

J O H N I M L A H.

OUR sweetest song birds never soar high. The mavis, the blackbird, the lintie, and other songsters who trill out their

sweet notes in our woods and groves all keep near the ground, and their song is short and unsustained. The skylark is not a sweet singer—he is a brilliant artiste that dazzles you with his power and *abandon* rather than feeds your heart with the soft, dreamy music which soothes and fills it with joy. The subject of the present paper is a singer of limited flight—he never soars into cloudland with unwearying wing and lofty song. He “chants the notes o’ nature”, now with a low-voiced sweetness when he sings of human joys and sorrows, or the beauties of some quiet fairy nook, then with a bugle blast of a few bars he inspires a patriotic glow of pride in “oor ain land”, which nature has made so beautiful and worthy of our love, and again in a chuckle of humourous fun he puckers our face with some lively incongruity which forms the weft and warp of a short lilt.

JOHN IMLAH, a true “bard of Bon-Accord” was born in North Street, Aberdeen, towards the end of 1799. Being the youngest of seven sons, we would expect that, according to the old freit, he was

Endued

With gifts and knowledge perilous shrewd,

and that, besides the power of curing King’s evil, which a seventh son possessed as legitimately as one born with the kingly right divine, he may have been the lucky possessor of other occult powers belonging to that mysterious and magical numeral. Be this as it may, we will content ourselves by showing that he had that gift which, according to the temperament of the one possessing it, may turn out a blessing or a curse—the gift of song. John’s forbears had been farmers in the parish of Fyvie for several generations. His immediate progenitor, however, seems not to have had anything to do directly with crops and nowt, but to have filled the important position of public purveyor of creature comforts for man and beast—in short, he was the keeper of an inn in the village of Cuminestone. He likewise enjoyed the title, and exercised the functions—whatever they were—of Bailie of Cuminestone, where we are told, his house long continued to be known as the “Bailie’s house”. Probably considerations for the future of his sons led him at Whitsunday, 1798, to take up his residence in Aberdeen,

where his boys would have a better chance of making their way in the world than they could have had in the country. In due time John was sent to school, where he proved himself a bright student, ending this part of his life with a year or two at the Grammar School. He early showed his liking for nature's loveliness, and delighted to wander among the many lovely scenes round about the "braif toun". By Dee and Don, by Rubislaw and the Stocket, he roved, weaving many a fancy, we doubt not. Familiar to his steps were the road to the black "Brig o' Balgownie", and that lovely "Seaton Vale", long since shut up to the public, and which inspired his fine farewell poem:—

Green bloom thy groves, sweet Seaton Vale!  
 And fair unfauld thy flowers!  
 To bless wi' balm the gentle gale,  
 That seeks thy simmer bowers.  
 Where white as snaw the gowans grow,  
 The thornie briers blossom;  
 And pure as light the waters flow,  
 That babble thro' thy bosom.

The dew descends, sweet Seaton Vale!  
 As heaven's ain tears to woo thee;  
 The zephyr sighs its true-love tale,  
 Baith morn and e'eni' thro' thee.  
 Th' enamoured sun, wi' brightest rays,  
 Smiles on thy realm o' flowers,  
 And eve her softest shadow lays  
 Upon thy peacefu' bowers.

For thee and thine, sweet Seaton Vale!  
 Tear after tear is starting;  
 That better far than words o' wail,  
 Reveals the pang o' parting.  
 In Nature's every hue and form,  
 Thou fairy land, I loved thee!  
 In simmer's calm, and winter's storm,  
 Adoring have I roved thee!

Then fare thee weel, sweet Seaton Vale!  
 And fare thee weel for ever!  
 Our bark for sea now bends the sail,  
 Ae look—and then we sever.

And ye wha made as dear as fair,  
Each scene o' wave and wildwood,  
Farewell!—we part to meet nae mair,  
Companions o' my childhood!

