

BURNS AND BYRON.

THE late festival—an unprecedented one in Scotland—has not made the name of Burns better known, or more celebrated than it was before. His fame was independent of any such public recognition. But we cannot help regarding it in a very important light, considering the many different opinions which have been expressed of his character. The festival was a formal national acknowledgment, both of his poetical genius and his social worth; not only unopposed by any one having a right to be heard on the subject, but ratified by the eager consent of many illustrious, many enlightened, and many honest, moral, and respectable inhabitants of the country. There was no effort required to make this acknowledgment. The proposal, of course, came at first from one individual, but the feeling of its justice and its propriety was universal; and we are glad that cant and hypocrisy were disregarded, and that so many Scotsmen had the moral courage to despise the cold sneer of the professing rigidly righteous; and to recognise, honestly and openly, claims which no other Scottish poet ever put forth so strongly to the admiration and affection of his countrymen. We mean not to say that there are not other names of which Scotland has good cause to be proud—names which are justly honoured both in this country and throughout the empire; but no Scottish writer has presented so vividly the sturdy independence of his countrymen as Robert Burns. It was his own strongest characteristic; and the sympathy with it is deep and national. It is more of his *character*, as developed in his poetry, than of the poetry itself, that we wish to say a few words; and to contrast it with that of another man of genius, between whose works and those of Burns, however, either as regards fancy or creative power—the two great elements of poetical genius—we do not intend for one instant to institute any comparison. It is simply with the *character* of the two men of genius, as shown in their respective works, that we intend to deal; and we know of no more striking contrast than that which these characters, so exhibited, present. Though we had never read one word of the private history of either, we are inclined to think that our remarks would have been the same.

Burns and Byron—the Peasant and the Peer! Save the alliteration, there is little parallelism between them. In station, studies, aims, and objects, no two men were ever more widely different: in tone, expression, sentiment, and manner, no two poets ever presented a stronger contrast. They were both reared in Scotland: they died at nearly the same age: both were determined enemies of cant, in all its shapes and disguises: and we know few other elements of thought or character in which they resembled one another.

Burns was the robust poet of health, Byron the fevered prophet of disease; and their works are as different as the glow of the one and the fire of the other. The song of the one was the charm by which he escaped from the pressure of worldly

calamity; that of the other was the passion by which he immortalized his affliction, and rendered mental agony doubly poignant. Burns dipped his pen in oil, to smooth with verse “the carking cares” of life; Byron plunged his in gall, to poison himself and mankind. The one looked at the best view of an indifferent prospect, and he brightened it with the sanguine hues of his own fancy; the other would see nothing but darkness in his splendid career, and his whole life and genius were devoted to deepen the shades. The poetry of the one resembles a *pastorale* of Haydn; that of the other is like a *sinfonia funebre* of Beethoven.

Burns was conscious of his own natural ability,—knew perfectly well that his talents were far higher than his birth; and felt, at the same time, that, as a man, he had nothing to regret. While he made a true estimate of his own genius, asserted it, and gloried in it, he had no repinings at his humble station, no heart-burnings for higher. He was there, and he was there for good. He felt no petty enmity at those of a higher grade; his was none of the vulgar democracy which sneers at all above it. Where rank was united with worth, no one admired it more: where the union was embellished with wit, and learning, and genius, he was ready to worship. There was much honest admiration in him; there was little envy. He would not have exchanged his bardship for a coronet. The “holly round his head,” bound by the Scottish muse, was a diadem which he esteemed higher than the “round and type of sovereignty.” And as his crown was from Nature’s hand, his treasures were drawn from her choicest stores:—

No vulgar metals fused from common ores,
But gold to matchless purity refined,
And stamped with all the Godhead of the mind.

His subjects had the worship of his heart and the allegiance of his genius—honesty, valour, love, friendship, truth, independence. Manliness in all its forms, whether in the field, the senate, the shelling, or the grove, was his favourite theme; and if for a moment his verse was tinged with misanthropy, the blot was speedily effaced by the healthy reasoning which a moment’s reflection suggested. There is little of the effeminacy of poetry about Burns; and, much as has been said about it, there is little licentiousness, properly so called. It is true he is often coarse, indelicate, unscrupulous in his phrases; but he is so, purely for the sake of the humour or the satire—not for the sake of indelicacy. There is no gloating over vice as in Juvenal—no painting of it for its own sake. “Holy Willie’s prayer” and “The Jolly Beggars” may be too strong for refined tastes; but the one is a richly-deserved castigation of a class too numerous in this country, and the other is life, real life, though it be the dregs of it. But his highest efforts are his purest, and they show the natural bent of his mind, which was virtuous and honourable. “The Cottar’s Saturday Night” is a picture of piety, benevolence, love, affection, and contentment, which, we believe, could only come

from a pious and benevolent mind. No radically vicious man could have so ardently delighted in the description. It came fresh from an honest unsophisticated heart. His "thoughtless follies" have been rather too often harped upon. With his festive soul—his adoring companions—it is wonderful they were so few. But he has himself immortalized them by his touching confession. There was at least no hypocrisy in his character. He would have pleaded guilty at once at any bar of morality. He would have given judge and counsel no trouble in searching for evidence. They and the world were welcome both to the full knowledge of his sins, and his manly repentance of them.

