

THE LATEST LITERARY DISCOVERY.—BURNS AND THE PARAPHRASES.

AN announcement, calculated to startle Presbyterian Scotland from one end of it to the other, has been somewhat boldly hazarded, that our national poet, Burns, had a hand in giving some of the last touches to our national Paraphrases, and left the mark of his genius deeply stamped on them. The statement is not given by way of conjecture or surmise merely, but as a positive and peremptory averment.

To the *Witness* newspaper belongs the extraordinary merit of being the first to proclaim this discovery, as remarkable in its way, if true, as any of the vestiges of pre-Adamite existences found flagreed into fossils, or intaglied on stones. But that paper, though the first to proclaim, was not the first to make the discovery. An article in the *Free Church Magazine* for April on the Paraphrases led, it seems, "one of the readers, a gentleman of Edinburgh, to bring to the shop of the publisher, Mr. Johnstone, a manuscript volume which he had found lying among some old hereditary papers, embrowned with the dust of half a century, in a waste corner of his library, and in which a considerable number of the Paraphrases was copied out in a small and neat, though somewhat common-place hand." Of this volume every alternate page had been left blank, and on the blank pages were found corrections on the verse by three different hands. One of these, on being shown to the Rev. James Begg of Edinburgh, was straightway pronounced by him to be that of Burns; the "remarkable handwriting" of the poet having become familiar to him—so, and in none other strain, runs the tale—from his having seen it "in the big ha' Bible of Jean Armour, the widow of Robert Burns," while he was minister of Maxwelltown Chapel, Dumfries. Mr. Begg, therefore, is the Columbus of this new discovery in the world of literature; to substantiate which, a *fac simile* of some of the alleged alterations by Burns, appears in the May number of the *Free Church Magazine*.

Here, then, we have the whole amount of it—the old manuscript found in a waste corner of the library of "a gentleman of Edinburgh"; the *pronunciamento* of the Rev. James Begg; the decisive proclamation of an Edinburgh newspaper; and the smaller and more modest announcement of the *Free Church Magazine*, with its accompanying lithograph.

And "that's our case, my Lord." Dr. Johnson admired "a good hater." We confess to having predilections for any one who is a sturdy doubter. "Prove all things" is a Scriptural maxim. Well may the literary world pause and demand farther proof of the statement of alterations of the Paraphrases, in the massy and masculine chirography of Burns himself, being extant, before such a statement can be implicitly believed. Old manuscripts, found in queerer places than "the waste corner of a library"—

what particular corner is that?—have been credited ere now, on much stronger testimony than this brown affair that was brought, in a mysterious way, into Mr. Johnstone's shop by a mysterious "gentleman of Edinburgh;" and yet have turned out false after all. Ireland's spurious tragedies of William Shakspeare were said to be discovered in the corner of an old, unfrequented garret, or some such out of the way place; and, at the first announcement of them, all the *literati* of the day welcomed them as veritable productions of the Bard of Avon. But the deception did not continue long. The *glamour* left the eyes of the literary public, and the pretended plays, said, on the most unquestionable authority, to be in the genuine handwriting of Shakspeare, were found to be forgeries. Then there was Chatterton, with his Rowley manuscripts, taken out of the old chest of St. Mary Redcliffe, Bristol. These were received at the first as authentic writings. But Grey and Mason, on being shown them, at once declared them forgeries too. We do not say that Mr. Begg has had any art or part in the old hereditary manuscript containing the altered Paraphrases, any more than he has had in the composing of the Paraphrases themselves; nor that in the slightest degree, or in the smallest way or manner imaginable, does he resemble Ireland and Chatterton in imaginative powers; his gifts are of a different kind, and of a high order in their way. But in one important respect he stands on precisely the same grounds with them; namely, in being the first to promulgate the notable discovery to the world. Both Ireland and Chatterton had a fraudulent object in view in their impostures; as Lauder and Psalmanazar also had in theirs: the one, the interpolator of passages into Latin authors to prove Milton a plagiarist, and the other the inventor of the Formosan language and history. But there is clearly no fraudulent or deceptive motive in this affair of the Paraphrases. It is simply an error in judgment, a mistake of the imagination, a mere flight of the fancy—only Mr. Begg and his two supporters need not be so very decided and positive about it.

