THE LIFE AND CHARACTER OF JAMES VI.

[We make ourselves debtors for the following sketch to an article in the Edinburgh Magazine of February, 1826. It is based principally on "The Historie and Life of King James the Sext," a quarto volume of 386 pages, printed in 1825 for the Bannatyne Club, narrating the affairs of Scotland from 1566 to 1596, with a short continuation to 1617, and composed apparently by three or more successive writers very soon after the events; and all the antique quotations or references in the article, except when otherwise indicated, are to this 'Historie.' We do not concur in all the opinions of the Article; yet we think it as a whole much nearer the truth than the estimates and representations of the pedant king made by the great majority of Scotish historical writers.]

JAMES was born in the Castle of Edinburgh, on the 19th of June, 1566. His birth did not heal the breach which previously existed betwixt his parents, and which the murder of Rizzio, under the auspices, if not with the assistance of his father, Darnley, on the 9th of March preceding, had widened and confirmed. Various causes have been assigned for the unfortunate disagreement of the royal pair, but the truth seems to have been, that Queen Mary had married a vain young man, who was too weak minded to make a proper use of his elevation; and that amidst the factions of the period, the wife and husband attached themselves to different parties, who were perfidious enough to make each the instrument of their own selfish purposes. Certain it is, that very soon after their marriage Mary evinced little anxiety for her husband's company, and that Darnley took very little pains either to preserve or to regain her affections. He allowed himself to be persuaded that Rizzio was a more favourite object of the Queen's attentions than himself, and the unfortunate musician was the victim of his revenge. We are far from thinking that Darnley had any good grounds for depriving Rizzio of life, yet, if we may credit the contemporary narrative of Sir James Melvil, the Queen displayed an immoderate portion

of sorrow for the death of her lutenist. "So many great sighs she would give, that it was pity to hear her."* After this period she seems to have regarded her husband with no other feelings than those of hatred, and accordingly he was not even present at the ceremony of the baptism of James, which took place at Stirling on the 22d of August following. Within a few months afterwards, during which he followed the Queen "whithersoever she rode, but *got no good countenance*,"† he was murdered by Bothwell at a house in the suburbs of Edinburgh, (9th February, 1567,) "and uponn the fyft day thereftер, his body was bureit in the tombe of the Kings at Halyruidhous, quyetlie in the night, without any kynd of solemnitie or murnyng hard amang all the personis at court."‡ The conduct of Mary before the perpetration of this abominable crime, her apparent preparation for the event, and the little concern which it excited in her mind, joined with her sudden marriage to Bothwell, who was even then generally recognised as the murderer, created an impression in the minds of her subjects that she was privy to Bothwell's designs, and raised against her feelings of dislike to which she ultimately fell a victim.

Internal divisions now disturbed the country more violently than before. The name and safety of the young Prince James were assumed by various noblemen, (Morton, Mar, Athol, and others,) as a cloak to their designs; troops were assembled by them, to carry their purposes into effect; and after inducing the Queen to surrender, and to quit Bothwell, they hurried her to the Castle of Lochleven as a prisoner. In July 1567, they crowned James at Stirling, and in the following month the Earl of Murray (the Queen's bastard brother) was appointed Regent of the kingdom. He adopted various

* Melvil's Memoirs. Edition 1735, p. 148.

† Melvil's Memoirs, p. 154.

‡ Historie, p. 7. Birrel's Diary, p. 7. Balfour's Annals, Vol. I., p. 336.

strong measures for the safety of the people; but the Queen's escape from Lochleven Castle, in May 1568, led to the battle of Langside, between her partisans and those of Murray, in which she was defeated, and from which she fled into England, where she remained a prisoner until 1587, when she fell a victim to the policy and envy of her cousin, Queen Elizabeth. Murray, in 1570, was shot on the street of Linlithgow; and after Lennox and Mar had successively been appointed Regents, Morton, the most able politician and most selfish man of the whole party of the King, was proclaimed Regent in 1572. The troubles which agitated Scotland during this unhappy period, as well as the succeeding five years of Morton's Regency, we purposely omit, our limits being altogether inadequate to the slightest sketch of them.

