

# Biographical Sketch

—OF THE AUTHOR.—



VAN MACCOLL was born on the 21st September, 1808, at Kenmore, Lochfyne-side—a farm situated on the banks of that famous Loch, about five miles west from Inveraray, Argyllshire, and at the time in the joint occupation of several tenants, the poet's father, Dugold MacColl, being one of them. The bard, who

was the youngest but one of a family of six sons and two daughters, was fortunate enough in having for his father one who, in addition to many other excellent qualities, was famed far and near for the richest store of Celtic song of any man living in his part of the country. His home became, in consequence, the common resort of those in the district who delighted in such things; and long and frequent were the winter *ceilidhs* at his house to listen to him singing song after song—especially the Jacobite lays of such favourite minstrels as *Mairi nighean Alastair Ruairidh*, Alexander Macdonald, and Duncan Ban Macintyre, every line of whose compositions he could repeat from memory, and in a manner well calculated to attract and captivate the rustic audience congregated round his hospitable fireside. He had a keen and genuine appre-

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\*Written for the *Celtic Magazine* of 1880, by its editor, Alexander Mackenzie F.S.A., Scot., Inverness, Scotland.

ciation of the beautiful and the grand in the natural scenery which adorned his native land, and it was charming to hear the bard relating his recollections of how, when a mere boy, his father had made him familiar with the best positions in the neighborhood of his home from which to view to advantage any scene of more than ordinary attraction—a circumstance which, no doubt, tended to implant in the mind of the future poet that love of Nature which afterwards found such mellifluous expression in his "Address to Loch Lomond;" his "Sonnets descriptive of Lochawe," which appeared in these pages; his "Loch-Duich," and many more of his most beautiful and best descriptive poems.

Dugald MacColl was received among, and lived on close terms of intimacy with, men who moved in a sphere of social life far above his own, and was in consequence able to procure the use of books, otherwise inaccessible, for his children; for parish libraries in those days were things undreamt of in the Highlands. Nothing delighted him more than to see the patriot flame fanned in the bosom of his young family by the perusal of such books as Blind Harry's Metrical Life of Sir William Wallace, the Life of Hannibal, Baron Trenck's Autobiography, and other works of a similar character. He was descended from an old family—the MacCells of Glasdrum—a family in which resides, it is said, the chiefship of his clan—a small but heroic branch of the great clan Domhnuill. He possessed superior natural endowments—physical as well as mental—and was reputed to be altogether as fine a specimen of the Highlander as could be found in the whole county of Argyle in his day. He delighted to wear the Highland dress, and continued to do so, at least as a holiday dress, long after it had ceased to be used by any other of the adult population of his native parish.

In his mother, Mary Cameron, a daughter of *Domhnall mor a' Gharbh-choirre*—in his day a man of considerable mark in the district of Cowall—the bard was scarcely less fortunate. She was noted for her store of traditional tales, legendary and fairy lore, and not less so for a life of much active benevolence. \* \* \* \* \*

John Mackenzie, in his "Beauties of Gaelic Poetry, and Lives of the Gaelic Bards," informs us that "the poet's parents, although not affluent, were in the enjoyment of more comfort than generally falls to the lot of Highland peasants; and were no less respected for their undeviating moral rectitude than distinguished for their hospitality, and the practice of all the other domestic virtues that hallow and adorn the Highland hearth." Of the bard himself, with whom he was intimately acquainted, the same writer says:—"At a very early age he displayed an irresistible thirst for legendary lore and Gaelic poetry; but, from the seclusion of his native glen and other disadvantageous circumstances, he had but scanty means for fanning the latent flame that lay dormant in his breast. He, however, greedily devoured every volume he could procure, and when the labours of the day were over, would often resort to some favourite haunt where, in the enjoyment of that solitude which his father's fire-side denied him, he might be found to take advantage of the very moonlight to pore over the minstrelsy of his native country, until lassitude or the hour of repose compelled him to return home." The same author continues:—"His father, Dugald MacColl, seems to have been alive to the blessings of education; for, as the village school afforded but little or nothing worthy of that name, he, about the time that our bard had reached his teens, hired a tutor for his family at an amount of remuneration which his slender means could scarcely war-

rant. The tutor's stay was short, yet sufficiently long to accomplish one good purpose—that of not only enabling Evan properly to read and understand English, but also of awakening in him a taste for English literature. A year or two later a circumstance occurred which tended materially to encourage our author's poetic leanings. His father, while transacting business one day in a distant part of his native parish, fell in with a Paisley weaver, who, in consequence of the depression of trade, had made an excursion to the Highlands with a lot of old books for sale. MacColl bought the entire lot, and returned home groaning under his literary burden, which Evan received with transports of delight. Among other valuable works he was thus put in possession of were the 'Spectator,' 'Burns's Poems,' and the 'British Essayists.' He read them with avidity, and a new world opened on his view; his thoughts now began to expand, and his natural love of song received an impetus which no external obstacles could resist. Contemporaneous with this literary impulsion was the artillery of a neighboring Chloe, whose eyes had done sad havoc among the mental fortifications of our bard; he composed his first song in her praise, and, although he had yet scarcely passed the term of boyhood, it is a very respectable effort, and was very well received by his co-parishioners."

