

SKETCHES OF BRITISH POETS.

No. II.—BURNS AND ROSCOE.

BY JOHN MACKAY WILSON.

THE name of Burns will ever be a name of pride on the page of Scottish History—his strains will be sung upon the green mountain and in the yellow vale, till the last sheep shall have nipped the last blade of grass upon the one, and the last sickle, in the hands of the last reaper, shall have cut down the last harvest in the other.—Burns was born in the year 1760, in a small cottage built by his father, about three miles from the town of Ayr. He was the eldest son of a poor, upright, sternly honest man; who bestowed upon his children an education rather above, than below his circumstances, and set before them an example of cheerful piety and inflexible integrity. The progress of our young poet, while at school, was sufficiently rapid, but not remarkable. Gilbert was the more studious, and apparently the cleverest boy of the two; and their teacher said that had he been asked which of the brothers would have been most likely to become a poet, he should have said the younger. But with all respect for that worthy gentleman, I should have said no such thing,—give me the boy—whose young brow in the school-room is clouded with unutterable thoughts,—who cares only so much for learning as not to let others surpass him,—whose mirth is wildest on the green, whose climbing exploits are most daring in the wood,—who is willing to run, leap or box, the biggest boy in the school—or hurl a stone at their heads should they intrude upon his solitude, when twilight falls grey on his native river, as he wanders by its side, indulging in dreams, which to himself are vague and indistinct as that twilight, and that is the future poet for me,—and such was Robert Burns. He was early called to take a part in the labours of the field, and there was more poetry in the aspiring principle, that caused him while a boy to compete with the strongest reaper in the field and determine to “*do or die*,” than if he had mastered all the volumes of the Vatican. *Love* makes poets of us all—though all cannot express the poetry they feel. And love made a poet of Burns—nor could any poet have a better master—for then the poet is sure to be in earnest, and *love* of one description or another, is the very soul of poetry. Not muling, sickly, corrupting, *Tommy Mooreish* namby pamby—but frank, open, honest, fervid love, such, as if it offend a lady’s ear, will not corrupt her heart. He began to write verses at fifteen, which were as indifferent as verses may well be—I have had the pleasure of seeing the original copy of the first he ever wrote, and the ploughman’s hand stiffened with early labour, evinced that from the time of his leaving school, the pen till then had been a stranger to his fingers. His judgment and his passions grew with his growth, and as they grew, they drew out his mighty genius from its hiding-place. His spirit became entranced in nature and her works. He heard her voice in the teeming earth,—in the birds that carolled in the spray—in the leaves that wantoned on the bough, in the echo of the hills and the sounding sea—in the

stern independence that cried from his own bosom : and the dreamer answered her back from the furrow where he followed his plough in strains she mistook for her own echo.

“*Robbie Burns the rhymist*” and “*Burns the Poet*” became a name familiar for ten miles round. His father having taken a small farm, which was wrought by himself and sons, after struggling with it for a time, died, and left it to his sons and widow. But it yielding a very imperfect maintenance for the family, our poet gathered together a few pounds and entered into partnership as a flax-dresser in the little town of Irving, which has the honour of being the birth-place of the scarce less celebrated James Montgomery. But before he had been many months in his new profession, a fire burnt their mill and property to the ground, leaving him, to use his own words, like a true poet, not worth a sixpence. At this period misery mocked him to his face. It is not my intention to dwell upon the vices into which at about this time he fell ; some may call them youthful indiscretions—but vices was their name in his father’s house—vices was their name in the country that gave him birth—and vices was the name they bore in his own conscience. But there are enough to blacken them. Let their memory perish. To his ardent and social disposition they owe their being. And oh ! what a millstone of guilt hangs around the neck of that miscalled word—*sociality* ! It is strong as hell ! It is powerful as death ! It is desolating as insanity ! It converts the angel into the fiend ! Let a man once cross its threshold, and he is led as a lamb to the slaughter.