In 1577 James, at the age of eleven, performed his first act of government, by accepting of Morton's resignation of the Regency. His management in this affair proves him to have been an adroit or a very docile boy; for Morton's request to resign was a mere feint, to acquire greater influence over James, and was never intended to be carried into effect. Accordingly, in the following year, he took advantage of his office of a councillor to expel the other nobles, who were hostile to him, from the King's presence, and to resume the government of the kingdom as before. He was violently opposed by the Chancellor, (Athol,) and an appeal to arms seemed to be unavoidable; but the King contrived to allay the rising storm, and to prevent bloodshed between the adherents of the hostile factions. In September 1579, James made his first public entry into Edinburgh; and though George IV., on his gracious visit to Scotland, was surrounded by splendour and magnificence, we doubt much if any part of the pageantry of 1822 is to be compared with the following:—"And withall, the haill streits war spred with flowres; and the forehowsis of the streits, be the whilks the King passit, war all hung with magnificent tapestrie, with payntit

historeis, and with the effigeis of noble men and women." James afterwards held a Parliament in Edinburgh, and created Lord D'Aubigny, of the House of Lennox, in France, Earl and afterwards Duke of Lennox, and appointed him Great Chamberlain of the kingdom, &c. Lennox was a great favourite with the King, and seems to have deserved the character given of him by Pinkerton, that he was "the most worthy and innocent of this Monarch's favourites."* Next to Lennox, Captain James Stewart, the second son of Lord Ochiltree, was most in favour with the King; he was a man of a very ambitious and enterprising character, or, in the words of the Historie, "he was of a prowd and arrogant mynd, and thoght na man to be his equall." His first exploit was directed against Morton, who was, in consequence, tried, condemned, and executed for the foreknowledge and concealment of Darnley's murder. His fortunes were pushed with great ardour, by various nobles and preachers, in the hope that he would prove a rival to Lennox in the King's affections; and as their efforts were ably seconded by his own address, he was soon created Earl of Arran, and wielded almost exclusively the government of the kingdom. His power alarmed even his friends, and they promoted a quarrel between Lennox and him, that they might rid themselves of both; but he deserted his supporters, and joined Lennox, and with him divided the King's favours and the kingdom's rule. However, "certayne unquyet people of the nobilitie war still devysing thair machinations againis the young King, and the new Duc of Lennox, and the Erle of Arran, how thay mycht shift thir thre from uthers severallie;" and they accomplished their wishes by conveying his Majesty, in August 1582, to the Castle of Ruthven, and from thence to Stirling, and by compelling him to issue "a warrand under his hand, charging Lennox to depairt fra Scotland."† Arran, in the

* Iconographia Scotica.

† Balfour's Annals, Vol. I., p. 374.

meantime, was committed to the Castle of Duplin. Lennox died soon after his return to France; and James lost no time in sending for his son and daughters, and installing the former in his father's honours and possessions, and marrying the latter to the Earls of Huntly and Mar.

Several previous commotions in our country were either stirred up or at least countenanced by England, and the watchful Elizabeth; and it was well understood that the Earl of Gowrie, and the other nobles who at present held the King under personal restraint, were in communication with the English Queen, whose ambassadors, supported by this faction, and by the "preachers of Edinburgh," (who now began to move somewhat too frequently in the political affairs of the time,) carried all measures they thought necessary to promote their own ends, and treated with contempt the ambassadors of France. James, however, in 1583, escaped from his self-created guardians, "and rayde with extreme diligence to the Castell of Sanctandrois, wharin he remanit in great secrecie, till sic nobles as he had writtin for cam to him with thair forces;" and as soon as he found himself safe, he banished Gowrie and his confederates, sent for the Earl of Arran, and published a well-penned proclamation to his subjects. Queen Elizabeth reproached him for his conduct to the banished nobles, and his reception of Arran; but he answered her ambassador in a strain of independence, with which the latter pretended to be satisfied, and most probably was so, as the embassy appears to have been got chiefly up for the purpose of obliging Gowrie and the other conspirators, and retaining and confirming them in the interest of the English Queen. Melvil seems to have thought that the English ambassador had another object in view, viz. to ascertain and report to his mistress the qualities of her royal successor;* and this opinion is certainly strengthened by the circumstances of the