The means taken for the publication of this first effort, as related to us by the poet himself while his guest in Canada, is worth telling. The bards were not at the time held in high esteem in his native district, and this fact, of which he was well aware, coupled with the subject and nature of the song, made him unwilling to make it known even among his most intimate friends. He, however, felt conscious that his effort possessed some small merit, and was anxious to submit it to

the local critics, which he did in the following manner :— Taking into his confidence a young friend, who was an excellent song singer, Evan taught him his first attempt, without however letting him so far into the secret as to name the author. The same evening a *ceilidh* “of lads and lasses” was held in the house of a poor widow who lived rent-free on the farm of Kenmore—that on which our bard was born—and Evan’s friend engaged to sing the song during the evening, while the bard decided to remain outside, and hear, through the chinks and crevices with which the walls of the primitive domicile were pretty freely riddled, not only the singing of the song but the criticism which was sure to follow. His nerves were strung to the highest pitch, waiting the result, which to him was of the utmost consequence. The song was sung; it was received with loud and unanimous applause, and its unknown author, whom every one became anxious to discover, was praised without stint. Evan heard the whole, he felt himself a bard, and became supremely happy, and the genius of which this was the first-fruit broke forth from that moment with the result so well known to the lovers of genuine poetry throughout the length and breadth of the land, wherever Highlanders are located, and to all to whom the name of Evan MacColl is long since a household word.

Of his educational opportunities in early life the bard, in a letter recently received from him, gives the following interesting account :—

“My earliest schoolboy days were spent in a most miserable apology for a school, existing quite close to where I lived, and conducted by a dominie of whose scholastic acquirements you may judge from the fact that he was content to be paid for his services at the rate of £10 per annum, besides board and lodging—the last being secured to him at the expense of

a constant round of house to house billeting, one day at a time for each child attending school. Here, in a building little better than a hovel, and where the discipline was such as I even now shudder to think of, I first learned to master the A B C, the ab, abs, and so forth. This important preliminary being once through, I, in common with all little ones of similar standing, were made to grope our way through the Shorter Catechism—the English version, mind you—for to be taught at that stage of our progress to read a word of Gaelic was a thing never dreamt of. So much for *our* First Book of Lessons! Our next was the book of Proverbs, then the New Testament, and afterwards the Old—all in English, of course, and the same as Greek to most of us. These were followed by some English Collection, or it might be Goldsmith's History of Rome, in the case of children whose parents could afford to buy such books; and where that could not be done, I have known an odd volume of Dean Swift's writings doing duty instead! Last of all came in the Gaelic Psalm-book for such of us as might wish to attain to a knowledge of reading our native tongue. When it is considered how very little English any of us knew, I think it must be allowed that a total reversal of all this would have been the infinitely-more sensible procedure. In those days, and in such schools, a boy caught speaking a word of Gaelic was pretty sure to be made to mount the back of some one of his sturdier schoolmates, and then, moving in a circuit around the master, tawse in hand, get his hips soundly thrashed. You may well guess what a terror was inspired by such a mode of punishment in the case of little urchins wearing the kilt, as most, if not all of us, then did. Another barbarous mode of forcing us to make English our sole vehicle of speech at school was, to make any trespasser on that rule carry on his breast, suspended by a *gad*

made to go round the neck, the skull of some dead horse! and which he was by no means to get rid of until some other luckless fellow might be overheard whispering a word in the prohibited tongue. How Highland parents, with the least common sense, could approve of all this is to me now inexplicable. Little wonder if, under such circumstances, we could often devoutly wish that the Saxon and his tongue had never existed! It is to be hoped that no such foul, short-sighted means of killing off my good mother-tongue are still allowed to exist in any part of the Highlands. If it must die—though I see no good reason why it should—let it have at least a little fair play in the fight for its life.

