

JAMES Y. GEDDES.



Bailie Geddes

POET AND PUBLIC MAN.

XL.

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The man who can write a book which tempts a critic of high standing to devote a series of four long and appreciative articles to its elucidation is likely to have some good stuff in him, and such a man is he whose name heads this article. "I like that," said our critic regarding one of the poems in "The New Jerusalem;" "I like that; I feel it is written by a man who would be worth knowing." From which dictum the present writer would be the last individual in the world to dissent, and so should the reader also before all is said. Mr Geddes was born in Dundee in 1850, but some of his earliest and most pleasant recollections are connected with Strathmore, and at one time he was as intimate with the Barlatch in Coupar Angus, Causewayend, Campmuir, Kettins, Lintrose, and Burrelton as he was with the streets and alleys of Dundee. It is evident, however, that both in thought and action our friend is a son of the city—a product of its stirring life and ceaseless activities; and the majority of his pieces bear the impress of a mind concerned with its

SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS PROBLEMS,

its labour conditions, and class antagonisms. This is felt in his first volume—the "New Jerusalem"—and even more so in his latest, "In the Valhalla." But whatever he has written

Blairgowrie and Strathmore Worthies:

is stamped with the hall-mark of sincerity; the matter is always his chief concern, the form secondary; the matter itself, chiefly men and women. When he published his first book he was just turned twenty-five, and there was something so good in his last that it captured the critics, drawing from Richard Le Gallienne, a poet of no mean order himself, very high encomiums. The first is severe upon the "unco guid" and the conventions that too often pass for religion. There is no getting away from the fact that the poet had a subject of "bad eminence" to work upon, had clear and vigorous ideas regarding the subject, and could express his ideas in appropriate language. The book attracted such attention that it ran speedily out of print. A good deal of speculation was exercised and dogmatic statement made regarding the origin of the principal poem—nearly all wide of the mark. The facts are these. In his youth the author was a great reader, and became a member of Tay Square U.P. Church Literary Society, Dundee. This was one of the best Societies of the kind in the town, and among its former members may be mentioned David Deuchars, now General Manager of the goods department, N.B.R.; David Templeman, Provost of Blairgowrie; James Duffus, jute merchant, Calcutta; and J. J. Henry, leader in Conservative circles in Dundee. The Rev. Dr M'Gavin was pastor—a most worthy and conscientious minister, but conservative and orthodox to a degree—the very antithesis of the Rev. George Gilfillan. He could be very bitter at times; as witness his memorable attack on the "Dundee Advertiser," the "Scotsman," and Gilfillan in the Dundee U.P. Presbytery in connection with the instruction of the Edinburgh Presbytery to the former body

James Y. Geddes, Alyth.

to prosecute Gilfillan for heresy. The young man's sympathies were all with

THE GENIAL POET AND ORATOR,

and as President of the Literary Society, he came into contact with the Doctor, to whose rigid, Calvinistic theology and strict orthodoxy his freedom of thought and speech were particularly obnoxious. The result was open revolt on the part of our friend, who left the church and joined Lindsay Street Congregational Church, then being ministered to by the Rev. Mr Wallace, a man of deep insight and poetic temperament. The "New Jerusalem" was the outcome of this period of disturbance and transition, and to the circumstances referred to is due not a little of the invective and sarcasm it exhibits. The whole poem as well as some other things in the book are very typical of that phase of mind through which many thoughtful young men pass on the way to the region of the "Everlasting Yea." In Lindsay Street he had the privilege of coming into touch with some of the subtlest intellects and keenest debaters in Dundee, and no subject was outside review by the daring young spirits. Amongst Mr Geddes' most cherished friendships are those of the late William Reid, principal sub-editor of the "Dundee Advertiser," and W. F. Black, of the "People's Journal." Another old friend was the late James Cromb, of the "Evening Telegraph." A period of literary activity followed. As a member of the Dundee Burns Club Mr Geddes recalls with great zest the glowing spirits who used to meet of nights, each one moved as if he had

Meant to put his whole wit in a jest,
And resolved to live a fool the rest
Of his dull life.

Blairgowrie and Strathmore Worthies:

Coming to Alyth about twenty years ago, the backward condition of sanitary affairs—the drainage scheme had been under discussion for about nine years—led him under a *nom de plume* to start a correspondence in the “Dundee Advertiser,” the result of which was the creation of a Working Men’s Municipal Party, and Mr Geddes’ ultimately entering the Police Commission. With the single exception of Provost Tod, he is now the oldest member of the Town Council, to which he was once more returned last November. During all these years, it is hardly necessary to say, he has ever been on the side of progress. He has been a member of the School Board for many years, and occupies exactly the same position there as on the Town Council—the respected Chairman, Mr George Duncan, being his only senior in service. In politics, as any one might safely infer from his poetry,

OUR FRIEND IS A PRONOUNCED LIBERAL.

Along with several other ardent spirits he was the means of starting a Radical Association, which was merged in the Liberal Association many years ago. Again, as champion of the people’s rights, it is recalled that he was associated with Bailie M’Kenzie and Mr M’Glashan in the celebrated Reekie Linn affair, which created considerable stir at the time. With an indifference to convention and much independence of spirit which have exhibited the prickly side of his character occasionally, he has, as Le Gallienne points out, the saving sense of humour in his composition, which helps to tone down the acerbities of debate, and probably even his opponents would rather have him on

James Y. Geddes, Alyth.

their side than the other. To the present writer, however, the most interesting phase of our friend's personality is the poetical. The storm and stress of public life is the inveterate enemy of all poetry, particularly of a reflective or philosophical character; yet he has managed to do much admirable work in these lines. In addition to his "Jerusalem," he has two other volumes—"The Spectre Clock of Alyth" and "In the Valhalla," already mentioned; together with the libretto of a juvenile opera, "The Babes in the Wood." Many prose articles, reviews, &c., have also to be placed to his credit, the "Weekly Sun," "Weekly Star," and other London periodicals being open for his contributions. "In the Valhalla" has had a splendid reception; Gallienne himself devoted nearly a column of eulogium to it in the "Star" on its appearance. The author is a great admirer of Whitman and Emerson, it is evident, and some of the finest things he has written are in what is known as "Whitmanese." That is a matter of form; in interest and sympathy he is with all things "common" and simple—synonymous for the lovable and beautiful.