So desperate were his circumstances, and so does slander dog the heels of misfortune, that the parents of the future partner of his life, determined she should rather suffer dishonour than become his wife. In despair he resolved to quit his native country, and go out a voluntary slave to the West Indies ; and to raise the money for this purpose, his *Cotter’s Saturday Night* and other poems were printed by subscription at Kilmarnock, and he was waiting at Greenock, (the place where his *Highland Mary* is buried) for a vessel to convey him to Barbadoes,—skulking to avoid the gripe of his merciless creditors ; when a letter from Dr. Blacklock, the poet, to a friend, roused his hopes and ambition. And instead of the West Indies, he steered his course eastward to *Auld Reekie*. A review in the *Mirror* by Mackenzie the gifted author of the “*Man of Feeling*,” who died but a few months ago, rendered the productions of the ploughman bard, the topic of conversation in every circle. An enlarged edition was announced to be published by subscription, and patronized by the noblemen and gentlemen of the Caledonian Hunt. Its success was worthy of his genius. His company was sought by all ranks. But those who, priding themselves upon their station in society, thought they did honour to a ploughman who was a poet by inviting him to their tables, found they had invited their equal,—a peasant it was true, but one of those peasants who

“ With powers as far above dull beasts endued  
In forest, brake, or den,  
As beasts excel cold rocks and brambles rude ;  
Men who their *DUTIES* know,  
But knew their *NOBLES*, and knowing dare maintain.”

They found they had drawn within their circle a giant, harmless, but conscious of his strength, and ready to use it.—One who could cut the soul of presumption to pieces with a glance. They did not find in him the studied scrapes and congests of a posture master, nor the lumpish rudeness of a clown. But they found the perfect ease of a proud good natured man; who had too much intuitive delicacy to be rude; too much self possession to be awkward. Burns was far from becoming giddy with the incense so suddenly offered up: but his love of pleasure, the only vulnerable point of his character, yielded to the syren voice that sung around him. And upwards of twelve months, I may almost say dissipated months, were unfortunately spent in Edinburgh, where habits which had formerly taken root sprang up. He made a tour to the Highlands, from which it appears he profited but little; and in company with Mr. Ainslie of Edinburgh, made a visit to Dunse and to the Borders. On settling with his publisher, Mr. Creech, he received eleven hundred pounds, and returning to Ayrshire, married the object of his early love, and took the farm of Ellisland near Dumfries, with the resolution, as he says, "Come, go to, I will be wise." But the habit of death was formed. Love of company threw its net again around. He had been appointed an exciseman, it led him to the tavern. The farm was neglected,—given up. And he removed with his family to Dumfries, as gauger of the district. There is not in Scotland, particularly on the Borders a more hateful avocation than an exciseman. But it was the fortune of Burns from his leniency, to be rather loved than hated. And

"Ika wife wha salled guid liquor."—

blessed him as he passed. And when upon a ride of inspection round the district with the supervisor, he was in the habit of riding on before, or leaving the superior officer at the principal inn, while he slipped up the village, and cried into the passages or windows of the suspected houses—"Now, Tibby, or now, Jannet, the supervesoor will be here in a quarter of an hour, an' if ye has a drap ye had better hae it out o' the way, or it winna be my wyte."—And to this kindly intimation, "Thank ye, Robin lad, ye're a mindfu' chield," was the grateful reply. He now fell into low company. Low company sealed his ruin. And he sank pennyless and broken-hearted into the grave, in the thirty-eighth year of his age, leaving his fame only as a portion to his widow and family—but to the honour of literature and humanity, that has been no mean dowry.

Boswell, the verbatim biographer of Johnson, has said, he was anxious that "no word might be lost of that immortal man:" and though kindly meant, it was neither a very wise nor a very friendly wish, but it was one of those wishes, the effects of which are eagerly swallowed up by the insatiable, the universal and all-powerful gormandizer called *curiosity*. Curiosity is, indeed, but a childish word when used, yet call its influence by what name we will, trifling as it seems, there is no one whose bosom it has not visited with the greedy appetite of a hungry giant. Despised as it is, it is the parent of the sciences,—the nurse of poetry. It is all very well to talk about feelings more sacred than curiosity: it gives a sort of sentimental, lackadaisical falsehood to what may be termed impudence, but give it