On leaving school John was apprenticed to Mr. Allan, a famous local pianoforte maker, and having a capital musical ear, his master initiated him into the mysteries of pianoforte tuning, at which he soon became an adept. It is probable that it was in the exercise of his profession that the poetry in his nature first made itself evident; for poetry—the only visible part of the immaterial soul—is not always to be looked for in measured lines or even in written words. It may be found under many shapes—on the canvas of the painter, in the marble of the sculptor, in the tones and harmonies of the musician, and, above all, abroad in the fields and woods, and even lurking amid the sin and squalor of the crowded city. Certain it is that his pen now began to discourse as eloquent music as he ever drew from the vibrating strings in his daily work, and as it is foreign to the poetic nature to shut up its feelings—like the winds in the cave of Æolus—in the recesses of its own breast, his compositions soon found a corner in the local newspapers. By this time, however, Imlah was left the sole remaining member of his family in Aberdeen. His parents were both dead, as were also four of his brothers; the two survivors, Peter and Alexander, had both emigrated at a period when John was so young that he had but a very imperfect recollection of them. He accordingly made up his mind to push his fortune in London, on arriving in which his qualifications procured him almost immediate employment. He soon afterwards entered into an engagement with the eminent firm of Broadwood & Co., which lasted until almost the close of his life. His connection with this firm was one of the most agreeable which could be desired to a man of his tastes and character, and without those family ties which bind one to a spot of earth like a vegetable. From the beginning of the year till about the middle of June he was engaged as a regular town and house tuner in London at a fixed salary. During the rest of the year he was allowed to travel in Scotland in the exercise of his profession on his own account, eking



out his income by the commissions allowed by the Messrs. Broadwood on his sales of instruments. These months he spent in Scotland were very pleasant seasons, not only to Imlah, but also to circles of attached friends in every town from Edinburgh to Inverness, who were always ready with a hearty welcome to the genial and social poet. He had also many attached friends among the nobility and gentry whom he visited professionally, and he never failed to spend some happy days with some cousins in Methlic—the only relations he had in this country. It is very evident from his published volumes that nothing inspired his muse so readily as the folks and the scenes of his own calf-country. Seaton Vale, Balgownie Banks, the Bogie, the Burn o' Ardoh, the Ythan, all incite his song; and where does he find more kindred souls and kinder hearts than among the folk of his own and his father's shire?—

I've wandered Scotland far an' wide,  
 I've been out owre the border;  
 But gie me our ain waterside,  
 I seek to gang nae farther.  
 Whare cantie chiels fu' aften meet  
 Around their native cogie,  
 An' gar the hours flee swift an' sweet  
 Upon the Banks o' Bogie.

In bonnie Buchan thrive the nowte.  
 The crap and corn in Gearie;  
 Thro' Mar the fir-trees straicht an' stout,  
 In forests deep and drearie.  
 But oh! at merry sang an' joke,  
 At toomin' stoup an' cogie;  
 Nae land can meet the honest fowk  
 Upon the Banks o' Bogie.

In London, Imlah was a general favourite with all classes of his compatriots, while his uprightness, goodness of heart, and fine sense of honour made him universally respected by all with whom he came in contact. He was an enthusiastic supporter of the London Scottish Hospital—the subscribers' book to which was said to be a complete directory of all the Scotsmen in London—at least, all the Scotsmen worth knowing. At its festivals and those of other kindred associations, established for the benefit of his poorer countrymen, he was a cheerful and

liberal contributor, and was always ready with song or kind word to

. . . hold to him the welcome hand  
 Of Scotia's ancient lineage sprung,  
 Whose soul still loves his father-land,  
 Whose voice still loves his mither-tongue ;  
 Whose heart warms to the tartan plaid,  
 Whose hand would clasp the braid claymore,  
 When freemen arm to freedom's aid,  
 As did our dads in years of yore.

Intense Scotsman though Imlah was, he was not one of those who are always sounding the supposed superiority of Scotsmen and everything Scotch to every other nationality or institution on the face of the earth. No one was more ready to defend Scotsmen and Scotch habits and institutions when assailed by ignorant prejudice, but, on the other hand, he was equally ready to point out the shortcomings of his countrymen, and how they might with advantage take a lesson from the people of other nationalities.

