

BARDLINGS OF A DAY—FROM 1800-1820.

THE publication of “Currie’s Life and Works of Burns” in the year 1800 is a memorable event in the history of Scottish poetry, for it gave an impetus to the activity of the national muse infinitely greater than that which any other publication had ever done. Men saw there, once again, in light as clear as noon-day, that the higher reaches of poetry were not an exclusive possession of those versed in “the jargon o’ the schools”, but that wherever “that spark o’ nature’s fire”, which alone reaches the heart, was found, whether under the fustian of the peasant or the frills of the peer, there the goddess of immortal song had her shrine. Of course the full and true appreciation of the marvellous genius which possessed that typical Scotsman—not to speak of the deep tragedy of his life—had not then been apprehended in all its magnitude—indeed, men have to be removed generations beyond such giants before they realise how much they tower above ordinary mortals. As may be

read in many a preface to obscure versicles, the success, which crowned the poetical efforts of the Ayrshire ploughman, made many an indifferent singer dream of possibilities, which till then had never crossed his mind. There are fools, however, outside college as well as inside, and if these latter tried "to climb Parnassus by dint o' Greek", the former, in their efforts, frequently confounded mere rhyming power with the poetic gift.

In approaching the bards of our countryside who came forth to public view during the early years of the century, we find many, apparently less impelled by the vanity of seeing their names in print, than by the necessity which brought them face to face with "sell your rhymes or starve". The generous public, who bought these rhymes, had some return for its money in seeing "my subscribers'" generosity duly magnified in an introductory note, and in being assured, with all humility, of the lasting gratitude of the needy author. The vast majority of these aspirants after a fame which might put money in their purse were bardlings far below mediocrity, a typical example of which we find in "Poems on various subjects, and chiefly in the Scottish Dialect. By JAMES M'KENZIE, teacher of Mr. Hunter's School, Kincardine O'Neil. Aberdeen: Printed for the author. 1804". The humble author of this booklet of 48 pages belonged to the poorest class of country dominies, who managed to scrape a meagre subsistence from the fees of straggling scholars outside the range of the parish school. In his case, this precarious pittance was supplemented by the interest of £150, which James Hunter of Darrahill had bequeathed, for a school near Camphill, on the borders of Lumphanan and Kincardine O'Neil. The dominie evidently belonged to the north Highlands, from near Fortrose; and, if one were to judge from the notes which accompany his verses, he must have been a prim sample of the high-and-dry Highland pedagogue. Unlike the ordinary poetaster, who is eternally singing his own loves, hopes, and fears, Mr. James's muse moves mostly to thunder-storms. He is the bardling of thunder and night scenes—and might have reached the sublime, only he took the other step. He tried all sorts of verse, the ballad, heroic, Alexandrine, blank, and was equally successful in all. His booklet may be of value to local collectors, because it is rare, and

because it is a good sample of the press of "Imlay & Keith, Longacre"; certainly it is of no value for anything it contains.

Slightly improved in quality are the verses which "the female bard of Aberdeen", prefaced by a considerable flourish of local trumpets, brought before the public in "Simple Poems on Simple Subjects; by CHRISTIAN MILNE, wife of a journeyman shipcarpenter at Footdee, Aberdeen, 1805". The authoress was indeed a woman of no ordinary character, and well deserved the temporary hum of praise and more substantial profits which followed the publication of her little work. She was a native of Inverness, being born there on 15th May, 1773. Her parents were poor, but the little schooling she got she turned to good account, having early shown a strong attachment to poetry, and actually had begun rhyming before she entered on her teens. Like every other working man's daughter, she was sent early to work, entering on domestic service in Aberdeen at the age of fourteen. Shortly after this, a series of family disasters brought her father to be entirely dependent on her scanty earnings, while a break-down in her own health, brought both to the brink of starvation; but through all her trials and difficulties the little woman battled bravely and successfully. Shortly after her marriage, some of her poetical pieces,—for she had never ceased, 'mid all her privations and misfortunes, to court the tuneful Nine,—were shown to a gentleman of reputed taste in Aberdeen, and the news soon spread abroad that a poetess, in the person of a clean, thrifty, motherly housewife, dwelt at Fittie. A number of local gentlemen, among whom were Dr. Livingston, Bishop Skinner, and John Ewen, came to her assistance, and helped materially to make the publication of her verses a success. A list of 500 subscribers, almost all in the upper classes of town and county, ensured the sale of over 600 copies; and one can easily imagine how gratifying such a response proved to the humble housewife, who heretofore was so shy in showing her verses. An interesting notice of Mrs. Milne is given in "Spence's Letters from the North Highlands during the summer of 1816". From it we learn that the profits from "Simple Poems" amounted to £100, which was then being invested in the sixteenth share of a vessel of which her husband was made master, and that