The matter requires proof. The parties are bound to establish their case. *That* they have not yet even attempted to do. Mr. Begg's *ipse dixit* is considered quite enough to settle the question. But there are many persons in this our country of Scotland, besides the Rev. gentleman, to whom the handwriting of the poet of Scotland is familiar. And there are a few alive, even at this day, who were familiar with the poet himself, and knew all his personal history. And yet to none of these, or to the generation that has intervened betwixt his day and ours, did it ever occur that Burns had anything to do with the revision of the Paraphrases. None of his numerous biographers have ever come upon the trace of such a remarkable incident in his life, as this would have been,

had it been true. Tradition makes no mention of it; and all the searching and seeking of some of the most indefatigable hunters after personal traits, anecdotes, and facts, that ever followed in the wake of one who had achieved for himself immortality—all the pickings and rakings of the *chiffonniers* of literature that ever puddled among the sweepings of an author's study, or the refuse heaped into "the waste corner of a library," or, ghost-like, have wandered up and down among "the homes and haunts" of our poets and great men—to whom the merest scrap of gossip, the smallest possible crumb of biography, would be a perfect God-send—never stumbled on a discovery like this. It remained for Mr. Begg, to eclipse Currie, Walker, Heron, Hamilton Paul, Peterkin, Lockhart, Allan Cunningham, Cromek, Hogg, Motherwell, and a host of others, who had already told the world all that the world can now know of Burns or his history. It seems strange that his shrewd and strong-minded brother, Gilbert, knew nothing of such a remarkable matter as Burns's revision of the Paraphrases of our National Church, else he could not have failed to have put it on record, as he has done other things relating to the poet, not of such great importance; and that his widow, Jean Armour, with whom Mr. Begg was so well acquainted in Dumfries, and who "read much in her Bible," never mentioned such a circumstance to the minister of her grandchild, on any of his frequent visits to her. Surely it could not have been concealed from her? Is it conceivable that, during the whole time that, as husband and wife, they must have sung these same Paraphrases together—either in Sabbath-evening worship, in the quietness of their own house, or sitting on the same seat in the parish church—he never should have even breathed to her a hint of his handiwork? It is equally strange that the sons of the poet, yet alive, never divulged a fact of so much interest in the literary history of their father.

But in regard to the brown old manuscript volume itself, said to contain the veritable handwriting of Robert Burns, now revealed to the world like the unrolling of an Egyptian mummy, the world—the literary portion of it at least—would require to know something of its history and genealogy, before even pronouncing on the authenticity of the handwriting itself. Where did it come from? In whose possession has it been all this undiscovered time? Disclose to us worthy "gentleman of Edinburgh," where you got it, and by what means it has lain so long unregarded among the lumber of your library? We wonder if it ever occurs to any one who sees and handles it, to turn it up to the light and examine its water mark and maker's name. Strange detections have been made ere now, "in the olden time," by such a very simple test.

Granting, however, that it is all right in this particular, we come to the examination of the manuscript itself. What is alleged to be the handwriting of the poet, on close scrutiny, and comparison with his acknowledged genuine writings, will be found to be altogether unlike. Except

in the general massy outline, it bears no resemblance whatever to the handwriting of the bard, and is wanting in all the characteristics of his style. Connoisseurs in art have a sure method of detecting proper skill and genius in a painting submitted to their inspection. However showy and attractive may be the broad and general aspect of it—however grand and effective the full front view—if the minor details, the more minute touches, cannot stand the test of close investigation, the picture is a failure, and the artist pronounced either inexperienced or unskilful. The head and face of a portrait, for example, may be perfect and unexceptionable, while the fingers, or finger nails even, may have been overlooked, as things requiring no great care in the doing of them. A true master never leaves any portion of his work unfinished; but bestows even more attention on the smaller minutiae, the minor beauties of his productions, than he does on the greater details. Let our readers apply this test to the case in question; and that they may be enabled to do so, we have had lithographs done, of the portion of the paraphrases, lithographed in the *Free Church Magazine*, and of another authentic lithograph of Burns's unquestioned handwriting.