During all those pleasant years—for pleasant and happy was his life on the whole, compared with what befell many of his brethren in song whose stories we have sketched—a yearning of heart was ever present with him to look on the faces of his two brothers, whom he could but dimly remember. One of them was a resident in Halifax, in Nova Scotia, the other in Jamaica. Learning that his brother Alexander was to visit his other brother Peter at Halifax, he determined to make the family party complete by being also present himself. He had a happy and complimentary parting with his London friends; he set sail for Halifax, and had a most delightful meeting with his brothers and their families. After spending some time in Nova Scotia, he accompanied his brother Alexander and a nephew to their home at St. James's, Jamaica, but alas! after a brief season of enjoyment there, yellow fever, that scourge of the country, seized him, and, on the 9th January, 1846, he passed away, lamented by his relations and hosts of friends which his fine nature had attracted towards him during his short sojourn in the West Indies. The news of his comparatively early death was received by his friends in this country with the most painful regret. His joyous, social presence had brightened many

a heart, while his deep religious feeling, which with him was nothing less than life itself—not a mere appendage to life, as it is with many—could not fail in making better those he consorted with. If life was a burden, Imlah made it the burden of a song, and his memory was lovingly cherished by all his friends till the last. This is a minor immortality worth earning, for

To live in hearts we leave behind  
Is not to die.

The following quotation is from an obituary notice of him which appeared in the *Cornwall (Jamaica) Chronicle*:—"He is deeply lamented by his relations and friends, and sincerely regretted by a numerous circle of acquaintances. He was a man of unaffected manners and great singleness of heart, who, to a lively imagination and versatile talent, added a ready store of general knowledge which rendered his society very acceptable to those whose congeniality of mind led them to similar pursuits. He died in Christian hope and resignation, and we trust in an odour of mind which dictated, in one of his sacred poems, the following lines:—

O, dark would be this vale of tears—more dark the vale of death,  
Had we no hope through godly works—no saving trust through faith:  
Where tear shall never dim the eye, nor sob disturb the heart,  
Where meet the holy and the just, and never more to part".

Imlah's poems and songs are contained in two volumes, published respectively in 1827 and in 1841, the first containing by far the best of his work. In the copies before us, which once belonged to the poet himself, there are numerous autograph alterations made by him in 1842. Many of these are merely verbal and of small account; one, however, is of some moment, and for the sake of anyone possessing "May Flowers"—his first volume—we note it. In the song, "The Lass on Ythanside", the first eight-line stanza is wholly deleted, as is also the last half of the last stanza:—

Tho' monie a mile o' shore and sea,  
Tho' worlds us baith divide,  
In dream and thought I dwell with thee,  
Sweet Lass on Ythanside!

For which he substitutes—



Tho' space may spread and days depart,  
 They never can divide  
 The love that links her to my heart,  
 The Lass on Ythanside!

Imlah possessed the lyric faculty in a very high degree, and had a true instinct for the music of words. Few writers since the time of Burns have given us more of the lilt and flash of a true song, which should go without music. For instance:—

The Fittie fishers a' forsook  
 Creel, yawl and coble, net, and hook,  
 And spinners left the Poynernoon,  
 For the Bridal o' Balgownie.  
 The Spittal wabsters quat their looms,  
 The Gran'holm queans their reelin rooms,  
 To shak' their hochen and knack their thooms,  
 At the Bridal o' Balgownie.

The Braidgate sparks cam' braw and spruce,  
 Frae counter-board and countin' hoose,  
 And bailies big and deacons douce,  
 To the Bridal o' Balgownie.  
 They cam' frae north—they cam' frae south,  
 Frae yont the Month, and Tap o' Noth,  
 To cram their craps, and slock their drouth,  
 To the Bridal o' Balgownie.