His works have toned and improved the feelings of his class.

Byron's weakness was, to be thought strong. This desire shines through the most of his poetry. He wished to appear above prejudices, and opinions, and rules. He was too high to be guided by them. He despised the vulgar elements of human composition, and looked upon himself as "half dirt, half deity." Byron was a weak man, and the weakness of his nature was the strength of his poetry. His works were the diction of his passions. He was their intellectual bondsman. It was his slavery to their mandates—his entire devotion to their gratification—his intimacy with their operations—his intense concentrated experience in their indulgence and contemplation—his long obedience to their slightest impulse—that enabled him to paint and shadow, and compare and contrast them so vividly. He was a poetical gladiator, exhibiting for fame and gold the nakedness of "a mind diseased." His feelings were passions, and his passions crimes. Under their command the voyage of his life was made with a false compass, and a false chart. He read history and used it, not for healthful instruction in the ways of man—not for great, or correct, or useful views of legislation—not for philosophical analysis—not for the sake of tracing to its source any art, or any science, or any profession: he read it to illustrate his passions—his own passions—pride, revenge, love, fear, hatred, jealousy. Often he lauds highly and enthusiastically, the wise, the brave, the virtuous, the patriot, of a past era; but it is to gratify his scorn of the fool, the coward, the libertine, the traitor, of a later time. He draws an angel of light; but it is to contrast the angel with a demon. He looks into the grave of the father for a scourge wherewith to lash the son. He raises the dead, to mock the living. He holds up

"—— the name of Washington,

To make man blush there was but one."

The most glorious productions of the globe are used by him to make men look more hideous. He places his heroes in the gardens of the earth, where they spread pestilence and death. How he looked at the beauties of nature!

"Know ye the land where the cypress and myrtle
Are emblems of deeds that are done in their clime,
Where the rage of the vulture, the love of the turtle,
Now melt into sorrow, now madden to crime!"

In his highest work, the sublimest description of the sublimest scenery, the most melting pictures of natural feeling, are followed by the ready sneer and degrading comparison of Childe Harold. He cannot emancipate himself for any length of time from his bondage. He never escapes from the curse of seeing all things with "the evil eye." He would not know gold without its alloy; and he used it to make false coin. Unlike the alchemists of old, who tried to transmute baser metal into gold, he reversed the process. Virtue and beauty in themselves seemed tame. He could speak of love, but it must be followed by pollution; of courage, but it must be allied to crime. He could paint the bloom of the rose; but it was to watch it till it withered. He could sing, in tones of magical sweetness, of female tenderness and manly feeling; but the deformity must appear in opposition—lust, bloodshed, and saturnalian licence. The glow of innocence must be chased by the flush of shame: the heroic achievement must be paid by the guilty reward. He held up virtue as a light for exhibiting vice: he seduced his readers by sanguine descriptions of valour, and loveliness, and truth, and impassioned devotion, to follow him to contemplate their alliance with the foulest subjects of the mind. He created chastity to deflower it; honour, to break it; religion, to turn it into contempt. He was a poor miser; for he had inestimable wealth, and knew not its use: he placed his jewel in the head of a toad. He had precious mines; but his diamonds never saw the light of day: they must be shown in their earthy bed by the lurid glare of a torch,—their own lustre showing their dark setting,—their natural dyes dimmed by unwholesome vapours. Unlike other authors who describe crime, that it may be followed by repentance,—who paint virtue, to show its reward,—Byron exhibits the one, to exult at its desperation; and the other, to sneer at its loss. His judgment was wrong, and his hand was cursed: every thing he touched took the taint of his disease. He used the prism, not to show the dyes and the beauties of light: the colours of his spectrum all blended into black. His subjects are chosen for this colour: he cares not much for peccadilloes. His favourite topics were deep, damning, dangerous, maddening crimes. In a light mood he penned "Beppo;" but the evil spirit of his genius was strong upon him when he fancied "Manfred." He joked at adultery; but he devotes his whole soul to exhibit the foul and maddening fruits of incest. He delighted in anatomy only when there was disease; and he dissected with a poisoned knife.

Whom have his works made better?