* Memoirs, p. 296.

ambassador being her own secretary, and at that time loaded with years and infirmities, and of his declining all communication with every person in the Scotish Court, except his Majesty. Afterwards "the King convocat all his peaceabill prelates and nobles, and be thair generall voittis decernit the rayd of Ruthven to be manifest treasoun. The ministers, on the uther part, persuadit the people that it was a godly fact." Gowrie, Mar, and others, soon after broke out into open rebellion, and fortified Stirling; but, on the approach of the King's army, abandoned the town, and fled. Gowrie was apprehended, tried for treason, and on 4th May, 1584, beheaded at Stirling. The Earl of Arran seized on his estates. His adherents, Angus, Mar, and others, were declared, in a Parliament held on the 22d August following,* to have "committit and incurrit the crymes of treasoun and lesemaiestie;" and their estates were confiscated. Thus ended *the Rayd of Ruthven.*

James was now governed more completely than ever by the counsels of the Earl of Arran, and the measures of this intriguing minion were ably seconded by his wife, a beautiful but a profligate woman, whose passions and ambition knew no restraint. Her husband's fortunes were promoted by every disturbance; he was even guilty of involving men in treasonable practices, that he might seize on their estates—in one word, he grasped at boundless acquisitions, and his power seemed to be firmly established. According to Hume of Godscroft,† "In the civille government there was none now but the Earle of Arran; hee lacked the name of King, but hee ruled as absolutely, and commande more imperiously, than any King, under the shadow of the King's authority, and the pretext that all that hee did was for the King's good and safety. Hee had gotten before the keeping of the Castle of

* Folio Acts, Vol. III, p. 344.
† Melvil's Memoirs, p. 310. Balfour's Annals, Vol. I, p 383.

Stirlin; he behooved also to have the Castle of Edinburgh in his power. Hee was Chancellor of Scotland;—he did whatsoever hee pleased; if there were no law for it, it was all one, he caused make a law to serve his ends. It was observed, that his lady said to one who alledged there was no law for doing of what shee desired to have done, *It is no matter*, (said shee,) *wee shall cause make an Act of Parliament for it.*"* But powerful and unprincipled as Arran was, he soon became the victim of a plot, contrived by men who, by his means, were then living in exile at the court of England—the Presbyterian ministers and the Scotish nobles. Queen Elizabeth had found him less subservient to her interests than she wished, and she therefore forwarded the enterprise by contributions of money and the exertions of her ambassador in Scotland; and every thing was so well conducted, that the confederated nobles arrived before Stirling without opposition, won the town and castle, came straight into the King's presence, "and all of them desyrit the King's pardoun for that hardie enterpryse, whilk was grantit rather for feare nor favour." Arran escaped into France; and the confederated nobles used their triumph in a very moderate manner. James, as usual, surrendered his mind into the keeping of another, and Secretary Maitland seems to have been Arran's successor in the meritorious office.

Towards the end of 1586, James received intelligence of the condemnation of his mother, by the English queen, and he immediately despatched two ambassadors to get the sentence annulled. "In the moneth of Februar 1587, the ambassadors returnit from England with ansuer, that the Queyne of Scotland sould be saif till the Queyne of England sould send hir awin ambassador heir in Scotland; but how sone she had sure adverteisment that our ambassadors war returnit hayme, immediatelie the Queyne of Scotland was put to

* History of the House of Douglas and Angus, p. 390.