“The nearest parish school being separated from my father’s house by a considerable extent of rough moorland, which made his children’s attendance there a thing scarcely to be thought of, it was lucky for me that, after picking up all the little knowledge possible at the school just described, my father, while on a visit to some relations in Appin, there fell in with, and engaged as a teacher in our family, a young man to whom I am indebted for almost all the education worthy of the name, ever received by me during my school-boy days. My worthy tutor had been for several years a teacher under the Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge in the Highlands, but was, at the time of making this engagement with my father, waiting for a promised situation as book-keeper in one of Mr. Malcolm of Poltalloch’s estates in Jamaica, to which island, after a year spent with us, he went, and where, within a period of two short years, he died. Poor Alexander Mackenzie MacLeod—for that was his name—was a man of rare, ripe Celtic scholarship—a man who well merited being held by me in most loving remembrance:”

MacColl’s mind is of a peculiarly delicate and sensitive tex-

ture, and the strongest impression of his early childhood still remaining, he informs us, in his recollection of his extreme sensitiveness to pain inflicted on any creature, even among the lower animals. This characteristic peculiarity of his nature made the day set apart for killing the "*Mullag-gheam-hraidh*," or any other occasional victim necessary to furnish the household with animal food, to him a day of special horror and anguish. On all such occasions it became necessary to send him out of the way until the necessary proceedings were over. It led him also, often at the expense of much rough treatment from boy companions older than himself, to become a regular little knight-errant in the defence of his favourite wild-birds and their brood from the harrying propensities so common to most boys; and a lapwing could not more successfully wile away from her nest the searcher after it than he often did from their mark the would-be despoilers of some poor robin's *cuach*, as yet undiscovered by them. With a boy so constituted we may well believe him when he writes in his poem on "*Creag-a-ghuraidh*," given to the public a few years ago, that

These were the days a planet new  
Would joy its finder less than *there* I  
To find some blackbird's nest, known to  
Myself alone in *Creag-a-gharrie*.

Like most Highland boys brought up in rural life, MacColl was early trained to all the various duties and labours incidental to that sphere of life—the spade, the plough, and the sickle being for many years implements far more familiar to him than the pen. The herring fishing season in Lochfyne was also to him for several years of his early manhood a period of more than ordinary activity—himself and his wherry, "*Mairi Chreag-a-gharaidh*," the praises of which



have been already sounded in excellent Gaelic verse in these pages, being generally foremost in opening the fishing campaign, and seldom missing a fair share of its spoils. Ard, further, his father, in addition to the labour demanded by the cultivation of his small holding at Kenmore, was seldom without a road contract of some kind or another on hand, generally the making or repairing of roads within the policies of the Duke of Argyll, at Luveraray. During the last ten years of the father's residence in Scotland before emigrating to Canada, in 1831, he held a contract for keeping a considerable stretch of the county roads in repair, to which he confined himself exclusively in that particular department. These repairs were usually carried on during the winter, and the bard and his brothers had to work along with the other labourers employed, thus making the whole year to them one unceasing round of hard and active labour. The bard was thus employed for several years—years, however, during which many of his best Gaelic lyrics were composed.

When his father, accompanied by all the other unmarried members of his family, emigrated to Canada, Evan could not make up his mind to leave his native land, even to accompany those whom he loved above all others in the world—he having already secretly resolved that before following them, he would try to leave his country-men at home something to be remembered by,—a poetic volume, in short, the materials for which were daily growing on his hands. How well he succeeded in his purpose remains now to be shown.

His first publication in volume form appeared in 1836, under the title of *The Mountain Minstrel*, containing Gaelic songs and poems, and his earliest attempts in English. Though the names of MacLachlan and Stewart appear upon the title page, the work was entirely published at the risk of

the author. It was well received, the sale covered the cost of publication, and left a small balance to the bard.

During the next two years he wrote several new pieces, both in Gaelic and English, and in 1838 the Messrs. Blackie, of Glasgow, published the Gaelic work now known as "Clarsach Nam Beann," containing all the Gaelic productions of the bard till that date. Simultaneously with the "Clarsach" the same firm brought out the first exclusively English edition of the *Mountain Minstrel*, the first edition of which, we have seen, was partly Gaelic and partly English. A second edition of this *Mountain Minstrel* was published in 1847, and another in 1849; but neither of these produced any great financial results to the author.

On the appearance of his two volumes in 1838, MacColl was hailed as a rare acquisition to Gaelic literature and his right to stand in the front rank of modern Celtic bards was at once established and acknowledged. Of his *Mountain Minstrel* or "Poems and Songs in English," some of the best contemporary authorities in Britain wrote in the very highest praise.

