

L I F E  
OF  
ALLAN CUNNINGHAM.

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CHAPTER I.

POETIC FERTILITY OF NITHSDALE—POWER OF SONG OVER LEGISLATION—NO BIOGRAPHY OF ALLAN CUNNINGHAM—LITERARY APPRECIATION OF HIM—PARENTAGE—FAMILY TALENT—THOMAS MOUNSEY CUNNINGHAM—EDUCATION AT A DAME'S SCHOOL—"THE HILLS O' GALLOWA'"—HIS SENSITIVENESS AS TO CRITICISM—CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE "EDINBURGH MAGAZINE"—TIFF BETWEEN HIM AND THE ETRICK SHEPHERD—PETER MILLER CUNNINGHAM—HIS LITERARY PRODUCTIONS.

THERE is no district of equal compass within our ken which has been so prolific in poetry and song as that of Nithsdale, and it continues as fertile as ever. Apart from Burns and Cunningham, the *Dii majores* of song in the vale, the number of minor minstrels whom it has produced is almost incredible. Some of these are, of course, very inferior, though, all things considered, deserving of commendation for their efforts. Some, again, are highly respectable in their effusions, but circumstances, not always under their own control, have

prevented them from soaring into fame. Some are forgotten. Some were never known to be forgotten, except by a limited circle, and some were known only anonymously, if the bull may be excused, through the medium of the local newspapers, and the magazines of the day. One generation has gone, and another come, hastening to go again, transmitting, as if by hereditary descent, the poetic faculty, and the old woodlands are still vocal with song.

We have sometimes puzzled ourselves with the endeavour to discover the *why* and the *wherefore* of this, without, however, coming to any satisfactory conclusion on the matter; and we have asked ourselves if there can be anything in the atmosphere, or in the local scenery, to account for it? or if it is altogether a mere matter of chance, a caprice of nature under heaven-born inspiration? We know parishes which, for half a century, have been prolific in producing preachers, while those adjacent never sent a single youth to college. Nor can it be said of either that the profession has run in the blood, as very few instances of this are found. From whatever cause, or whether there be a cause at all, the fact is certain, that the spirit of poesy is still hovering, as of yore, over the length and breadth of Nithsdale.

When Fletcher of Saltoun wished to have the making of his country's songs, and he would let any one else have the making of its laws, he meant veritable songs, expressing in appropriate terms his countrymen's sentiments and feelings, amorous, patriotic, pathetic, courageous. He knew that only such would take hold of the public mind, and produce the effect he desired. These

must have free and unbiassed sway to maintain a permanent footing throughout the land, and not, as it is said in the present day, by paying a high royalty to some distinguished professional to sing a doggerel into temporary popularity. That will never transmit any song from one generation to another. Our songs, to become part of the country's existence, must be sung, not on the opera stage, with instrumental accompaniments, but lilted in the gloaming, and at the milking hour, warbled with the song of the lark behind the plough, or on the hill-side with the sheep, and they shall live, though it may be a matter of no concern to many whether their authors' existence is secured or not. Now, whose songs are they that we hear chanted at our rural merry-makings, at our wedding-feasts, on the harvest-field, or at the farmer's ingle in the long evenings of winter? With some exceptions, they are those of Ramsay, Burns, Scott, Hogg, and Cunningham, though probably the fair songstress knows nothing of their author. They are all one to her, the sentiments they breathe are those of her own heart, and she pours them forth with a melody and a cordiality which stir the very souls of all around her. She sings them to her children in the cradle, and, in process of time, they to theirs, so that they are handed down to posterity with a reality of feeling which forms part of our national character.

It has long been a subject of wonderment and remark that no biography of Allan Cunningham has yet been given to the world, notwithstanding the abundance of materials for that purpose within the reach of almost

any one qualified to collect and arrange them. His varied abilities, natural and acquired—his endowments, physical and mental—his rise from obscurity to an eminence which gained for him the intercourse and friendship of the noble—his connection with the metropolitan press—his association with a distinguished sculptor—his diversified literary productions—as well as the reminiscences of his early life, floating through Nithsdale and elsewhere, might have tempted some ready pen to produce an interesting record of the stonemason, poet, novelist, biographer, and sculptor, all in one. But no! A slight sketch written by himself, and of limited extent, is all that exists for the information of posterity, and which has been eagerly drawn upon by those permitted access to the treasure.