what term we may, *curiosity* is the straight-forward and legitimate word. The prim, precise, mechanical Chesterfield did it some justice, but it merited a manlier and more warm-hearted advocate. It may put on the grab of awe or of reverence, but the moving spirit is curiosity still. Mackenzie says truly that we do not like to be pleased with, or weep over the pages of an author without knowing who he is. Curiosity was in the beginning, and is destined to be an ever-will-be principle. Nicholas Rowe justly remarks, "how fond do we see some people of discovering any little personal story of the great men of antiquity; their families, the common accidents of their lives, and even their shape, make and features, have been the subject of critical enquiries. And we are hardly satisfied with an account of any remarkable person till we have heard him described even to the very clothes he wears." Unfortunately, there are instances where fulfilling this last office would be "the unkindest cut of all," for oftentimes the cut of the outward man is of such a shape, texture and complexion, that, to paint them as they are, the colourist must lay his easel by, and dipping his pencil in the dust, moisten it with his tears, and apply it to the canvass. I know not if these feelings created in me poetry, or poetry created them, but I do know they have strengthened each other. We always find we can judge best of the author by knowing something of the man, and in treading the ground where the never-dying dead have trode before us, to find out for their strains a "local habitation." To muse over the narrow graves, where the worm banquets amidst the ashes of immortality, and trace upon the mouldering stone a name which, riding over time in its chariot of Fame, will meet the shock of eternity, is still curiosity, but curiosity—trembling beneath the dark wings of sublimity. To me the land of Burns was holy ground, and I visited the places of his birth and his burial, with a reverence more sincere than a devotee's at the tomb of his prophet. I had gazed upon the monument erected near

"Alloway's auld haunted kirk,"

wandered by the

"Banks and brass o' beany Doon,

stood upon the "Brigs o' Ayr," and sauntered by the banks, where

"Ayr gurgling kissed its pebbled shore,

O'erhung with wild woods thickening green,"

where

"Mary from his soul was torn:"

and although the poetry of anticipation felt disappointment when I gazed only upon every-day objects, still the spirit of Burns was hovering over the scene, bathing it in a glory immortal as himself, and indignation mingled with reverence on finding that Mammon had converted the clay-built cottage of his birth into a mean change-house. I had followed the "winding Nith" to Dumfries, and with deeper awe gazed upon the costly tomb where his ashes now rest: I had stood under its templed roof, with his dust beneath my feet, gazing even unto blindness upon the breathing marble, where he stood with his hand upon the plough, gazing upward in awe as Genius threw her inspiring mantle over him; and turning aside from its pillars and mute magi-

science, if they gave rise to any feelings less hallowed than those arising from his sacred dust, it was the painful recollection of almost his last letter, and the agonizing sarcasm of Butler's application of a text of Scripture—"He asked for *bread*, and they gave him a *STONE!*" I had left the church-yard, and turned up a short, narrow, hilly street, near the church-gate, upon the corner of which appeared the words *Burns-street*. A clean, white-washed house, consisting of a ground and upper story, and approaching what may be termed genteel, stood at the higher end of the street. A weaver of about sixty, and a tanner of fifty, each bearing some of the implements of his calling, were conversing before the door. Of them I enquired in what part of the town BURNS had resided.

"In this vera house," said the tanner, "and auld luckie lives in't still."

"An' as canny a cracky body is luckie Burns," added the weaver, "as is in a' the gate end."

Heaven! earth and sea! I was struck dumb, dismayed, confounded! my very soul ached beneath the unchiseled lumps of prose that fell from their unpoetical lips! "*Auld luckie!*"—" *Luckie Burns!*" I repeated in horror, gazing upon the astonished tanner and the wondering weaver, like a man with a dagger in his breast. *Auld luckie* and *luckie Burns!* What, "lovely Jean," whose name has been sung in every land and by every tongue! Jean! the inspirer of his theme—the subject of his muse! Jean! from whose eyes he drew the fire, with which he lighted an admiring world!—"his ain kind dearie O." Jean! "the flower o' them a'," whose name is eternal as song, immortal as his lay,—to be in one moment reft of her divinity, and transformed into an ancient, plodding, gossiping housewife, and be styled "*auld luckie*" by a tanner, "*luckie Burns*" by a weaver!—it was humiliating, monstrous, unpardonable!