There is no poetry here, but there is song—the very words sing themselves; there are as much go and lilt in them as “Drumnagarrow” himself could have put into “Loch Errochside”—the tune appointed to the song. The same may be said of his serious songs, with this addition, that they evince true feeling on the writer's part—another requisite in real song. They are no inspirations at second-hand—verses about what the author would perhaps like to feel, and what he ought to feel because others have felt it, but which he utterly fails to feel. Witness the following fine song, a fit companion to “John Anderson, my Jo”:—

Thou'rt sair alter'd now, May,  
 Thou'rt sair alter'd now,  
 The rose is wither'd frae thy cheek,  
 The wrinkle's on thy brow;



And grey hath grown thy locks o' jet,  
 Sae shining wont to be,  
 Thou'rt alter'd sair—but, May, thou'rt yet  
 The May o' yore to me.

Thy voice is faint and low, May,  
 That aft in former time  
 Hath woke the wild bird's envious chant,  
 The echo's amorous chime ;  
 Thy e'e hath lost its early light,  
 My star in ither years,  
 That aye hath beam'd sae kindly bright,  
 To me thro' smiles and tears.

For a' the signs that show, May,  
 The gloamin' o' our day,  
 I lo'ed thee young—I lo'e thee yet,  
 My ain auld wifie, May ;  
 Nae dearer hope hae I than this,  
 Beyond the day we die,  
 Thy charms shall bloom again to bless  
 My halidome on hie.

As has been already hinted at, Imlah never married. Why, we are not told. Certain it is, judging from his songs and from what we know of his social character, he was no misogynist—nay, we believe he was no old bachelor by choice. There is a certain “Sweet Mary that lives on the Braes o' the Don,” which we follow through his pages :—

O! meet me at yon bush o' broom,  
 Wi' bells o' gowd busk'd gaily ;  
 Be moonlight gleam or mirkest gloom,  
 Upon the hill and valley.  
 When the wearie warld has sunk to sleep,  
 There will thy true love tarry ;  
 For thee thy plighted troth to keep,  
 Then meet me there—my Mary!

In another song his “fond, enamoured theme” takes a pleading turn : he seeks a heart for one he has lost :—

Nae worldly wealth hae I for thee,  
 Nor even now a heart to gie,  
 For that thy charms has stown frae me—  
 My bonnie, blithesome Mary!

Love's thermometer is very sensitive—at one time he is bewailing his hopeless condition, and again he is jubilant because

his love is returned—or he fancies it is, and he bursts out into that fine lyric, at one time so popular with the public through the singing of Templeton and other eminent vocalists:—

There lives a young lassie  
 Far down in yon glen,  
 And I lo'e that lassie  
 As nae ane may ken ;  
 O ! a saint's faith may vary,  
 But faithful I'll be,  
 For weel I lo'e Mary,  
 An' Mary lo'es me.

Not only, as is always the case, is the loved one idealised, and qualities and perfections attributed to her that are not quite so patent to the eyes of others as they are to the love-glamoured eyes of the victim (were not Burns's immortalised heroines reckoned somewhat commonplace in the eyes of their contemporaries ?), but all her surroundings are heightened and brightened in the lover's eye. Her very home is different from all others:—

Home of her, at eve or early,  
 Lov'd so deeply—lov'd so dearly,  
 Wildly fair when morn is shining !  
 Softly sweet when day's declining !  
 There the Summer brightest bloometh,  
 There the Winter gentlest gloometh,  
 Angels seem to watch so wary  
 Day and night the Home of Mary.

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How blest the gowans down yon glen,  
 They kiss the little feet o' Mary,  
 The birds that hush their music when  
 They hear the voice mair sweet o' Mary !  
 Ye stars that light the trysts o' love,  
 Say, saw ye ever onie lassie  
 Sae like yoursel's or aught above,  
 As Mary is—my bonnie lassie ?

\* \* \* \* \*

My Mary's looks—my Mary's love—  
 They make this earth a heaven to me ;  
 I kenna how they fare above,  
 But here mair bless'd I may na be.  
 I seek nae better world than this,  
 Wi' sic an angel for mine ain ;—  
 I couldna dream o' dearer bliss  
 Than love and be beloved again.

