

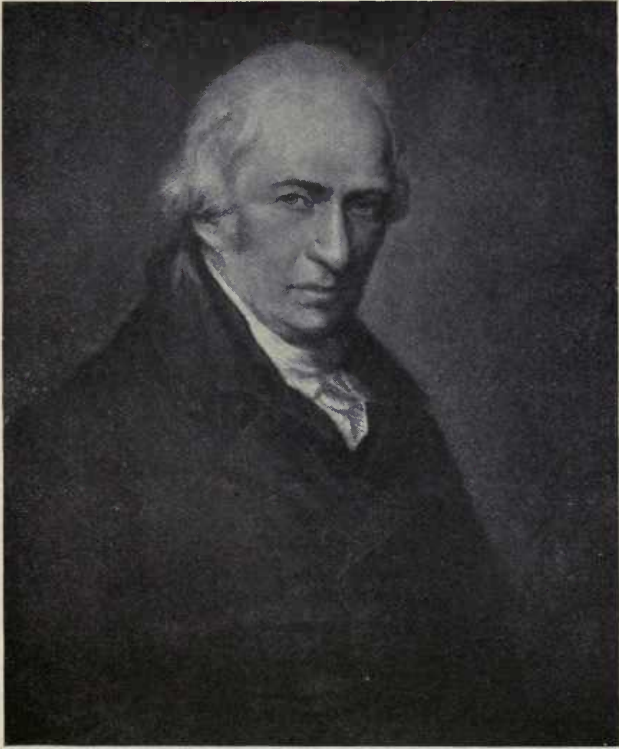
22. The Roll of Honour.

It used to be said that one could not throw a stone in Paisley without striking a poet, and there is more truth in this hyperbole than in most. In fact the whole county is marvellously rich in literary associations; and yet, curiously enough, there is not one name quite in the front rank of literary fame. Instead of one star of the first magnitude in an otherwise empty sky, we have a whole constellation of lesser lights; yet the total literary radiance from Renfrewshire, in spite of the small size of the county, will bear comparison with that from any other shire in Scotland. The greatest names connected with the county are not those of literary men. Two of her sons stand head and shoulders above the rest, Scotland's noblest hero, the patriot Wallace, and her greatest inventor, James Watt. Although attempts have been made to dispute Wallace's birthplace, in all probability he was born at Elderslie near the place that is still pointed out as his home. In all Scottish history his is the grandest figure :

“The manlyast man, the starkest off persoun
Leyffand he was ; and als stud in sic rycht
We traist weill God his dedis had in sycht.”

The most famous of Scottish warriors in things spiritual was also connected with Renfrewshire. Though born in the east, John Knox was descended from the Knoxes of Ranfurly.

James Watt was born in Greenock and lived there till he was eighteen years of age. He went to Glasgow



James Watt

in 1754, and found employment in the little shop of a mechanic who called himself an optician. Here Professor

Anderson handed him the model of the Newcomen engine to mend, and so originated one of the greatest discoveries in the history of the world. Watt's memory is kept green in his native town in many ways. A statue, an institution, a monument, a great dock, all bear his name.

The noble house of Sempill, long connected with the county, illustrates how persistently the golden vein of



Castle Sempill, Lochwinnoch

literature outcrops in some families. Robert Sempill, born about 1530, was one of the most noted partizans of the Reforming party, and assisted the cause by writing numerous satires, which are coarse and brutal, but at the same time pithy and clever. A "gude, swyne hogge" was one of the mildest of his terms. Then came three

generations of Sempills, James, Robert, and Francis, all of whom won distinction by their writings. Sir James, nicknamed "the Dancer" by John Knox owing to his courtly accomplishments, assisted King James VI in the preparation of the *Basilicon Doron*, and wrote polemical works against the Catholic church. Robert is best remembered by his famous poem, *Habbie Simpson, Piper of Kilbarchan*, in a metre which has been traced back to the troubadours :

“ At clerk-plays, when he wont to come,
His pipe played trimly to the drum,
Like bykes o’ bees he gart it bum,
And tuned his reed,
Now all our pipers may sing dumb
Sin’ Habbie’s deid.”