“Kirsty”, though busy with the duties which eight children laid upon her, still found time for writing an occasional poem. “Mrs. Milne’s habitation”, says Miss Spence, “is in the second floor of a very mean house in a small fishing town, called *Foot Dee*, where all the uncivilised fish-wives live, but”, she continues, “her homely apartment had none of the litter and disorder seen in many of the dwellings of the poor in Scotland”. She describes the poetess as seated in the midst of her children, clean, neat, and employed at her needle, with a countenance, pale, melancholy, and sickly, but marked by intelligence, and enters fully into the origin of her verse-writing and subsequent domestic circumstances.

The contents of her book, apart from the history of the author, demand little attention now. They are indeed *simple*, both in matter and manner, and while they all evince a considerable faculty for rhyming, a pure and devout spirit, a tender and warm heart, they present few items worth quotation. The following epigrammatic lines will suffice as a sample :—

A sage much skilled in classic lore,
 And eager still t’ increase his store,
 Did punctual come each day to dinner,
 But never left his study sooner.
 One day, so says my little tale,
 His wife, surprised to find him fail
 In coming at the hour precise,
 Went to his study with surprise
 And said, with archness in her look,
 “I wish, my dear, I were a book”.
 “Why so?” her learned spouse replied;
 “Because you’d still be at my side”.
 “If you an almanack could be,
 I’d wish you then a book”, said he;
 “Pray, why an almanack, my dear?”
 “I’d have a new one every year!”

“A Collection of Poems on Various Subjects, in the English and Scottish Dialects, by WILLIAM EDWARDS, gardener, Delgaty, Turreff. Aberdeen: D. Chalmers & Co., 1810”. The above is the title of a small volume of verse which, though marked by little of the poetic faculty, shows considerable facility of versification, and which appears to have

had a rather extensive circulation, if we are to judge from the fact mentioned in a note at the end, that "the number subscribed for was nine hundred and twenty-three". The author must have been born soon after the '45, but his life appears to have been unchequered by events other than fall to the lot of the ordinary mortal who spends a long life in rural work. In looking over the volume it is hard to account for the large subscription-list on any other hypothesis than "troops of friends"; so the author must have been a "likeable body". Its pages contain a few elegies and odes, a "Song in praise of the gardener", dated 1780; a "Baker's Shop Bill", 1781; "An Address to the *Aberdeen Journal*"—the particular number containing an account of the battle of Corunna—in which he wonders how the editor can possibly find something new to say every week! In his modest preface he states that his "poems were written during intervals of labour by one who received no advantages of education except what a few months' attendance at a country school could afford". The following specimen of his poetic powers from an "Address to his Subscribers" has a personal interest:—

Weak flows the vital current in my veins,
 Its warmth reduc'd by age and wasting pains;
 Threescore and three years has the circling sun,
 Since I was born, along the ecliptic run.
 My nerves relax—the pride of strength is past,
 And down the hill of life I totter fast;
 No fare delicious does my table grace,
 No nut-brown draughts my languid spirits raise;
 A wife, five children at my homely board,
 Share in the boon my labours can afford—
 Except two elder boys, who sometimes keep
 A neighbour's herd of kine or flock of sheep.
 Yet, Heaven be bless'd, I rent eight roods of farm,
 A cow is mine, my mud-built cot is warm;
 These, with the benison that crowns my toil,
 Clothes ev'ry face around me with a smile.
 Such moral ills, the source of cruel woe,
 As envy, hate, and strife, I never know.

Evidently a good, kindly soul, who well deserved a list of nearly a thousand subscribers to his "bookie"!