If, however, he wanted his heaven on earth, and “Mary’s” love the requisite, he did not get it. His loved one married another! Artemus Ward tells us “they frequently do”, and we suppose that it is all quite right and proper that they should do so:—

Young Mary by the burn,  
 I lo’ed her o’er them a’!  
 But Mary by the burn,  
 She’s wedded and awa’,  
 She’s wedded and awa’,  
 And I maun hope nae mair.  
 But live to love thro’ a’  
 The future o’ despair!  
 \* \* \* \* \*  
 Young Mary to yon burn,  
 That wimples in the west,  
 May never mair return  
 To bless as she hath bless’d.  
 My blessings gang the gate  
 My love and peace ha’e gane,  
 Tho’ mine maun be his fate  
 Wha lives and loves in vain.

Do these songs tell a story? Did he love in vain? If he did, he certainly did not live in vain; but, like every human being whose heart is not seared with selfishness, he found to his comfort and happiness that

’Tis better to have loved and lost  
 Than never to have loved at all.

Many of Imlah’s songs have enjoyed a long and lasting popularity, and are to be found in all the collections of Scottish songs. “O, gin I were where the Gadie rins”, is a great favourite with natives of the north all the world over, and it will be remembered by many as the favourite quick march of the Aberdeen City Rifle battalion a quarter of a century ago. At the first great volunteer review in Edinburgh the approach of the Granite City contingent at the march past was made known to the spectators long before they appeared in view by the notes of their favourite march echoing from the rugged Salisbury Crags and the walls of “auld Holyrood”. And he is but a poor Scotsman whose nerves have not thrilled with pride in his country at the blood-stirring song:—



The Land o' Cakes ! the Land o' Cakes !  
 O ! monie a blessing on it,  
 Its hills and howes—its linns and lakes,  
 The bagpipe and the bonnet ;  
 The braes that bred the kilted Clans,  
 That cowed the Dane and Roman,  
 Whase sons hae still the hearts and han's  
 To welcome friend or foeman !  
 Then swell the sang—baith loud and lang,  
 As echo answered never,  
 And fill ye up and toast the cup,  
 The Land o' Cakes for ever !

This is the true patriotic ring—genuine love of country, not the sentimental patriotism which is a compound of vanity and superstition. The same note is sounded in his “ Albin ” :—

Know ye the land where the clan-chequered plaiden,  
 Like the raiment of Rome, clads the stout mountain men,  
 And mantles the sunny-haired, blythe, blue-eyed maiden,  
 Whose loveliness lightens the gloom of the glen ?  
 What land then is that—but mine own Northern Land ;  
 And though cold be its clime—wild and sterile its strand,  
 The home of my heart is the country of Cæel,  
 The mountains of Morven—the glens of the Gäel.

In his 1841 volume he has a longish bit of verse in praise of Scotch fiddlers in general, and one Strachan in particular, better known as “ Drumnagarrow ”, who for many years enjoyed a high fame throughout Aberdeenshire as a performer of reels and strathspeys. In these verses he showed himself thoroughly sound and orthodox for “ auld use and wont ” in Scotch music, and if he favoured “ flings and springs ”, he was decidedly inimical to “ close-bosomed whirls ” :—

Music, 'tis said, can rive the rock,  
 And rend the trunk o' gnarl'd oak !  
 This will I say, and nae in joke,  
 A strain frae Strachan  
 Will mak' a man o' stiffest stock  
 As swack's a saughen.

Wae worth the wretch ! foul be his fa' !  
 Our ancient springs wad chase awa'  
 Frae lowly cot or lofty ha'  
 Our rants and reels—  
 To wanton waltzes bring us a',  
 And queer quadrilles.

Gie me the gear that gars me feel  
 The life o' life, frae head to heel!  
 To whirl thro' jig, strathspey, or reel,  
     As licht's a feather.  
 Quadrilles and waltzes to the deil  
     May gang thegether.

Another lengthy piece in the same volume, the "Bogle o' Banchory", is only remarkable as being written in a comical, mock-heroic style, with outrageous rhymes, which is unlike anything else in his published volumes. It refers to some marvellous occurrences which agitated the good folks of Banchory in the year 1838, and which inspired another "bard"—the "poet of Levatsglen"!