I found an opportunity of being introduced to her on the same evening, and was shewn into a small, neat, respectably-furnished parlour, in which, during his residence in Dumfries, the greater part of his latter poems were written. The door opened, a stout, middle-sized, dark-complexioned female, of about sixty or upwards, entered, wearing a plain muslin cap, a slate-coloured stuff gown, and cloth shawl of a similar shade. Beautiful she certainly had never been; the most prominent trait in her countenance was deep good-nature, blended with a sort of sombre quietness. Her manners were neither easy nor awkward, but those of a plain country-woman, who feels conscious she is within her own house. Her education, appearance and conversation were those of a farmer's wife of the middle class, who, knowing neither poverty nor riches, confines her researches and accomplishments to the concerns of her husband's household. In her youth she may have been what in the west of Scotland is termed a *likely lass*, with an aggregate share of comeliness, though transformed into an angel in the blind gaze of her poetical lover.

Leading to a portrait of her husband which hung near the door, she said "That is the only likeness he ever sat for; but Maister Naysmyth has painted it far owre coarse, for he was neither sae blacky-vised nor coarse looking as ye wad tak him to be by that, but it was a very guid likeness for a' that."

The existence of the portrait of the poet by the late Mr. Taylor, of Leith, was then unknown to her, and to the world.

She again continued: "Indeed I little expected there was such a work made about him, puir man, now when he's dead and gane."

Then drawing my attention to some miniatures over the mantel piece, she added, "But ye'll no ken wha this is I reckon? This ane in red is my son James, and that in blue his brother William. James, ye'll observe, is like his faither, but William aye took it o' my side o' the house."

Then turning to a print between them, taken from the Cotter's Saturday Night, and representing the father opening the "Big Ha' Bible," she said, "Ye'll ken this better, it's reckoned an excellent thing, but I'm nae judge of these matters."

Her household consist of a grand-daughter, a maid servant and herself; she lives in easy competency, in the midst of neighbours who esteem her for her own worth, and neither think of nor envy her the fame of the partner of her youth. Such is the widowed wife of the first lyrical writer of modern times, the child of nature, the more than father of Scottish poetry.

It is a very general error to entertain the idea that Burns was no scholar. He was not what is called a Scholar in the extended signification of the term, but his acquirements were highly respectable,—his study of nature intense,—and his knowledge of poetry intuitive. Had the scholar appeared more in his poems, the poet would have appeared less. And I maintain, that his poems exhibit all the education, that the nature of the subjects will admit. Virgil was a scholar, Homer was not; and is the pomp of Virgil to be compared with the sweeping unrestrained vehemence of Homer? His pictures are not like figures upon canvass, they are like groups of sculpture set in motion. His very fancies are tangible. His spirits may be seen and felt. His judgment was equal to his imagination—his wit equal to his genius—and his honest glowing enthusiasm greater than all. By wit, I mean wit in its proper and legitimate sense, not mere aptness to repartee. The wit of Burns was a part of his poetry—it existed in thoughts not in words, and the following anecdote will illustrate it. At a funeral in Scotland every person must appear in black, which frequently causes a good deal of borrowing of coats upon the occasion. A person of a very worthless character applied to Burns for the loan of his black coat to attend a neighbour's funeral. "I am sorry," said the poet gazing sternly in the face of the applicant, "I am sorry I cannot accommodate you with my sables, having to attend the funeral myself. But, throw *your own character* over your shoulders, and it will be the blackest garment you ever wore."

I should not speak impartially of Burns, did I not acknowledge that some of his pieces have no higher claims to poetry than morality. But he has been mistaken for the enemy of religion, when only the scourge of hypocrisy.

There is one name that will ever go down to posterity in connexion with that of Burns. The name of William Roscoe, the patron of his family and friend of his Biographer Dr. Currie; through whose united exertions, the fame of Burns was made known to an English public, and provision made for his family. William Roscoe was born