Yet Allan Cunningham was not without high appreciation in his day, as well as now, by some whose favour was worth the winning, and his society was courted in the circles of the literary and the great. Miss Landon said that “a few words from Allan Cunningham strengthened her like a dose of Peruvian bark.” Mrs. S. C. Hall “remembered how her cheek flushed, and how pleased and proud she was at the few words of praise he gave to one of the first efforts of her pen.” Sir Walter Scott characterized him as “Honest Allan, a credit to Caledonia.” The Ettrick Shepherd described him as “the very model of Burns, and exactly such a man.” Tom Hood said, he “used to *look up* to Allan Cunningham, who was formed by nature tall enough to snatch a grace beyond the reach of art.” Talfourd said of him,

that he was "stalwart of form, and stout of heart and verse—a ruder Burns." And Southey apostrophized him thus—

“Allan, true child of Scotland; thou who art  
So oft in spirit on thy native hills  
And yonder Solway shores, a poet thou!”

Still, notwithstanding all this appreciation, no biography has been written. We fully feel our inadequacy for such a task, and agree with the poet that "fools rush in where angels fear to tread;" but from our admiration of the man we are willing to make the attempt rather than that the work should remain undone. What we shall throw together may at a future time be useful to some one capable of doing our countryman justice.

Allan Cunningham was descended from an ancient family, who held possessions in Ayrshire bearing their name. After the battle of Philiphaugh his more immediate ancestors thought it advisable to dispose of their inheritance rather than run the risk of losing it by forfeiture, as one of them had served as an officer under the great Montrose. Having done so, they became tenants of the farm of Gogar Mains, in the neighbourhood of Edinburgh, where they remained for several generations. It was here that Allan's father, John Cunningham, was born on the 26th of March, 1743. When he had reached his twenty-third year his father died, and being unwilling at so young an age to undertake the responsibilities of the farm management, he surrendered the lease, sold off the effects, and went into the county of Durham to improve himself in the knowledge of farming, as England at that



time was considered ahead of Scotland in agricultural progress, and that he might qualify himself for the office of land-steward or overseer wherever Providence should cast his lot. After some time he returned to Scotland, and became overseer to Mr. Mounsey of Rammerscales, near Lochmaben, in Dumfriesshire.

He then married Miss Elizabeth Harley, the daughter of a Dumfries merchant, who had formerly been a farmer in Berwickshire. She was a lady of great personal attractions and accomplishments, shrewd in judgment, poetic in fancy, and altogether possessing a very superior intellect, which she transmitted to her family, both sons and daughters. John Cunningham, having now acquired considerable experience in agricultural pursuits, resolved to improve his condition along with his young wife, and with this view took a lease of the farm of Culfaud, in the parish of Kirkpatrick-Durham, in the Stewartry of Kirkeudbright. This enterprise, however, not proving so successful as he had anticipated, he was forced to relinquish farming on his own account, and became factor to Mr. Syme of Barncaillie in the same parish, upon whose death he removed to Blackwood, to fill the same situation there under Mr. Copeland, the proprietor, and finally he went to Dalswinton in the same capacity, where he greatly assisted Mr. Miller in his agricultural improvements on the estate, and with whom he remained till his death in 1800, in the fifty-seventh year of his age. He had nine children—five sons and four daughters—who all gave evidence of superior talent and high intellectual ability. He himself “was a man fond of collecting all

that was characteristic of his country," and, doubtless, the continual witnessing of this by his sons, tended, in no small degree, to inspire them with a similarity of taste.

All the sons were more or less distinguished for their love of literature, and their contributions to the periodical press, a circumstance rarely to be met with in the family of a cottager, where few opportunities for writing were afforded, and little leisure was at command. They are deserving of something more than a passing notice.