Both Ramsay and Burns were influenced by this poem, and copied the form of it, which became characteristic of Scottish vernacular verse. Robert’s son Francis became Sheriff-depute of Renfrewshire, and wrote many poems, although the authorship of some attributed to him is doubtful. *Maggie Lauder* is probably his best known song.

Robert Wodrow, author of the *History of the Sufferings of the Church of Scotland*, became minister of Eastwood parish in 1703. Though not quite free from prejudice or credulousness, his work is of very high value for his period. It is only natural that a parish so much associated with the Covenanters as Eaglesham should have produced a historian of those who suffered in the "killing times." John Howie was a farmer near Eaglesham and

came of a family that had undergone persecution for adherence to the Covenant. His *Scots Worthies* was at one time one of the most widely read books in Scotland, and even at the present time when interest in the early struggles of the church is waning, the simple, direct, and vivid style of the book gives it a high place as pure literature. From the same district came another book that enjoyed a popularity almost equal to that of the *Scots Worthies*. This was *The Course of Time*, the author of which, Robert Pollok, was born in Eaglesham parish, and educated at Mearns and Fenwick schools. On Pollok's long poem the dust now rests undisturbed, for it has the one vital fault of literature, it is dull. Whole sections resemble a dreary sermon put into tedious blank verse, and yet true poetic gems can be found if the rubbish be sifted with patience.

John Wilson, the author of *The Clyde*, was born in Lanarkshire, but found a home for his later years in Greenock. Like the river whose beauties he sang, he started life among the Southern Uplands, and came to rest where the Clyde enters the sea. He was schoolmaster in turn at Lesmahagow, Rutherglen, and Greenock. The magistrates and the minister of Greenock, however, despising everything without a money value, stipulated that he should abandon "the profane and unprofitable art of poem-making." The combination of adjectives is typical of the true barbarian. Wilson loyally kept his pledge but remained an embittered man, and henceforth, in his own words, passed "the dreary days of an obscure life, the contempt of shopkeepers and brutish skippers."

Although Thomas Campbell was born in Glasgow, in his youth many of his summers were spent in Renfrewshire. To the end of his life he retained tender memories of his boyhood's haunts beside the pleasant banks of the Cart. Indeed the Cart should be the sacred stream of the shire, for by its banks linger memories, not only of Campbell, but of Tannahill, Christopher North, and Alexander Smith.

John Galt, author of *The Annals of the Parish*, was born in Irvine, but in his eleventh year he went with his parents to Greenock. He was employed in the Custom House there until he determined to make his fortune in London, but he returned to Greenock, broken in health, to spend his last days. There is a fountain in his memory on the Esplanade.

Among the many poets of Paisley Tannahill takes first place. He was born in the town, and there he spent most of his life and wrote most of his songs. His best poetry too deals with the scenes among which his life was passed, the Braes o' Gleniffer, and "the birks o' Stanley-shaw."

In Paisley also, in the High Street, Christopher North was born. His remarkable personality is perhaps more interesting now than much of his writing. He was strongly attached to the surroundings where his boyhood was spent, and described Mearns under the name of "our parish" in his *Recreations*. In the manse of that parish he was educated, and the countryside he describes in an impassioned apostrophe as the "fairest of Scotland's thousand parishes." Alexander Smith is also associated with

Paisley. Although born in Kilmarnock he was brought up in Paisley and Glasgow, and he describes the former town under the name of Greysley in *Alfred Hagar's Household*.



Professor John Wilson

(*Christopher North*)

James Young, the founder of the oil-shale industry of Scotland, had his house in Renfrewshire for a time. James Smith of Jordanhill is known to the geologists of many countries by his work on the arctic shells of the Clyde clay beds.