The late Dr. Norman MacLeod, reviewing it in an Edinburgh paper, writes:—"Evan MacColl's poetry is the product of a mind impressed with the beauty and the grandeur of the lovely scenes in which his infancy has been nursed. We have no hesitation in saying that this work is that of a man possessed of much poetic genius. Wild, indeed, and sometimes rough are his rhymes and epithets; yet there are thoughts so new and striking, images and comparisons so beautiful and original, feelings so warm and fresh, that stamp this Highland peasant as no ordinary man." Hugh Miller says, in the *Inverness Courier*: "There is more of fancy than of imagination in the poetry of MacColl, and more of thought and imagery than of feeling. In point, glitter, polish, he is

the Moore of Highland song. Comparisons and ideality are the leading features of his mind. Some of the pieces in this volume are sparkling tissues of comparison from beginning to end. The images pass before us in quick and tantalizing succession, reminding us of the figures of a magic lantern, hurriedly drawn athwart the wall, or the patterns of a web of tapestry, seen and then lost, as they sweep over the frame. Even when compelled to form a high estimate of the wealth of the bard from the very rapidity with which he flings it before us, we cannot avoid wishing at the same time that he had learned to enjoy it a little more at his leisure. This, if a fault, however, and we doubt it after all, is a fault of genius." Dr. Brown, author of "The History of the Highland Clans," noticing the work in the *Caledonian Mercury*, wrote:—"Here we have the poetic spirit breaking out amidst every disadvantage in the person of a Western Celt,—one, who, obedient to the voice within, sought to embody in song those feelings and emotions which external nature has kindled up in his bosom; and who, with none of the means and appliances furnished by the schools, has thrown together in his *Mountain Minstrel* more gems 'of purest ray serene' than could be found in a decade of *lustra* amongst the measured dullness of the choristers and songsters in the cities of the south."

This is surely high praise, but we must yet quote Bailey, the celebrated author of "Festus" and of the "Angel World." "There is a freshness, a keenness, a heartiness in many of these productions of the *Mountain Minstrel*, which seems to breathe naturally of the hungry air, the dark, bleak, rugged bluffs among which they were composed, alternating occasionally with a clear, bewitching, and spiritual quiet, as of the gloaming deepening over the glens and woods. Several of

the melodies towards the close of this volume, are full of simple and tender feeling, and not unworthy to take their place by the side of those of Lowland minstrels of universal fame."

Our Minstrel having thus established for himself a name which his countrymen "will not willingly let die," the time to leave his beloved Lochfyne-side, not for Canada, but England, at last drew near. For, having been in the spring of 1839, through the influence of Mr. Campbell, of Islay, then M. P. for Argyllshire, appointed to a clerkship in the Liverpool Custom House, he, in that year, bade his native home an affectionate farewell, and exchanged the Highland hills and heather, which had so often occupied his poetic mind, for a sphere of life which, with its necessary duties and surroundings, had little attraction for one of his temperament, tastes and feelings.

In 1850, the health of our bard having become somewhat impaired, he obtained six months' leave of absence to enable him to visit his friends in Canada, and at the same time recruit his overworked constitution. Shortly after his arrival there he happened to come in contact with an old friend of his father's family, the Hon. Malcolm Cameron, then a member of the Canadian Government, and was by this distinguished countryman invited to transfer his clerkship in the Liverpool Customs for a somewhat better position at the time in the Provincial Customs of Upper Canada. Unfortunately for him, we think, he fell in with this friendly suggestion, and was, shortly after, appointed to a situation in Kingston, a position in which he remained until 1880, when he was superannuated.

Promotion in the public service in Canada, being a matter almost entirely dependent on political influence,—and the

Liberal party,—that to which MacColl owed his appointment,—having, unfortunately for him, been left in the cold shades of opposition, with but a very short interval during the whole of his official life in that country, his portion at the “public crib” was never much to boast of. We suspect that a further barrier to his advancement lay in a suspicion that not a few of the political lyrics anonymously contributed from time to time to the Reform press were from his pen. It is certain that the bard never professed to be much of an admirer of his countryman, Sir John A. Macdonald, the leader of the Conservative party there; and, this being the case, he made it a point of honor never to solicit any favour at his hands. Yet Sir John, who had it so often in his power to befriend him, can hardly be excused for not acting towards him in a more generous spirit than he seems to have done. It was hoped that when, in 1874, Mr. Mackenzie, the leader of the Liberal party, came into power, MacColl's well-established claims to promotion would result in some lucrative place being at once given him. A promise to that effect was cheerfully made; but, yielding to political exigencies, Mr. Mackenzie delayed its fulfilment, more clamorous claimants having to be provided for,—while the bard, too modest to press his claims, and altogether too confident that the time would come when his patience would be amply rewarded, kept vainly trusting on until the upset of the Mackenzie Government, in 1878, suddenly put an end to all his hopes of preferment.