death." James put himself into "a dule weid of purple for a certayne dayis," convened a parliament, "where all the estates cried out in a great rage to set forward to revenge that unkindly and unlawful murder," and actually refused to receive the ambassador sent by Elizabeth, with an absurd story, that Davison, her secretary, was the sole author of the foul deed;—"but after his Majesty had ripely considered the best and worst of that deed, remembered himself of the many friends he had in England who had no hand in his mother's death, he thought it not just to trouble the peace and quiet of the kingdom for the deed of a few who guided the Queen and court, he being thereof himself apparent heir."* Our historian is not well pleased with this peaceable, though selfish resolution of James; and, accordingly, when an English ambassador was received in the following year, he writes with some bitterness of feeling: "Thus all memorie of Queyne Marei's murther was bureit. The King ressavit thair ambassador, as I have sayd, and be his persuasioun is becum thair yeirlie pensioner. What honestie the commonweill ressavis heirby, I think the posteritie sall better knaw than that this tyme can judge,"† &c. But James, who was always a lover of peace, bethought himself of other employment than our historian would force upon him, and began seriously to look around him for a wife. Ambassadors were despatched to Denmark, and in August 1589 he was married by proxy to Anne, a Danish princess. Stormy weather obliged her to take refuge in Norway; and James was so gallant, or impatient, that he encountered the dangers of a winter voyage, and married her in person. This brave act, the only one which distinguished the career of the peaceable monarch, seems to have cured his passion for adventure; he did not choose to encounter the waves a second time during winter, but tarried and feasted in Denmark with his newly-married

* Melvil's Memoirs, p. 345—9. † Ibid. 241.

spouse, and reached his own dominions only in the summer of 1590. The poor witches of Scotland were the only sufferers from the storms which impeded Queen Anne's progress, "dyvers being executit to the death," for their officious interference with the winds of Heaven.

An unruly nobleman, Francis, Earl of Bothwell, gave rise to the only extraordinary incidents which distinguished the two following years of James' public life, by his repeated attempts to secure the King's person. In domestic life, James seems to have displayed an unworthy portion of jealousy; and in consequence, a young nobleman, the Earl of Murray, "quhom the Queyne, more rashlie than wyslie, had commendit in the King's heiringe with too many epithetts of a proper and gallant man," was put to death by the Earl of Huntlie, who surrendered himself for trial, but was almost instantly liberated, on "averring that he had done nothing but by the King's Majestie's commissione."* In addition to these troubles, he was beset by his old foes, the ministers of Edinburgh, who urged numerous complaints against various noblemen, for entertaining Popish tenets, and so far succeeded as to procure the arrest of some, and the execution of others, on the ground of a papistical correspondence with Spain. They grew bolder in their demands, in proportion as James seemed to favour them, and at length interfered so directly in matters of state, that he was obliged to check them, and to appeal to his subjects against their pretensions.

An event now occurred, which, for a short time, united or at least restrained all parties—the birth of Prince Henry, who was afterwards highly and deservedly praised by poets and

* Balfour's Annals, Vol. I., p. 390. It is but fair to mention, that Balfour's statement of the cause of Murray's murder is not supported by the authority either of the author of the "Historie," or of Robert Birrel; and that Melvil attributes the deed to a family feud, and speaks of the commission, under which Huntly afterwards sheltered himself, as one given to him, "to pursue the Earl of Bothwell and his partakers."

statesmen, by royalists and republicans, in one word, by men of the most opposite political principles. But the breathing-time thus afforded seemed to add vigour to the hostile measures afterwards resorted to. Huntly, Errol, and others in the North, defeated the King's lieutenant, and Bothwell advanced to Leith with 500 horsemen. Surrounded with difficulties, and unable to extricate himself, James "came to sermon, and thair, in the kirk, maid great instance to the people, that they sould assist him with thair gudewillis and strenth to suppres his ennemie Bothwell," and he was successful. He led his troops against Bothwell; and though he could not boast of victory, he reaped all the advantage of a triumph, his enemy being obliged to retire to England. But his labours in the field were followed by new troubles in the council. The ministers were clamorous against the noblemen suspected of Popery, and at their request a Parliament was called, and Huntly, Angus, and others, were pronounced traitors; but, much against the wishes of the clergy, James was contented with this sentence, and devoted himself to pursuits much more congenial to his nature;—he "had his haill mynd bent for reparatioun of the Castell of Sterling, and to prepare all glorious things necessar for the triumphe of the baptisme of the yong Prince." He was prevailed upon, however, to issue a proclamation to please the clergy, and then, with great pomp, he celebrated the baptism of his son. The ministers of Edinburgh, taking advantage of the proclamation, persuaded Argyle to attack Huntly; but the latter defeated Argyle's forces, and secured considerable plunder. James afterwards proceeded to the North, and, by levying fines on his rebellious subjects, restored peace. He returned to Edinburgh, but only to encounter new difficulties. The Queen, the Chancellor, and others, had concerted a plan to withdraw the Prince from the custody of his guardian, the Earl of Mar; but, by reasoning with her privately, and by reproaching the others separately, James destroyed the conspiracy. In the

