse is that of mournful sedateness. In 1765 he published a long metaphysical poem on the classical fable "The Judgment of Paris". In spite of his expectations to the contrary, it turned out a complete failure, and after reprinting it in the second edition of his poems, he saw sufficient reason to suppress it altogether. Of his prose writings, which lie quite beyond the scope of these papers, we would just note that his "Essay on Poetry and Music" should be read and re-read by every lover of poetry and every devotee of the lyre—it is one of his most masterly performances. No juster estimate of our poet's character could be given than that of his great contemporary, Cowper:—"Beattie is the most amiable and agreeable writer I ever met with; the only author I have seen whose critical and philosophical researches are diversified and embellished by a poetical imagination, that makes even the driest subject, and the leanest, a feast for an epicure in books—one so much at his ease, too, that his own character appears in every page, and which is very rare, not only the writer, but the man; and the man so gentle, so well tempered, so happy in his religion, and so humane in his philosophy, that it is necessary to love him, if one has any sense of what is lovely". As an amateur in music his performances on the violoncello have been reputed as something much beyond common. An incident communicated in a letter to his niece from Edinburgh confirms that reputation. Speaking of being in company with Mrs. Siddons, he says:—"She loves music, and is fond of Scotch tunes; many of which I played to her on the violoncello. One of them ('She rose and let me in', which you know is a favourite of mine), made the tears start from her eyes. 'Go on', she said to me, 'and you will soon have your revenge'; meaning that I would draw as many tears from her as she had drawn from me".

As mentioned above in an incidental way—other hands

have tried to do what the master's hand did not---complete "The Minstrel" on its original plan. At least three continuations have been published—one in two books by the Rev. Mr. Polwhele, which appeared in the *Poetical Register*, 1810-1811, and which, though a very unequal production, contains several passages of considerable beauty; another by Mr. Herman Merivale, who published one book as a specimen, but its want of success was such that the author neither claimed the work nor finished it. The third who sought

with trembling hand

To touch the tuneful harp which Beattie strung,

and who managed to approach most nearly in spirit and plan to the merit of the original poem, was a student of his own, the Rev. William Cameron, the minister of Kirknewton.