We have said enough to show the stamp of man, whom we (on this side of the Atlantic) had almost permitted to die out of remembrance; but we must yet be allowed to add one more tribute in his praise from a brother Canadian bard, of no mean powers himself; for it is not often that one poet can

be found to speak so well of another. We quote from a Biographical Sketch, written by the poet, Charles Sangster, for General Wilson's work on the Scottish Bards, published a good many years ago, by the Harpers, of New York.

"MacColl," writes Sangster, "is considerably past the middle of life, but bids fair to weather the storm of existence for many years to come. In private life he is, both by precept and example, all that could be desired. He has an intense love for all that is really good and beautiful, and a true and manly scorn for all that is false, time-serving and hypocritical; there is no narrow-mindedness, no bigotry in his soul. Kind and generous to a fault, he is more than esteemed, and that deservedly, by all who properly know him. In the domestic circle, all the warmth in the man's heart—the full glow of genuine feeling and affection—is ever uppermost. He is a thoroughly earnest man, in whose daily walks and conversation, as well as in his actions, Longfellow's 'Psalm of Life' is acted out in verity. In his friendships, he is sincere; in his dislikes, equally so. He is thoroughly Scottish in his leanings, his national love burns with intensity. In poetry, he is not merely zealous, but enthusiastic, and he carries his natural force of character in all he says and does. Consequently he is not simply a wooer, but a worshipper of the muse. Long may he live, the 'Bard of Lochfyne,' to prostrate his entire heart and soul in the 'Temple of the Nine.'"

Among MacColl's literary friends and acquaintances in the Highlands were, first and foremost, John Mackenzie, of "The Beauties," allowed, like many more of his class, to die prematurely in neglect and poverty, though his great services to the Celtic cause are now being fully acknowledged. The late Robert Carruthers, LL.D., he met several times, "first of all in the studio of my dear departed friend, Mr. Alexander

MacInnes, the artist, then a resident of Inverness." He met Hugh Miller, too, more than once, the last time being at the old Cromarty homestead celebrated in his "Schools and School-masters." He also spent some time with the brothers Sobeskie Stewart, at Eilean-Aigais, and drank with them out of a *cuach*, once the property of Prince Charlie. In Glasgow, he could claim among his friends James Hodderwick, of the *Citizen*; Dugald Moore, author of "Scenes before the Flood," and "The Bard of the North;" Alexander Rodgers, the author of "Behave Yourself before Folk," and many other popular songs and lyrics; and last, but not least, the Rev. Dr. Norman MacLeod, the gifted author of *Leabhar Nan Cnoc* and editor of the celebrated *Teachdaire Gaidhealach*. In Edinburgh, the late Dr. Robert Chambers made him the lion of a dinner party at his own house in Princess Street, to which were invited a dozen of the then literary stars of "modern Athens," the poets Gilfillan and Velder being among the number. In Liverpool, he made the acquaintance and secured the friendship of James Philip Bailey, the author of "Festas," and the late Robert Leighton, author of the "Christening of the Bairn," and other well-known poems. "When first I knew Leighton," MacColl writes, "he was quite a raw, unsophisticated callant, fresh from Dundee, and with seemingly no conception of the poetic power afterwards developed in him."

In London, he was intimately acquainted with James Logan, author of "The Scottish Gael;" Fraser, of *Fraser's Magazine*, and Hugh Fraser, an Invernessian, the publisher of "Leabhar Nan Cnoc." These, in all, form a circle of literary friends with whom the Bard of Lochfyne might well be highly pleased, indeed gratified.

MacColl has been twice married, his first wife being Frances

Lewthwaite, a native of Cumberland, while his present worthy and hospitable partner is of Highland parentage, though born in Canada—her father, James McArthur, as also her mother, McCallum by name, being natives of Mull, in Argyllshire. Of a family of nine sons and daughters, Evan, the poet's eldest son, has been educated for the ministry, and is now pastor of the Congregational Church at Quebec. The readers of the *Celtic Magazine* are already familiar with some of his daughter Mary's productions, and her fair promise as a poet to become worthy of her sire. Fanny, another daughter, is a teacher under the Ontario Board of Education, while the more youthful members of his most interesting family give ample promise of proving themselves worthy of the stock from which they sprang.