Another of our local bards who rarely rose above mediocrity

in his verse-writing, and whom the spur of pinching poverty sent to the press more than once, was JAMES COCK, popularly known as "the Grandholm Poet". James was a native of Elgin, where he was born 17th February, 1752. He was bred to the occupation of a handloom weaver, married in 1775, and in 1781 lifted his "three looms and warping mill", and bag and baggage settled down as a customer weaver at Fraserburgh under the patronage of Lady Saltoun. After a three years' stay, dull times set in, with so distant a prospect of a revival in that quarter, that he was compelled to return to Elgin, where for about ten years, with varying fortune, he plodded through the rounds of a hard-working life. About 1796 he entered the employment of Leys, Mason, & Co., as a foreman or overseer at Grandholm Works, and after the wind-up of that firm, again took to the loom, and ended his days on the "treddles". His rhyming powers soon became known in the locality, and the geniality of his nature, coupled with no small share of conversational power, soon grouped round him all those fellow-workmen who had a taste for literature, especially poetry. There were George Smith, who long after published "Douglas Travestie", &c., a fellow-craftsman, humorist and poet; Willie Beattie, the heckler; Joseph Anderson, baker, book-canvasser, and poet; William Sutherland, the Gilcomston poet, also a weaver; all birds of a feather, and devoted cronies. Many a happy night did this coterie spend over the inspiring sup from Luckie Lawson's "pig", or at "Patie's reamin' nappy", till the varying fortunes which time had in store for each scattered them widely apart. Cock was singularly unfortunate in his family, the greater portion of them dying as they reached maturity. He first appeared before the public with a volume of verse in 1806, again in 1810, 1820, and 1824. He was too sensible a man to plume himself much on his poetic gifts, and frequently, to his more intimate correspondents, was not a bit mealy-mouthed about the lameness of his muse. In an epistle to Geordie [Smith] he says—

Tho' lang I've born the poet's name,
I hae sma' right to public fame,
My muse at best's but unco lame,
Without a doubt;
But vain applause was not my aim
Fan I set out.

At first, she was fu' stiff to draw,
 For fup nor spur she wadna ca';
 Necessity, that has nae law,
 Gar't her tak gate;
 Tho' mony a dowie day she saw,
 She's aye on foot.

* * * * *

Now, neiper, just to tell the truth,
 My muse could frolic in her youth;
 Fan she got aught to weet her mouth,
 She rais'd a clatter——
 Now fint a hait's to slok her drouth
 But sups o' water.

Guid scuds that fills a body's wame,
 May whiles inspire a chiel to rhyme;
 Vow Geordie, lad, ance on a time,
 Fan just half fu',
 I gart my numbers nicely chime,
 I sall avow.

This is pretty much the literal truth, for it is the frolicsomeness of his epistles, whether written in youth or old age, that makes up for the disappointing flatness of what may be called his more ambitious attempts. Though unmistakably far behind some of his contemporary working-men poets, yet the versicles of James Cock have now and again a raciness of expression and quaintness of phrase, which indicate a something in their author, which, had greater leisure and a more liberal education been his, might have bloomed into verses of more permanent worth.

The JOSEPH ANDERSON mentioned above, as a crony and rhyming correspondent of Cock's, was for some time a baker in Peterhead, but latterly came to Aberdeen as agent for the Bungay Publishing Company. He lived in Longacre, and published in 1818, through Peter Buchan, "at the Auchmedden Press", a volume of rhyme entitled "The Artless Muse". One of the longest pieces in his booklet is on the death of his wife in 1817, at the early age of twenty-four. His verses are much under mediocrity, and seem to be a rather lengthy commentary on his own description of himself—

A wayward, musing, strange-like elf,
 I never could express myself.

A A

His claims to fame, even among our bards of passage, are *nil*, but had they even been greater than they are, he was bound to play second fiddle to, yea, almost suffer total eclipse through the notoriety of another of the same name—to wit, DAVID ANDERSON, popularly known as “Copperie”, a literary veteran of many books, and, if not much of a poet, certainly a good bit of a character. He was born at Kintore in 1783, learned the trade of coppersmith at Aberdeen, and some time prior to 1817 started business on his own account at Inverurie. For some time he carried on a fairly remunerative business there, principally making and mending small stills, extensively used at that time throughout the county in distillation, illicit or otherwise. Unfortunately for much success in business, David, at an early period of his life (he is said to have first appeared in print in 1803), got hopelessly smitten with the itch for literary fame: and ’mid the hardships and poverty which fell to his lot from first to last, and they were many and keen, the illusions of authorship buoyed him gaily over all. Though by no means a strong man, he was an eminently cheery one, and had the happy knack of finding the silver lining to every cloud of trouble that overshadowed him—a feat which our profoundest philosophy cannot always achieve. Up to the year 1838, when he last appeared before the public with his poem “Napoleon in Russia, in three cantos”, he had already, in plays and poems, thrown forth seven separate booklets, the general character of which is that of unmistakable doggerel. They failed to bring money, they failed to bring fame, but they brought a certain amount of notoriety, which, in the simplicity of his mind, gave him all the pleasure the higher form could have given. His vanity and self-conceit, in connection with what he called his “literary works”, were of that sublime order which no amount of failure could touch; and of course criticism, unless it flattered him a bit, was equally powerless. Nothing astonished him more than the rage which took the public mind about William Thom after the publication of his “Rhymes and Recollections”; and when that sweet singer afterwards became known as “the Inverurie Poet”, Copperie, for the nonce, lost all patience. He spoke of Thom as a mere boy in literature; while he—the veritable Inverurie Poet—was the author of at least eight volumes of poetry! The younger sparks