The first thing that strikes us in the *fac simile* of the pretended alterations by Burns on the old 35th paraphrase, (No. 48 of the collection now in use) given in the *Free Church Magazine*, and re-lithographed from it, in a separate leaf, is, that it has all the appearance of the writing of an old man, rather than of one in his early manhood. At the time the present version of the Paraphrases received the final sanction of the General Assembly, Burns was barely twenty-two; and even at that period, his handwriting was firmer and clearer than that represented by the *fac simile*. Let the reader compare it with the lithograph of the stanza of the *Cotters' Saturday Night*, given on the same page, and they will not fail to mark a mighty difference in the character and spirit—in the very idiosyncrasy, as we may say, of the two handwritings. Not only in the grouping but in the formation of the letters a difference is observable. The one, the paraphrase, has apparently been written by some person who wrote slowly, and with no small degree of tremor; and it has about it an aged, dragged sort of look. The other has a freshness and vigour that are evidently the impress of a young, and strong, and confident hand. But to come to tracings. Contrast the Bs of the two writings. In the one, they are sharp and angular; in the other, open and rounded. Take the As. In the one, they are full and bold; in the other, narrow and stroky. The small ds in the one are, almost without exception, turned round; in the other, they are just as invariably written the other way. Then look at the letter i, as used in both. The one dispenses, in every instance but two, with the dot above; the other never misses it once. In the one, the s is always written short; in the other, it is just as invariably written long. There are numerous other discrepancies that cannot fail to be detected on close examination. But it needs not that we should

individualise them farther; on this point, we have, we think, supplied abundant data for enabling the reader to form a correct judgment for himself.

It seems to be taken for granted that it was during the time of Burns's residence in Irvine that his amendments on the Paraphrases took place. "The little brown volume," it is said, "must have been submitted to him for revision by some of his earlier clerical acquaintances; and the fact, that the poor over-toiled flax-dresser of twenty-two, should have been consulted in such a work, shows how high he must have stood in the estimate of the little circle in which he then moved." On June 1st, 1781, the present collection of the Paraphrases received the approval of the Assembly's Committee, and before the end of that year they were published as they now stand. It was only about that same month of June that Burns commenced business as a flax-dresser in Irvine, in partnership with another; and in six months thereafter, as he and some of his companions were making merry together, at the coming in of the new year, the shop took fire, and the poet was burnt out. It is quite clear that it was not at this particular period of his life that he could have had the opportunity of making the alterations. And nothing that we know of his previous history gives any countenance to the notion that any general or casual acquaintance, which he may have had with clergymen, could have led to his being consulted—in such a weighty matter as the emendations of the Paraphrases, then in preparation—at any anterior time.

The whole thing is a magnificent hypothesis; one of those bold and grand conjectures which set people's wits a-woolgathering, and originate interminable controversy. The announcers of the discovery have failed, or rather they have not tried, to show that any of Burns's clerical friends—and that he numbered several clergymen among his acquaintances at that early period of his life is well enough known—held that prominent position in the Church which gave them any authority, to submit the revision of the Paraphrases, to this or that clever country lad, that they "permitted," as Lockhart significantly says they did Burns, "to mingle occasionally in their society." Far less have they shown that those clergymen, conjointly or severally, had ever "consulted," that is, applied to, the poet on the subject at all. That is their weak point. They must get over that gutter in their way, before they proceed any farther. The rich plush cloak of Sir Walter Raleigh once stood both him and Queen Elizabeth in good stead, when he spread it over the mire to allow her Majesty to pass ever dry-shod; but the foot-cloth of Plausibility, however richly laced or gairishly adorned, won't do here. The connecting link is wanting. It must be remembered, that at that time—the period before June, 1781, when the Paraphrases were finally approved by the Church—Burns, though known in his own obscure country circle, for his acuteness and originality, for "the depth of his discernment, the force of his expressions, and the authoritative energy of his understanding," and, in some quarters,