course of a few weeks afterwards, the Chancellor (Maitland) died,—a man of talent, but of great intrigue, and suspected, not without reason, of many unprincipled acts and unjustifiable aggressions. The King "composit a worthie epitaph upon the death of the said Chancellor,"—the people "sparit not to calumniat him."

In the beginning of 1596, James adopted a new expedient to remedy the disorders which had crept into his household and the revenues of the crown, "and estableist eight chosin men to be of his perpetuall counsall;" but these Octavians, as they were denominated, "thoght that thair was na securitie in their standing, unless they first investit thaymeselfis in uther menis offeces," and accordingly they began their reforms by dividing among themselves "the offices of the crown, to every man one."* They were also suspected of favouring the nobles who were accused of Popery; and in consequence, the good citizens of Edinburgh, "being commoovit in their myndis by a preacher of the town," thought themselves bound to purge the land of such backsliders. "Then, without more, was the Blue Blanket advanced;" but after much turmoil and confusion, and suspension of clergymen, and removal of the courts of law, matters were arranged, and the gude town found itself *minus* 30,000 merks.†

The only other event of importance, which is noticed in the "Historie," and to which alone our limits will now permit us to attend, is that known by the name of the *Gowrie Conspiracy*. The "Historie," Balfour's Annals, and Birrel's Diary, all concur in representing the attempt of Gowrie and his brother as "treacherous and bloodie," and in avowing their report to be in unison with the belief of the people, except the ministers of Edinburgh. We are aware that the authorities we have quoted have been questioned by writers of

* Melvil's Memoirs, p. 382.
† Balfour's Annals, Vol. I., p. 401.

talent and research, and that it is now a fashionable dogma in Scotish history to maintain that this conspiracy was altogether a coinage of the brain of James, to revenge himself of an obnoxious nobleman. But after perusing the argument on both sides, we confess ourselves inclined to believe, that though Gowrie and his brother did not meditate the death of the King, they certainly did intend to keep his person under restraint, until they had accomplished some measures in the government favourable to themselves and their adherents. If the invitation to Ruthven had been given with the sole view of amusing the King by chemical experiments, why did Gowrie's brother attempt to confine him, and even struggle with him to prevent his escape? The heresy of the five Edinburgh clergymen weighs little with us. They had often bearded James—they were frequently thwarted and deceived by him—and therefore owed him no courtesy; but, what is of more importance, they and Gowrie were not merely of one mind as to the necessity of a change of men and measures at court, but were both the instruments of English policy in this work. Now, in the rude times of which we write, there was no other mode of accomplishing such a change ever dreamt of, except by getting possession of the person of the King. But while our belief is, that Gowrie and his brother had such an enterprise in view, we are equally ready to avow, that we have seen no satisfactory evidence of their determination to shed blood, or encounter hostility, rather than relinquish their object. On the contrary, we think that their utter want of preparation for hostile measures proves satisfactorily that they contemplated a peaceable coercion merely.

The severe legislative enactments which followed the Gowrie conspiracy,—the opposition, and disbelief, and consequent suspension of various clergymen,—and the trial and condemnation of several persons for their share in the deed, occupied a great portion of James' thoughts for many months. But they did not exclude the supreme object of his wishes—his

succession to the English crown. On the contrary, he was in constant communication with his ambassadors in England during the three years which intervened between Gowrie's conspiracy and the death of Elizabeth, and directed their measures with a degree of skill and knowledge of life, which could scarcely have been expected from his previous management in Scotish affairs. He tampered with the influential men of all parties in Elizabeth's court; and at last, when the demise of this Princess opened the way to his advancement, he ascended the throne of England with the good wishes of all. Our "Historie" contains very meagre notices of the affairs of the next fourteen years, and we shall not trouble our readers with any account of them.