James, the eldest son, was brought up to the mason trade, and afterwards, by his integrity, skill, and perseverance, he became a master-builder with very gratifying success. He was a great student of antiquarian lore, and as leisure allowed he wrote articles for the newspapers and magazines within his reach. He also maintained a considerable correspondence on literary matters with the Ettrick Shepherd, and others with whom he was acquainted, but none of his writings are forthcoming, as duplicates were not kept, and his magazine articles were without signature. He was a great favourite with his brother Allan, as we shall afterwards see, and with whom he kept up a most affectionate correspondence. He died at Dalswinton village on the 27th of July, 1832, in the fifty-seventh year of his age, being exactly that of his father at the time of his death.

Thomas Mounsey, the second son, was only a year younger than his brother James, and was born at Culfaud, on the 25th of June, 1766. He received the first elements of his education at a Dame's school, kept by one Nancy Kingan, whose whole stock of instruction con-

sisted in the alphabet, the Shorter Catechism, the Psalms of David, and the Proverbs of Solomon. Spelling was considered useless, and a mere waste of time. Writing and arithmetic she did not pretend to, and as for grammar, she had never heard of it. Her great boast to any occasional visitor to her seminary was, "the bairns when they lea' my schule hae unco little to learn o' the Bible." Having finished with Dame Kingan, Thomas was next placed under the tutorship of Dominie Gordon, at Kellieston, who had the strongest belief that knowledge could be imparted to a pupil through any part of the body by means of physical appliance, as well as by oral instruction.

One way and another the education was completed, or, as the common phrase went, "the maister could gang nae farther," and young Thomas, at his own request, was apprenticed to a millwright in the neighbourhood. He now began cultivating the acquaintance of the Muses, and submitted his poetical productions, from time to time, to the inspection of his father, who was proud of his son, and gave what counsel and encouragement he thought judicious. By-and-by he found opportunity of getting some of his effusions brought before the public notice, through the medium of the local journals, which greatly stimulated his efforts to further success. After his apprenticeship was finished he resolved to push his own way in the world, and directed his steps to England, with the sage counsel of Mr. Miller of Dalswinton to abandon all poetical aspirations. Here for a considerable time he followed desultory employment in his trade, as we find him at Rotherham, King's Lynn, Wiltshire,



Cambridge, and Dover, but at last he had the good fortune to become managing clerk in the establishment of Sir John Rennie, the celebrated engineer in London. After nine years' poetic dormancy, he woke up in the pages of the *Scots Magazine*, to which he made frequent contributions, and which, at the request of the Ettrick Shepherd, he allowed to be inserted in "The Forest Minstrel." He composed several songs which attained great popularity, but by far the most popular was "The Hills o' Gallowa'." In short, it was the great song of the day, and as it is still chanted in the South we shall insert it here:—

“THE HILLS O' GALLOWA'.

“Amang the birks sae blythe and gay,  
 I met my Julia hameward gaun;  
 The linties chauntit on the spray,  
 The lammies loupit on the lawn;  
 On ilka howm the sward was mawn,  
 The braes wi' gowans buskit bra',  
 An' gloamin's plaid o' gray was thrawn  
 Out owre the hills o' Gallowa'.

“Wi' music wild the woodlands rang,  
 An' fragrance wing'd along the lea,  
 As down we sat the flowers amang,  
 Upon the banks o' statcly Dee.  
 My Julia's arms encircled me,  
 An' saftly slade the hours awa',  
 Till dawin' coost a glimmerin' ee  
 Upon the hills o' Gallowa'.

“It isna owsen, sheep, an' kye,  
 It isna goud, it isna gear,  
 This lifted ee wad hae, quoth I,  
 The world's drumlie gloom to cheer.

But gie to me my Julia dear,  
 Ye powers wha rowe this yerthen ba',  
 An' O! sae blythe thro' life I'll steer,  
 Amang the hills o' Gallowa'.

“When gloamin' dauners up the hill,  
 An' our gudeman ca's hame the yowes,  
 Wi' her I'll trace the mossy rill  
 That owre the muir meand'ring rowes;  
 Or tint amang the scroggy knowes,  
 My birken pipe I'll sweetly blaw,  
 An' sing the streams, the straths, and howes,  
 The hills an' dales o' Gallowa'.

“An' when auld Scotland's heathy hills,  
 Her rural nymphs an' jovial swains,  
 Her flow'ry wilds an' wimpling rills,  
 Awake nae mair my canty strains;  
 Whare friendship dwells an' freedom reigns,  
 Whare heather blooms an' muircocks craw,  
 O! dig my grave, and hide my banes  
 Amang the hills o' Gallowa'.”