feared for his satirical powers, was not by any means known as a poet. His fame had not then travelled to Edinburgh, or widened into world-renown. It was not till full five years after the date mentioned, that his name was known to Dr. Blair, Dr. Blacklock, Dr. Robertson, and all the rest of them. It was not till after the Irvine business, and after he and his brother Gilbert had taken the farm of Mossiel, that he acquired any local reputation as a poet. On this point we have his own testimony. "I entered on this farm," he says, in his celebrated letter to Dr. Moore, of 2d August, 1787, "with a full resolution, 'come, go to, I will be wise.' I read farming books; I calculated crops; I attended markets; and, in short, in spite of the devil, and the world, and the flesh, I believe I should have been a wise man; but the first year, from unfortunately buying bad seed, the second from a late harvest, we lost half our crops. This overset all my wisdom, and I returned, 'like the dog to his vomit, and the sow that was washed, to her wallowing in the mire.' I now began to be known as a maker of rhymes. The first of my poetic offspring that saw the light, was a burlesque lamentation on a quarrel between two reverend Calvinists, both of them *dramatis personæ* in my 'Holy Fair.'" The first of Burns's poetic offspring that saw the light, according to the new discovery, was Burns's amendments on the Paraphrases, printed in 1781. And that these amendments were neither unimportant nor mere verbal corrections, *currente calamo*, is proved by the interest which the mere announcement of them has excited, and the specimens given. The paraphrase lithographed in the *Free Church Magazine*, the 48th of our present version, was composed by Logan. We may as well be told that Burns revised and amended Logan's Sermons, as that he revised and amended Logan's Paraphrases. We shall here quote the version, as given from the old brown hereditary manuscript volume, and the conjectural version by Burns:—

"Now let our souls ascend above
 The fears of guilt and woe;
 God is for us our friend declared,
 Who then can be our foe?
 He who his Son, his only Son,
 For us gave up to die,
 Will he withhold a lesser gift,
 Or what is good deny?
 Behold all blessings sealed in this
 The highest pledge of love,
 All grace and peace on earth below,
 And endless life above.
 Now who shall dare to charge with guilt
 Whom God hath justified,
 Or who is he that shall condemn,
 Since Christ the Saviour died?
 He died, but he is risen again,
 Triumphant from the grave,
 And pleads for us at God's right hand,
 Omnipotent to save."
 Then who can e'er divide us more,
 From Christ and from his love?

The passage supposed to be in the rendering of Burns, runs as follows:—

* * * * *
 "The Lord Almighty is our friend,
 And who can prove a foe?"

He who his Son, his only Son,
 Gave for mankind to die,
 Will He a lesser gift withhold,
 Or what is good deny?
 Behold the best, the greatest gift,
 Of everlasting love:
 Behold the pledge of peace below,
 And perfect bliss above.
 Where is the judge that can condemn,
 Since God hath justified?
 Who shall presume to charge with guilt
 For whom the Saviour died?
 "The Saviour died, but rose again,
 Triumphant from the grave.
 And pleads our cause within the veil,
 Omnipotent to save."
 Then who can e'er divide us more
 From Jesus and his love?

The 50th Paraphrase is generally ascribed to Dr. Isaac Watts, altered for the Assembly's collection by the Rev. William Cameron, minister of Kirknewton, Linlithgowshire, the author of the 14th and 17th, who had a principal share in the preparation of the appointed version. The second verse is said, in the newly-found manuscript, to have originally stood thus:—

"Those bodies then—corrupted now—
 Shall uncorrupted rise:
 Mortal they fell, but rise to live,
 Immortal in the skies."

Thus affirmed to be rendered by Burns, as in our present version:—

"Those bodies that corrupted fell
 Shall uncorrupted rise,
 And mortal forms shall spring to life,
 Immortal in the skies."

The 26th Paraphrase, of unknown authorship, was also altered by Cameron. The opening verse, in the manuscript thus reads:—

"Ho! ye that thirst approach the spring
 Of ever-flowing bliss."

As said to be amended by Burns, it runs—

"Ho! ye that thirst approach the spring
 Where living waters flow."