After the ample summary of the events of James' reign in Scotland, which we have laid before our readers, we trust they will be able to form a pretty correct estimate, not only of the character of James, but also of the characters of those who successively ruled Scotland from his birth to his departure for England. The history of this period is, indeed, a history of the domination of faction; one party or noble fell but to give way to another, and, in the hands of all, James seems to have been the mere puppet of royalty, in whose name Faction promulgated her own decrees, and perpetrated many crimes.

The youth of James gave great promise; his manhood disappointed the most moderate expectations. While he was very young, Buchanan made him an excellent scholar; and, in other matters, he displayed a maturity of judgment far beyond his years. Before he was eighteen, he had written many poetical pieces, and though these, of course, are not free of juvenile conceits and weaknesses, we may safely pronounce them, on the whole, equal in merit to those of any other youthful poet at or prior to the times of James. In 1584, while only in his eighteenth year, he published *Essayes of a Prentise in the Divine Art of Poesie*, and in 1591, his *Poeticall*

Exercises, which he characterizes as the work of his "verie young and tender years." Both works were lately reprinted under the editorial care of Mr. R. P. Gillie. The first contains several sonnets, which were well worthy of being rescued from oblivion; and we embrace this opportunity of preserving another, which, so far as we know, has never met the public eye as a production of James. It is prefixed to Hudson's translation of Du Barta's History of Judith, published in 1584. Of Du Barta's works James had a very favourable opinion, and betwixt the two authors poetic compliments were not wanting, as well as other marks of literary friendship.

"Since ye immortall sisters nine has left
All other countries lying farre or nere:
To follow him who from them all you reft,
And now has causde your residence be here;
Who, thoughe a straunger, yet he loode so dere
This realme and me, so as he spoilde his avvne,
And all the brookes, and banks, and fountains clere
That be therein of you, as he hath shavvne
In this his work: then let your breath be blavvne
In recompence of this his willing minde,
On me; that sine may with my pen be draune
His praise: for though himself be not inclynde,
Nor preaseth but to touch the lawrer tre:
Yet well he merits crovvn'd therewith to be."

James's other compositions during the same period are creditable to his talents and his learning.

As a man, we feel ourselves compelled to regard James in a contemptible light. He seems literally to have had no mind of his own, but to have resigned himself and his government to one favourite after another, with as much facility as these minions were changed. If we except the family of Lennox, no person in the kingdom seems to have acquired

his steady friendship. We fear he was incapable of permanent regard. His measures displayed the same vacillating mind. What was done yesterday was often undone to-day; and there was no security that another change would not take place to-morrow. He was vain of his dignity and of literary acquirements, and had very high notions of the rights of kings. Constitutionally a coward, he was—like almost all royal cowards—a tyrant. He was selfish in his desires, and, if we except hunting, even in his amusements. He could dissemble, too, and resort to mean practices to accomplish his purposes. In short, James was a sovereign at once weak and ambitious, unstable and tyrannical; and however mediocre his poetry may be deemed, his claims on our regard are much stronger as a poet than as a man or a king.

It is probable, that to many of our readers the estimate we have formed of his character will appear partial and unjust. To such we have little to say in justification of ourselves. We have enabled every reader to judge for himself; and we have merely exercised our right in offering an opinion on facts patent to all. These facts we have detailed at as great length as our limits would permit, and for the very purpose of placing data for judgment within the reach of all who feel an interest in the matter. They have been gathered exclusively from contemporary writers,—from men, too, who seem to have thought more favourably of James than we do: they are therefore free from any bias which might have been communicated by a perusal of the narratives of later historians only. For ourselves we can vouch, that we began and completed the collection and collation in the most impartial spirit, and so far from consulting modern writers, we have never even tried to recollect what opinions they had formed. If, therefore, the results we have drawn are either partial or unjust, our philosophy is at fault, and we must stand convicted of deducing erroneous conclusions from the premises before us.