It would be strange if a Scottish poet of half a century ago did not sing the praises of the white wine of the country, and Imlah does not make the strange exception. The following sonnet is quaint:—

Spirit of Spirits!—glorious Glenlivat!  
 Yclept Peat Reek—alias the Barley Bree;  
 Accept my sonnet freely as I give it,  
 Thou Northern nectar—Scotland's *eau de vie*!  
 Divinest essence of all drinks divine,  
 Thou helicon of Scottish poesie!  
 Before a Highland still thy holy shrine,  
 Thy thirsty pilgrim fain would praise and *prie*.  
 Heart's blood of the long-bearded King of Grain,  
 John Barleycorn!—right royal stream--'twas thou  
 Inspired the matchless Poet of the Plough;  
 What sober Bard sings now so sweet a strain?  
 At tavern table—yea on *dais* or *divot*,  
 Devoutly will I drink thee—guid Glenlivat!

And it would be equally strange if he did not show somewhat of that higher and deeper life which is equally characteristic of Scotsmen poetic or prosaic. His poems "Heaven", which we have already quoted, "The Lament of David", "He was a Man of Sorrows", &c., are above the average of sacred poetry.

We conclude with one of the best "local" lays, for, as we have already said, his love for Aberdeen was intense. As he says himself addressing "Nature"—

There's not a scene beneath the sun, upon the shore or sea,  
 In every change but hath a charm for him who loveth thee.  
 The sighing breeze, the singing birds, 'mid trees in greenest trim,  
 The murmuring brook, the wailing wind, are music all for him.  
 Where nature blooms, or beams or breathes, enraptured will he roam,  
 Yet dearest be his early haunts around his native home.

Come fill a bumper o' the best  
 That man can mak' frae grape or grain,  
 Let *clean cap out* our zeal attest  
 For Deeside dighting o'er again ;  
 And here's a stoup, and hame-o'er strain,  
 For social souls, at bowl or board,  
 That winna gang against the grain  
 Wi' them wha live in Bon-Accord.

Some grun' is gude for wood and wheat,  
 And others rich in coal and airn ;  
 For neeps and nowte, for stane and peat,  
 Match Buchan and the Dancin' Cairn !  
 Or folk, frae bearded man to bairn,  
 By thocht and thrift to hive and hoard—  
 For horn, corn, woo, and yarn,  
 Mak' busy folk in Bon-Accord.

Banff ne'er was dung for bottl'd skate,  
 And Athole ne'er was bang'd for brose ;  
 But coast or country ne'er has beat  
 Our ain for haddocks or for hose—  
 Cauld kail, and castocks that compose  
 A dainty dish for loon or lord,  
 And never be they scant wi' those  
 Wha coup the cog in Bon-Accord.

If back to ancient times we turn,  
 Our bauld forbears did weapons draw  
 To fecht for Bruce at Bannockburn,  
 And be the heroes of Harlaw !  
 In vain did Donald's bagpipes blaw  
 Before the "braif toun's" burges sword ;  
 Tho' Drum and Davidson did fa',  
 A proud day was't for Bon-Accord.

The Forbes and the Farquharson  
 Are ours, and baith are names o' note ;  
 By Bogie, Deveron, Dee, and Don,  
 The Gordon's hae the guidin' o't ;



Frae Border Tweed to John o' Groat  
 Can lines o' meikle fame afford;  
 But nane mair free o' blur or blot  
 Than what belang to Bon-Accord.

Still may Auld Reekie her renown  
 Uphaud for lancet, law, and lear;  
 "Let Glasgow flourish"! trade and town,  
 Wi' ship and shuttle, steam and steer;  
 May Paisley goods bring Paisley gear,  
 The touns on Tay still heap their hoard;  
 And nae waur tidings may we hear  
 Of our "braif toun" o' Bon-Accord.

"Then Aberdeen and time till't," as  
 The auld wife said at Loch o' Skene,  
 The city o' St Nicholas,  
 And be it aye what it hath been,  
 As meikle famed for beets and sheen  
 As social sons at bowl and board—  
 Here's the four Bows o' Aberdeen,  
 The braw, "braif toun" o' Bon-Accord.

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