Of the 6th Paraphrase it has never certainly been known who was the author, although it has been attributed to Watts. The only alteration made on it appears to have been on the 4th and 5th verses, which were originally written thus:—

"Though in his garden to the sun
 His boughs with verdure smile;
 Though deeply fixed, his spreading roots
 Unshaken stand awhile,
 Yet, when from Heaven his sentence flies,
 He's hurried from his place."

In the supposed hand of Burns they thus read:—

"Fair in the garden to the sun
 His boughs with blossoms smile,
 And, deeply fixed, his spreading roots
 Unshaken stand a while;
 But forth the sentence flies from heaven,
 And sweeps him from his place."

Although up to June, 1781, Burns's name had made no noise in the world, the preparation of the Paraphrases for the use of the Church was a matter of interest throughout Scotland. Five years afterwards, when he had entered upon his glorious career of fame, and the poet-ploughman was the subject of conversation in all the circles of his native land, is it to be supposed that those

who knew of his having touched with his genius some of the Paraphrases, would have remained silent at such a time upon the circumstance? Some of his clerical acquaintances, cognizant of the fact, must surely have divulged it at such a period of wonder and excitement about the peasant-bard? That Burns, at an early period of his life, had strong religious impressions, is a circumstance that in no way countenances the idea of his having given the finishing dress to some of the best of our Paraphrases. The minds of all true poets, when the first promptings of their genius is felt within them, take a decidedly devotional tone. It is in the very nature of inspiration to have in it some yearning after the Ideal—some longing after Immortality—some deep and stirring impulse to lead the soul beyond the mere Realistic of this commonplace world. Burns was not without these marks and signs of genuine inspiration. He tells us himself "that the earliest composition that he recollects taking pleasure in, was 'The Vision of Mirza,' and a hymn of Addison's beginning 'How are thy servants blest, O Lord!'" With him a strong feeling of piety and virtue was "early ingrained." But his devotion, however ardent, did not always take a religious turn; his impressions, however strong, were not, even at that early period, invariably virtuous. A man may worship a false deity, and yet have more real devotion than many who worship the true one. With Burns, love and poetry went hand in hand, and not poetry and religion. In his younger years, at the time these Paraphrases must have been so amended by him, or some one else, love engrossed all his affections. He was never without one rustic sweetheart or another, and his devotion to the "fair Cynthia of the minute" knew no bounds while it lasted. "Far beyond all other impulses of my heart," he says, "was un penchant à l'adorable moitié du genre humain. My heart was completely tinder, and was eternally lighted up by some goddess or another." But what we want to remark about this feeling of devotion is, that during those periods when it was undoubtedly of a strongly religious nature in the bosom of Robert Burns, his was not exactly the heart to have contented itself with a few occasional alterations of paraphrases, the productions of others; but that its own strong impulse would have led him to throw off one or more complete pieces, bearing all the impress of his high genius, and manly and vigorous intellect, worthy to be inserted in that collection which could already boast of his emendations. Witness the ardour with which he, some years later, set about writing songs for the valuable musical collection of Mr George Thomson. Can it be conceived that he would have restrained the boundings of his mighty genius, to merely doing the dull drudgery of editorial task-work? It is not, indeed, within the range of possibility, that those, whoever they might be, who asked him to revise the Paraphrases, should not have thought of asking also a paraphrase from himself. If he was thought qualified for the one, surely he must have been deemed abundantly

capable of the other. And that his mind, if properly attuned and directed, was fully competent for such a sublime task, the few pieces of a religious nature that he has left—his version of the first Psalm, and of part of the ninetieth, and his touching stanzas, entitled, "Man was made to Mourn," as well as his divine "Cotter's Saturday Night," amply testify.

