

**WILLIAM GEDDES,  
BLAIRGOWRIE.**



WILLIAM GEDDES.

**ARTIST  
AND  
BONHOMME**

## XXVII.

### WILLIAM GEDDES, BLAIRGOWRIE.

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Come forth into the light of things,  
Let Nature be your teacher.—WORDSWORTH.

It is interesting to note the large percentage of house-painters in Blairgowrie during the present generation who have proved themselves the possessors of outstanding ability in the domain of art proper. At the head of the list, "facile princeps," stands David Farquharson, A.R.S.A., whose paintings of Scottish scenery are amongst the most charming to be seen at the Exhibitions and most sought after in the market. He served his apprenticeship to the house-painting business with the late G. M. Dickson, Blairgowrie, whose humble workshop seems to have had some occult power of its own for inducing and fostering artistic tendencies, seeing that not only do we have the artist named, but, as his fellow-apprentices, William Geddes, whose name heads this article; William Dickson (son of G. M. Dickson), whose landscape and fish pictures are yearly growing in public favour; and James Reid, a native of Rattray, who has developed into one of Scotland's most successful decorators, as witness the interior of the M'Ewan Hall, Edinburgh, which is his work. Mention must be made also of the late John Bridie (dealt with in a former article) and Matthew Pollock, still at his trade in Blairgowrie, but with some very fair fish pictures and other artistic work to his credit. William Geddes

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## Blairgowrie and Strathmore Worthies :

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DIED AT THE EARLY AGE OF 43,  
and there is as little pleasure as profit speculating what he might have become had he lived longer ; it is sufficient for us that he lived long enough to do such excellent work as has left behind him regrets that he was not spared to accomplish more, together with a host of kindly remembrances of his genial personality. He was born in 1841, and gave early indications of his special bent, which probably suggested the happy idea of sending him to the house-painting, and thus giving him the chance of painting his own name on the scroll of fame in as bold letters as he could. In July 1853 he accordingly started off on his "career" with 2s a week, and the afore-said capital fellow-apprentices to keep him company. His time expiring, he went to Edinburgh, and while following his trade is said to have attended some classes there, but this could not have been for any length of time. The most important event here, there is little doubt, was his marriage, which took place when he was 23 years of age, and it so happened that the clergyman who performed the ceremony—Dr Macdonald, North Leith F.C.—was the same who, as minister of the First F.C., Blairgowrie, had baptised him. After his marriage, feeling encouraged by the recognition which he had been receiving, he resolved to devote himself entirely to the art he loved so well, returned to Blairgowrie, and settled down there. In

### HIS EARLY CAREER,

figure and genre work, mostly groups illustrative of Scottish life and manners, and with a humorous turn, engaged his brush—his unsurpassed fish pictures, by which he is chiefly known, arriving later on. Amongst public recognitions of his merits may be mentioned a gold medal

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and £50 for the best genre painting in the R.S.A. Exhibition of 1882, and the bronze medal and diploma (highest award) for a fish painting at the Fisheries Exhibition (London) in 1883. The best paid commission that ever came his way was in connection with Andrew Carnegie's first return visit to his native town, Dunfermline, when a painting of the free-handed millionaire and his family was executed, for which, it is understood, the Blairgowrie artist received £500. Another memorable episode in his life was a couple of months' study at the Louvre in 1871, just after the Franco-Prussian war. One day he was arrested as a spy. It was entertaining to hear his account of this historic affair; how the gens d'armes marched him off to the Hotel de Ville, while he tried all the way to explain that he was only an artist; the suave, but firm, Frenchmen, who pretended they did not understand good broad Scotch; and the providential appearance of a brither Scot who could talk French, and was able to make it clear that our friend was un'Ecosais, non Anglais; the sudden conversion of the officials, their humiliation, and his jubilation, condescension, and glorification, finishing up by driving off in a cabriolet at the French nation's expense and amid a perfect ovation. He revisited the gay capital four years later. Geddes' nature was so thoroughly imaginative, and so sensitive to the

Love and beauty everywhere  
In all their moods and tenses,

that he could have scored success in many other walks of art beside those which claimed his first allegiance had he so chosen. As

### A FIGURE AND FISH PAINTER

—more particularly the latter—he is so well known that nothing more is required here. He

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showed marked ability as a modeller, also, one of his best essays in that line being the "sweir-tree"—two boys, seated, with a stick between them, and tugging at each other for victory—which was exhibited in both Dundee and Edinburgh. That he could wield a facile pen all his correspondents know; the arrival of one of his letters was always an event. Above all, he was the most sociable of mortals, a witty and original conversationalist, with a perennial fount of first-class humour. He abounded in good stories, which never lost anything in the retelling, and never failed to "fetch" his audience. There was not one of the many brothers of the brush who put in an appearance at Blairgowrie as regularly as the swallows but would sooner have missed seeing Loch Clunie or the Muirton or Haermyre than passing a night with Geddes, king of good fellows; and it was in such congenial company as that of David Farquharson, the late G. W. Johnstone, Hugh Alan, William Dickson, Tom Scott, Michael Bown, James Spindler, T. Austen Brown, and T. Burnett—nearly all Academicians or Associates of the R.S.A.—whether at work in the open or over a pipe or glass after the light was gone, that he was to be seen and heard at his very best.