Warmth and love dwell on the levels,
Choose the common and be great,

is his own ideal, and there is a philosophical serenity of mood and a clarity of vision manifested in his writings which prove his consciousness of the fact that

The soul of all things is invisible.
And nearest to that soul the poet sings.

Not infrequently, however, there is a pervading note of sadness and questioning which only indicates his earnestness and sincerity; but the net result notwithstanding is optimistic rather than the reverse, and the fainting heart is nerved

Blairgowrie and Strathmore Worthies:

anew by contact with his tried spirit. His best work is seen in his longest poems; one of the present writer's favourites is "The Farm"—a deeply pathetic story of a happy country couple, who, longing for a farm of their own, go into the public-house line in order to gather the wherewithal, with the result that the man fills a drunkard's early grave. Here is an extract. It deals with the couple now settled down to work in the public-house:—

In the country, great preparations, too;
Ah, how they used to watch for the spring!
Do you think of it, wife?
Do you remember it, husband?
Over the bar they hung a bird's cage, with a lark in it
and a piece of green turf.
The bird broke into song; his songs were songs of re-
membrance; he saw it all too—
Primroses springing in the woods and pale anemones,
Hedges bursting into foliage,
Trees sending forth delicate leaves, falling like spray all
around them;
Children stringing again the daisies and buttercups,
Yellow blossom on the broom and the whin,
Nature hurrying on to the front her troops and under-
ground forces;
The old mandate set forth, "Let there be life and
light,"
Creation again.
Birds singing everywhere.
New birds in a new world,
Twitter, chirrup, flutter—never off the wing,
Their nesting a new thing,
Their songs new, and their mates superb and unequalled;
New bliss and domesticity;
Chaos threatening them if the nest be unfinished and the
hatching be not over in time,
Twitter, chirrup, flutter, hurry, and bustle,
Old birds going about the old work, soberly, sagaciously;
not just so active,
Singing seldomer they, deeper, fuller songs, with a touch
of sorrow in them;
They have memories;
They know there may be troubles;
They remember of such things as ravished nests.

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James Y. Geddes, Alyth.

The Farm comes nearer;
They almost smell the flourish of lilac and gean trees;
The coins drop, drop, dropping into the till—
Every penny a prisoner, not one of them needlessly
spent.

* * * * *

In the country midsummer.
How the throat of the lark throbs as he thinks of it;
Clover in the fields up to the knees of the children;
The making of hay;
The corn, tall, rich, green, succulent.
Kine in the shade loitering, whisking the flies with their
tails;
The great blades on the trees, open, expanded, taking all
they can get of the sunshine;
Fruit in the orchards, just needing the mellowing touch
of autumn;
Strawberries ripe;
Children gathering rasps in the wood.

* * * * *

Still nearer and nearer the Farm.

* * * * *

Autumn.

The lark seldomer singing;
They scarcely speak of the country.

* * * * *

Can this be the youth whose voice was to her as the fall-
ing of water in summer, the sound of whose coming
made her cheeks flush and her bosom quicker pulsate?
She remembered yet of the walks in the twilight, of the
whisperings low, of the pressing of hands, of the
loitering in nightly farewells;
She remembered of him who had sung of her, loved her,
wooed her, toiled for their little home, and married
her.

For these things the sot was sacred—he was transformed
before her;

Memory hung round him a golden aureole;
Still she loved on.

* * * * *

The mourners gather with long crape and white weepers;
Through the streets goes the hearse, with a dismal pro-
cession of coaches.

* * * * *

Snow on the ground;
The roses are gone and the honeysuckle;

Blairgowrie and Strathmore Worthies.

The lilac trees are lifeless, so are the ashes and gear trees;

The farmhouse is naked and desolate, fronting the full force of the blast.

The streams are sealed with the frost,

The birds are silent,

The sky is forbidding and sombre,

The wind moans and tosses about the withered leaves.

It would have been a pleasure to quote "A Common Affair"—

'Tis nothing rare,
Just a common affair—
A sale on the street!

But want of space forbids. Our final extract is from "Glendale & Co.," and gives a good idea of the author's sarcastic vein:—

Glendale! I think I saw you the other day;

It was at a meeting to greet a Distinguished Traveller.

Distinguished Traveller had penetrated to the centre of Africa;

The natives not acquainted with the blessings of civilisation, of trade, and of commerce,

Went naked, or nearly so; lived in huts in the forest, wore rings in their noses:

Unhappy benighted natives!

Natives not so anxious to receive the blessings of civilisation as could be wished, opposed the progress of Distinguished Traveller.

Some of them had to be hanged, some of them had to be shot—

Action of intrepid traveller justifiable in your eyes.

I saw you and others applauding him as he spoke in his own justification;

It was necessary to impress on the minds of the natives the wholesomeness of discipline,

Natives idolatrous, worshippers of wooden gods;

Distinguished Traveller of a religious turn of mind; this also highly satisfactory;

In a moment of dire distress he cried unto Heaven; he informed the Supreme that if he were relieved he would mention the fact in the newspapers—

(Great concession this on part of Distinguished Traveller—not always inclined to share publicity with any one).

Distinguished Traveller was relieved; strictly faithful to his word he mentioned the fact in the newspapers.