This song was so thoroughly popular and appreciated that several authors got the credit of its composition. It was especially attributed to Burns, and appeared in an edition of his poetical works which was published by Orphoot at Edinburgh in 1820. The same honour was also accorded to the Ettrick Shepherd in the “Harp of Caledonia,” edited by Mr. Struthers; but the real author was unknown. The Julia of the song was a Galloway maiden with whom Cunningham was in love, and upon her death he wrote another, entitled “Julia's Grave,” very beautiful and pathetic, which appeared in the *Scots Magazine* for 1807. That his affection for this young lady was deep-rooted and sincere is evident from

the fact that he made her the subject of several of his songs besides those noted above. Though he afterwards became the happy husband of a loving wife, yet the name of poor Julia Curtis was ever deeply impressed on his heart.

He was extremely *touchy* on the merits of his compositions, so that editors and he were frequently at variance. A writer in the *Scottish American Journal* of 7th September, 1871, says of him, "Mr. Cunningham was somewhat whimsical in his tastes, and rash in his judgments. He could not bear to hear any of his productions criticised, even by his most intimate friends, and considered professional criticism the most contemptible and worthless of occupations. He made the acquaintance and corresponded with the Ettrick Shepherd, but somehow a dryness arose between the two, and when Hogg visited London about forty years ago, there was a mutual desire to meet, but nothing could bring them together. Hogg sat in solitary dignity in London, and Cunningham, equally obstinate, in Southwark, and who was to cross the Thames was the all-important question. The man of Nith invited him of Yarrow, and the man of Yarrow invited him of Nith, but neither of them would stir; and when a mutual friend interposed, he was repulsed in a style that made him almost wish that both worthies were tumbled into the Thames. They never met."

His literary taste extended to prose as well as poetry, and when the *Edinburgh Magazine* was started in 1817, he contributed several interesting articles on ancient and modern times, under the title of the

“Literary Legacy,” but falling out with the editor, he withdrew. It was, however, in lyrical poetry he was fitted to excel, had his extremely sensitive temperament allowed him to persevere. But it is often found that superior genius is clogged with some insuperable failing which impedes the flight to fame. This idiosyncrasy of his character was greatly lamented by his brother Allan. In a letter to the Ettrick Shepherd on this point he says, “My brother’s want of success has surprised me too. He had a fair share of talent; and, had he cultivated his powers with care, and given himself fair-play, his fate would have been different. But he sees nature rather through a curious medium than with the tasteful eye of poetry, and must please himself with the praise of those who love singular and curious things.” In private life he was highly esteemed by a wide circle of friends, and his business habits were regular, punctual, and faithful. He died of cholera on the 28th October, 1834.

John, the third son, was also trained a mechanic, and evinced considerable talent for poetry, and literature in general, but he was prematurely cut off, while still in his teens.

Allan was the fourth son, but we shall merely mention his name at present, as he is to engage our special and whole attention afterwards.

Peter Miller, the fifth and youngest son, was born at Dalswinton, in November, 1789, and was first educated at a school similar to those at which his elder brothers had been taught. After passing through the curriculum of medical study at the University of Edinburgh, he

was appointed Assistant-Surgeon in the Royal Navy. "In this capacity," says an obituary notice of him in the *Gentleman's Magazine*, June, 1864, "he saw service on the shores of Spain, where the great war was raging, and on the lakes of America, where he became the close friend of the celebrated Clapperton. He also served for some years in the Eastern Archipelago, and had ample opportunities of observing the effect of tropical climates on the European constitution. Of this he profited when, peace having arrived, he was thrown out of the regular line of duty, and would have been left to vegetate on half-pay if he had not sought other employment from the Admiralty; in the course of which, to use the words of the *Quarterly Review*, he 'made no less than four voyages to New South Wales, as Surgeon-Superintendent of convict ships, in which was transported upwards of six hundred convicts of both sexes, whom he saw landed at Sydney without the loss of a single individual—a fact of itself quite sufficient to attest his judgment and ability in the treatment and management of a set of beings not easily kept in order.'—*Quarterly Review*, January, 1828.