That Burns's supposed connexion with the Paraphrases was unknown to his sons, as hinted above, is an acknowledged fact. Since this article was written, a paragraph has appeared in the *Dumfries Standard* of the 19th May, which is entitled to attention, as it embodies the testimony of one of the bard's sons in favour of the authenticity of the writing in question. The Editor of the paper mentioned states that he submitted the lithographed *fac simile* in the *Free Church Magazine*, and the explanatory notice, to the eldest son of the poet, now resident in Dumfries. As may readily be fancied, he was not a little astonished. "That is his hand," he said, "there can be no doubt of that; no man ever wrote like Burns; but I never knew before that my father had been consulted regarding the Paraphrases. It is certainly very strange, but it is no doubt perfectly true." In the course of the conversation which ensued on the subject, Mr. Burns said that he recollected the poet was very fond of the Paraphrases, and had caused him, when quite a child, to learn the first one, beginning, "Let heaven arise, let earth appear, said the Creator Lord." "For," remarked Mr. Burns, "the line ran in this way then, and not 'Said the Almighty Lord,' as it does now; and from early association, and because the term is more appropriate, I prefer greatly the old version of this passage to the new." Nevertheless, we remain unconvinced. Burns's son is as likely to be mistaken as any other man. On a superficial view, the conjectural handwriting is calculated to deceive and to satisfy; but no evidence on earth can be more fallacious or delusive than that of handwriting. Lawyers and lithographers, and all who are familiar with the mode adopted in Courts of Justice, in relation to manuscript identity, are sufficiently aware of this. We submitted the lithograph of the *Free Church Magazine* to a gentleman not unknown in the religious literature of his country, well versant in Burns's handwriting,

and in whose possession is the original of one of his poems. At first sight he at once declared it to be Burns's handwriting. On a closer inspection, however, he began to entertain doubts, and was ultimately convinced that it was not the poet's.

We repeat there is a vitality and grasp in the handwriting of Burns which we look in vain for in the supposed manuscript of his, now for the first time given to the world. The specimen of the "Cotter's Saturday Night," although not written for full four years thereafter, looks much more like what the poet's hand might be considered to have been while he was under twenty-two; and that of the Paraphrase revision, what it might have been had he reached a period of life much beyond that at which he died. To us it seems clear that the latter belongs to a person at the time much advanced in years; and it is not unlikely to have been that of an elderly minister or other person who had something to do either with the copying or the revision of the Paraphrases.

After all, before the summer of 1781, neither the literary nor the moral position of Burns was such as to countenance the assumption now made. At the period of his life anterior to that date he had not the slightest standing as a poet, and his moral character, even then, was not quite so irreproachable as to warrant his being applied to, by any of the clergy especially, to undertake such a sacred charge as the revision of the spiritual songs of his country. It was not long after this period, that, from his powers of satire, directed against the clergy, in which he has never yet been equalled, he became the terror of all the ministers of the west of Scotland; some of whom actually trembled in their pulpits when they knew that Burns was present among the congregation. And even while yet resident in the parish of Tarbolton, (including the short portion of his time spent in Irvine,) from his seventeenth to his twenty-fourth year, his name had become so notorious in "kintra clatter," as, in common decorum, would have deterred any of the clergy of that day, having to do with the preparation of the new version of the Paraphrases, from consulting him on such a subject. It may turn out to be the fact that Logan's handwriting bears a strong resemblance to that of Burns.

VERSES.

"Vita nam flamme similis.

Yea! bright is their lot, whose names dazzle in story,
Like some beacon that lights, far and near, the hill-side;
Though, partaking its brightness as well as its glory,
Their joy was scarce full ere its brilliancy died.

To some, still more blest, at each day's calm returning,
Life sweetly shines on with a lamp's even gleam;
And the ray which that lamp gives to night in its burning
Shines again from their eyes with as placid a beam.

But not such are the days t'will be mine to remember;
Not the fever of action, or calm of repose;
My life dies away like a smouldering ember,
Unrelax'd by joys, if unharass'd by woes.

And if sometimes the breath of love, friendship, and duty,
Like the wind, has swept o'er it, and kindled a spark;
It was but as the wind, which just stirs the night's beauty,
And scarce hushed, e'er the flame it brought life to was
dark.

Already has passed the fresh childhood, which bounded
At the thought of the great, and the sight of the fair,
And but left to my heart, as the flame has crept round it,
The dull ashes of life which lie mouldering there.

H. M. A.