in Liverpool. He was the son of very poor parents, and nearly 70 years ago, occupied the humble situation of errand boy in Gore's Advertiser Office. Afterwards he became copying clerk to a solicitor, and his conduct and talents exciting notice, he was in time enabled to be entered as an articled clerk. After the expiration of his indenture he commenced business as a solicitor. During this period he wrote his *LEO*, and his greatest work the life of *LORENZO DE MEDICI*, styled the *Magnificent*. He became connected with Dr. Currie in a literary publication; and about the same time his beautiful poem on *Burns*—his *Mount Pleasant*, and others, severally delighted the lovers of elegance and pure taste. He became a Banker, and finally a member of parliament for Liverpool, and now stood at the acme of his fortune and of fame. He was now acknowledged as a poet of great beauty and chasteness, an accomplished scholar, an excellent critic,—the most elegant historian of his age,—a politician,—and one of the warmest friends of humanity. He was talked of, and admired throughout the world, and his name was the boast of Liverpool. But the failure of the Bank of which he was at the head, reduced him again to comparative poverty. And many who had praised him loudest in his prosperity, were among his bitter revilers in adversity. From his misfortunes he emerged slowly, to what may be termed affluence again. And not many months ago, he died full of years and honour. A few days after my arriving in Liverpool, in January 1831, I received an invitation from Mr. Roscoe. I found him seated by the fire, not in a very large, but the most tasteful library I ever saw. As I entered he smiling rose and extended his hand, and as he then stood, though somewhat bent by age, his stature could not be below six feet. A stroke of paralysis had rendered him very infirm, and slightly affected his features. His eyebrows were large and hanging, and faintly tinged with grey; but his grey eyes showed that even in age the sun of song was not set. He was dressed in sables after the manner of what may be termed a Briton in full dress, but wore upon his head a brown silk cap with a tassel descending to the ear. His voice was tremulous, and he moved with much difficulty. But his language, his actions, and manners were gentle as a sweet tempered child. After listening to him with rapture upon several literary subjects, "See,"—said he, "you can walk better than I can. Take down those quarto volumes in blue morrocco and examine them. They are a present of which I am very proud: and for typographical excellence, and elegant binding—they are perhaps unequalled. And it is a most strange work; for it is merely a dissertation on the Correctness of the Text of *De Medici*, by the Grand Duke of Tuscany—you know he is the same there as our king is here." Taking down the volumes, I found them edited by the Grand Duke of Tuscany in the original Italian, and by him presented in token of esteem to the talented Roscoe.

"And what do you think of this?" added he, turning my attention to a huge elephant folio volume, "I commenced to write this after I was 73 years of age. I have always been fond of Botany, and the whole species of the plant on which it treats, grow in the garden before the window. It was rather a Herculean labour for an old man. And the drawings were by my daughter."

And after showing every thing which he thought could amuse me,

he continued, "But I have reserved the best for the last,—open that portfolio with the green back,—and you will find a treasure, richer and dearer to me than all you have seen."

I opened it as desired,—and met with the unexpected delight of finding it contained several quires of the immortal Burns' original manuscripts, which were presented to Roscoe by the poet's brother and widow in token of gratitude. Amongst them was the first he ever wrote, which I referred to "The Twa Dogs," "Tam o' Shanter," and many others. The hand-writing, until the time of his being admitted to the Excise, was stiff, cramped, and crooked. But after that period it assumes the appearance of a bold, back, dashing hand. On the margin were many remarks in the handwriting of Gilbert Burns, by way of criticism: and particularly at Tam o' Shanter, I remarked these or similar words—"This is your best poem, your fame will greatly rest on it. G. B."

As a poet Mr. Roscoe is distinguished only for chasteness, elegance, and classic beauty.

## THE FIRST LAY OF THE MINSTREL.

BY DELLA CRUSCA.

O WHAT a beautiful world is ours,  
With its forest trees, and its blooming flowers,  
And its emerald seas, and romantic streams—  
Where the sunshine of summer in glory beams,  
And the breezes of Heaven in music stray,  
When the day-light melts in the gloamin's grey!

'Tis sweet to rove at the early dawn  
When a sunny brightness robes the lawn,  
And the dew on its leafy pillow lies  
Like tear-drops wept from an angel's eyes,  
For the scene does our school-boy days recall,  
And they start like flowers at the young Spring's call.

And pleasant it is in the eventide,  
To stray where the waters gently glide,  
And to list to the 'plaining forest bird,  
Whose strain at the hush of eve is heard  
In the woodland's leaf-covered shades among,  
As he easeth his own full heart in song.

I have drunk of life from a deathless source,  
When I trac'd the stars in their shining course,  
And gaz'd on the face of the blessed moon,  
When she sail'd through the cloudless skies of June,  
And thus it was that my spirit caught  
Its softer feelings and loftier thought.

My youthful friends are around me now,  
And joy and peace beam on every brow—