"The result of his observations during this period was embodied in his 'Two Years in New South Wales,' which was published in 1827, in 2 vols., post 8vo, and rapidly ran through three large editions. This work is both amusing and instructive, and although necessarily superseded by more recent works on the same ever-extending subject, is still frequently quoted, and some centuries hence will afford a mine of information and speculation to the correspondents of the *Sylvanus Urban*



of the Antipodes. Mr. Cunningham added the profits arising from this work to his early savings in the navy, and expended them in an attempt to open up a large tract of land, in what he then fondly regarded as his adopted country. But the locality was perhaps badly chosen; the seasons were certainly unpropitious, and he soon abandoned the struggle, as far as his own personal superintendence was concerned. His well-earned reputation at the Admiralty, however, speedily procured him employment, and he served successively in the 'Tyne,' 18, on the South American Station, and in the 'Asia,' 84, in the Mediterranean. In the course of these years he published a volume of essays on 'Electricity and Magnetism,' and another on 'Irrigation as practised on the Eastern Shores of the Mediterranean.' He also contributed an account of a 'Visit to the Falkland Islands' to the *Athenæum*, and was a frequent writer in other periodicals. He was a man of remarkable powers of observation, and of the most amiable and conciliatory disposition, and, it is believed, passed through life without making a single enemy. His attachment to his brother Allan was particularly strong, and although death had separated them for more than twenty years, the name of that brother was among the last articulate sounds which passed his lips." He died at Greenwich on the 6th of March, 1864, in the seventy-fourth year of his age.

Of the four daughters, one now survives (April, 1874), the sole representative of the family, with her dark eyes as lustrous, intelligent, and penetrating, as if she were only twenty instead of fourscore.

On the death of John Cunningham, his widow removed with her family to Dalswinton village, where, through the generous liberality of Mr. Miller, she was allowed a free house and a small field for a cow's grazure during her lifetime. This she did not long enjoy, however, for her daughter Mary, Mrs. Pagan at Curriestanes, kindly prevailed on her to remove from Dalswinton and reside with herself, which she was probably the more easily induced to do from the circumstance that she had not been well provided for at her husband's death. It will be seen afterwards how affectionate and mindful of his mother, in this respect, was her son Allan, till the day of his death. She was a little woman, with sharp black eyes, and retained her faculties till the age of ninety, when she died. During her lifetime she was greatly respected, both on account of her own sterling qualities, and as being the mother of Allan Cunningham.

The following verses on the ancestral family are contributed by a grand-nephew of Allan Cunningham, Mr. Anthony C. M'Bryde, artist, Edinburgh, who seems to inherit a portion of the genius of his great kinsman:—

“THE CUNNINGHAMS OF CUNNINGHAM.

“The Cunninghams of Cunningham, in good old days of yore,  
Were doughty barons stout and bold as ever drew claymore;  
Who for their King and Country's right in battle foremost stood,  
And gave to dye full many a field the Sassenach's best blood.

“Within their halls at festive board, in many days langsyne,  
When freely passed the jest and song, the usquebae and wine,  
Amid their leal retainers, so merry, free, and gay,  
They were the blythest of the blythe, none merrier were than they.

- “ That night on Carrick’s rock-bound shore the warning beacon burned,  
To drive the invader from his throne the royal Bruce returned—  
And Cunningham of Cunningham, like lion bold let loose,  
Dashed gallantly across the hills to fight or die with Bruce!
- “ In Killiecrankie’s mountain pass they fought right gallantlie,  
In favour of King James’s cause, by the side of brave Dundee—  
And many a well-contested field their valour did engage,  
No nobler name than Cunningham exists on history’s page!
- “ And well, I wot, the lion heart survives those ‘good old days’—  
The patriotic spirit breathes in kinsman Allan’s lays;  
His ‘Hame and it’s hame,’ and his ‘Wee, wee German laird,’  
Shall live with Scotland’s lyric fame while the Scottish tongue is  
spared.
- “ O! let us cherish proudly now their virtues manifold,  
And strive to emulate the deeds they did in days of old;  
For never shall we know again men of superior worth,  
Than the Cunninghams of Cunningham—none nobler lived on earth.”