"Sic poet, sic pastor", no doubt; but the fates had reserved "Copperie" for other purposes, and the "shin-banes" of the "auld wives" were in no danger of disturbance by the force of any pulpit declamation from him.

Years now began to whiten his haffits and curtail the energy of his wiry frame; and it fell to the kindly hands of friends to smooth in a manner the roughness of the way in his declining days. A short time before he died, he was so thoroughly poverty-stricken that some of his friends got him persuaded to acquiesce in their application for parochial relief on his behalf. This was readily granted to him, at the rate of a shilling per week, payable monthly. The spirit of independence, however, which all through life had characterised him, though "cowed" a little now, yet chafed under the indignity of being a pauper, and, on second thoughts, he wrote a letter to the parochial authorities desiring them to erase his name from their books, as he had determined to have nothing to do with their relief. So he died "in the rickle o' dry stane wa's" on the 29th December, 1851, and on the New Year's Day was laid in the churchyard at Kintore beside his mother, over whose grave he had, in his better days, placed a stone with the following epitaph—

No pomp displayed nor meant by this plain stone,
To draw the attention of the passing eye;
But the due tribute of a mourning son,
That marks where lies a mother's mouldering clay.

A man of quite a different type from Anderson was NATHANIEL GILLET, author of "Man's Chief Good, a poem, Aberdeen, Chalmers & Co., 1819". Though not a native, Mr. Gillet lived a long life in Aberdeen, was a working jeweller or goldsmith in the Gallowgate, and for a long period held office as treasurer to the managers of the Trades' School, being himself a member of the Hammerman Corporation. He was for many years electrician to the Infirmary, and was reputed to have held very curious opinions anent what he called "the four elements", fire, air, earth, and water. Among his cronies he was known as the "The Buckle-maker" a *nom-de-plume* he assumed in a controversy which took place, in the local papers, between him and the Rev. John Murray, over the removal

of the black cloth with which the Trades draped the gallery of Trinity Chapel, on the death of Queen Caroline. This retiring, diligent citizen, seems to have wooed the muses only in his old age, and if it was the besetting sin of his poetical contemporaries to be, in their higher attempts, little other than far-off echoes of Burns, it was reserved for Nathaniel to show that there were depths of inanity in blank verse which even these jinglers in their mother tongue could never hope to reach. In short, "Man's Chief Good" is the most prosaic and unreadable poem that had *then* been issued by the Aberdeen press; indeed we have to come down to the present day to find anything to match it in insipidity and dulness. As far as we have been able to understand it, it is a kind of sermon on the utility of religion, garnished over with those pious reflections, which we all like to hear from the lips of our old men, but which, in print, unless counterbalanced by other qualities, is not only intolerable, but would be certain to sink almost any poem.

His address to the muse will show, if not "the art of sinking in poetry" at least a little of the sister art of vapouring in verse:—

Hail ! heavenly muse ! offspring of Divine power !
The Deity's high herald, to proclaim
Around creation his ne'er-ceasing praise.
All hail ye Goddess of primeval joy !
Fair as the blushing morn that raptur'd saw
The Universe arise ! and fir'd the songs
Of chorus angels, when the morning stars
Together sang, and all the sons of God
Shouted for joy. Seraphic Songstress, hail !
Whose God-like energies at first disdain'd
The despicable range of grov'ling thought ;
And mounted nobly on cherubic wings
Enraptur'd, circled the Eternal Throne !
With eagle eye presuming him to trace
In all his radiant glory.

He also published in 1827 a religious work, "An Exposition of Christian Doctrine".