### GEDDES' STYLE OF NARRATION

counted for so much in his reminiscences—he was a splendid mimic among other things—that it suggests substituting a palette of colours for a picture to retail them. That reference recalls one of his own experiences. On one occasion a swell critic, just stepped out of a fashion-book, called to inspect a picture our friend was at, and while backing away from it to get a better view, inconsiderately spoiled 5s worth of good paints by sitting down on the

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artist's palette which was on a chair behind him. Three "p's" came to grief—the palette, the paints, and the pants, and the upshot was that a pair of Geddes' unmentionables had to be requisitioned before the exquisite could appear in the streets. As the Blairgowrie artist was under medium height and the caller near six feet high, the result may be imagined. He used to make a good thing of the experiences of two Blair notables, Hugh and William, slater and mason respectively, who started off one morning for a job at Merklands, but succumbed to the attractions of Bridge of Cally Inn for three days. On two days they struggled bravely forward about a couple of miles, but were that "sair forfochen" they could not walk another step—in a northerly direction—but had to return south to the inn for recuperation. On the third morning, when they awoke and discovered their whereabouts, said Hugh to his companion in tribulation—"Ay, Willum, as Scripture saith, 'And the evening and the morning were the third day.'" While still an apprentice, an old lady relative, not noted for her generosity, got our friend to devote all his spare time for weeks to papering and painting her house—on the strength of huge and mysterious promises—"juist wait, and he would see, he would," what she had in store for him. Well, when

### THE JOB WAS FINISHED

entirely to her satisfaction, he got a small packet put into his hand very impressively. "There, laddie," said the old angel, "tak' that, and I'm sure ye weel deserve it!" After many speculations on the way home as to whether it was a sovereign or half-sovereign or only a couple of shillings, he opened the packet to find two nice cough lozenges inside. He had a

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## Blairgowrie and Strathmore Worthies:

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tricycle for a while, received as payment for a picture—and it was a wonder and a terror under his control. He rode it as if it was a horse and he was out on a steeplechase. Fixing on a point he wanted to get at, straight for it he went, lifting or pitching the ironmongery over dykes and hedges, dragging it over ploughed fields and through ditches in a manner that would have astonished the makers. At one moment it was a reaper and binder, at another a potato digger, or it might be only a useful road scraper, but whatever it happened to be there was always infinite sport in it for Geddes and his confreres. One of his strongest characteristics was a love of animals. He seemed to have some secret power over them, and was every now and then catching rabbits, squirrels, birds, and other creatures of the open. He had a pet monkey once, but it died on his hands, and for a while he was inconsolable. This trait in his character came out touchingly in his will, in which he left everything to his widow with the exception of a favourite terrier which he bequeathed to a friend.

### ONE OF THE CLEVEREST

of his *jeux d'esprit* was in the form of a letter to a Dundee friend; it got into the papers at the time, and is here reproduced.

“Dear T—,—A curious fellow turned up here the other day—with dash a copper or even a pouch to hold such an article. He wasn't even in rags, but was literally without a single rag to cover his nakedness. He either could not or would not give any name, and reason he would not, but kicked up a bonnie how-d'ye-do, until for very peace sake we were glad to provide him with some clothes. With difficulty we got the

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fellow put into decent condition, then offered him something to eat; but at this he got perfectly furious, and would take devil a thing but drink. I believe the rascal lives on drink only. He appears to be a very old fellow, too, for he is absolutely bald-headed and toothless. He gave my wife a bonnie fright, I can tell you, and the doctor has been in attendance upon her ever since, but has hopes of her getting over the nervous shock. He thinks that we should see that means are taken to prevent another such unexpected visit. The impudent fellow has taken up his quarters here anyhow, and, so far as I can see, is not likely to budge for some time. I hope that Mrs T—— and you will come through as soon as possible, and advise us what we should do with the fellow.”

The recipient of the letter was somewhat puzzled at its contents, as were all his male friends, more or less. Finally the letter was submitted to three of their wives, who promptly designated them a set of donkeys. Beneath all his fun and drollery and bonhomie, however, were

### THE RADICAL FEATURES

of our friend's character—his perfect honesty and truth and deep sympathetic nature. It was impossible to conceive of his ever doing or saying anything mean; and as he was the most trustworthy of friends, so was he also the most affectionate of husbands and fathers, which made the parting all the more difficult when it came, as it did, after a long and trying illness, one night in October 1884, with wife and children assembled around his bedside.

His oldest son, Ewan, is a young artist of promise, who has exhibited in London, Dundee, Edinburgh, Glasgow, &c. He is an R.S.W.,

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and advancing in his father's footsteps—landscape and genre being his particular forte. "Marah," the pen-name of the deceased artist's oldest daughter, is familiar to readers of her bright little stories and sketches in the "People's Friend" and other periodicals. Heredity counts for some little thing after all.