

CHAPTER XV.

PREPARATION OF HIS COLLECTION OF SONGS—ITS PUBLICATION—"A WET SHEET AND A FLOWING SEA"—ACCOUNT OF THE WORK—TRIBUTE TO THE MEMORY OF HIS FATHER—"LAMENT FOR LORD MAXWELL"—ANECDOTE REGARDING AN ENGLISH DRAGOON AND A NITHSDALE WIDOW—CRITICISMS—"THE POET'S BRIDAL-DAY SONG"—LETTER TO THE ETRICK SHEPHERD.

THE intensity with which Cunningham prosecuted his efforts in gathering materials for his newly projected work, "The Songs of Scotland," ancient and modern, was greater than he had ever devoted to any of his previous publications. Sir Walter Scott had greatly encouraged him in the undertaking, promising to give him what assistance he could, and other distinguished persons had done the same. He applied everywhere for old songs, or scraps of such, as he thought he might make up defects himself where the original was wanting. In addition to his own knowledge of Scottish songstry, he knew several sources to which he could successfully apply with regard both to the songs and their elucidations. One of these sources was the M'Ghies of Quarrelwood, Kirkmahoe, at whose fireside he had heard so many ballads lilted, and stories told. Writing in the fullest exuberance of spirits to his friend George on the subject, he says:—"I have been writing and printing books since I saw you, and am become a great man in

rhyme and prose. Even lords and knights—mighty men whom the King delighteth to honour—have praised me and my offspring. I mean the offspring of my pen, for I have other progeny, of which more anon. I am at present busied in a Collection of Scottish Songs, which I expect will be a very curious work, and my friend Sir Walter Scott has already given me some valuable assistance, and has promised me more. I have no doubt but your father and you could give me some aid in this; half verses, or whole songs—anything will be welcome, and the older the better.” We have reason to know that he was largely assisted from this source, as the whole family were musical, and had store of songs almost without end.

It is interesting to note in the same letter of application for ballad lore, his humorous reference to the times of old, indicating the friendly and familiar terms on which he stood with the M’Ghies:—“I often think of the auld clachan, and the glorious evenings I had among the M’Ghies—even now, I behold all the family faces laughing around the fire, and honest Thomas M’Ghie is entering at the partition door, with the same face with which he sought to associate the eighth psalm with its kindred tune of ‘Martyrs.’ My wife is now sitting beside me, and seems pleased that I am writing to her old acquaintance. She looks little the worse—sometimes I think, and oftentimes say, *better*, than when you saw her in Dumfries, and four boys and a little girl, with my sister Mina, and a ‘servan’ hizzie,’ a southron quean, make up the amount of my household. Three of the boys are great in the mystery of Latin and English grammar,

and are promising chiefs; but when can either your sons or mine hope to rival the genius of their fathers?" Such snatches as these, which were never intended to be seen by any other than the person to whom they were addressed, afford glimpses of the real nature of the writer, which a more formal document could not have done, intended to see the light.

While making this preparation he had also formed an intention of *regenerating*, as he called it, "Mark Macrabin the Cameronian," which had appeared by instalments in *Blackwood*, and of sending it into the world in two volumes, as, at first, it had been exceedingly popular. He cherished a great respect for the name and the followers of Cameron, and he was desirous to honour them a little, so far as he could, as he thought they deserved it. But in the meantime, while intentions like this are cropping up, the main thing in hand is his Collection of Songs, for which he is to receive from the publisher £200, and as to his other works, author and publisher are to share the profits between them. This had hitherto been his greatest undertaking, and he braced himself manfully for its performance. The pecuniary remuneration was encouraging, where thirty guineas a-year had to be paid for the school fees of three boys alone, besides their food and clothing, and the parents kept in hodden-grey and calimanco for week-days, and broadcloth and silk for the Sunday.

After much research, and correspondence, and study, and many late hours, no other time being afforded, the work was completed, and appeared in four volumes, under the title of "The Songs of Scotland, Ancient and

Modern; with an Introduction and Notes, Historical and Critical, and Characters of the Lyric Poets." The songs were numerous, the best known having been taken from reliable authorities, and the rest from where they could be found. A number of them came from the author's own pen. One of the best, a nautical one, is the following, which has obtained a wide-spread popularity to the present day:—

“A WET SHEET AND A FLOWING SEA.

“A wet sheet and a flowing sea,
 A wind that follows fast,
 And fills the white and rustling sail,
 And bends the gallant mast;
 And bends the gallant mast, my boys,
 While, like the eagle free,
 Away the good ship flies, and leaves
 Old England on the lee.

“O for a soft and gentle wind!
 I heard a fair one cry;
 But give to me the snoring breeze,
 And white waves heaving high;
 And white waves heaving high, my boys,
 The good ship tight and free—
 The world of waters is our home,
 And merry men are we.

“There's tempest in yon horned moon,
 And lightning in yon cloud;
 And hark the music, mariners!
 The wind is piping loud;
 The wind is piping loud, my boys,
 The lightning flashing free—
 While the hollow oak our palace is,
 Our heritage the sea.”

The greater part of the first volume contains a long, elaborate, and eloquent disquisition on Scottish Song, which is gratefully dedicated to Sir Walter Scott, for the friendship he had shown and the assistance given in the preparation of the work. It bears evidence of extensive research and intimate acquaintance with the subject, as well as a keen discrimination of what constitutes the merits and beauties of our national lyrics. Unlike Burns, Cunningham was musical, and could not resist chanting what he read in poetry. From his boyhood he was accustomed to put an air to every song he met with, and, curiously enough, he afterwards found that the air which the words suggested to himself generally corresponded with the proper tune. Burns lamented his deficiency in this respect, and was indebted to others to test the musical cadence of his songs, but with Hogg and Cunningham there was the greatest advantage, as they could throw their whole soul into the melody, and so make words and music harmonize.

With regard to the coarseness of the songs which were popular before the Reformation, they were, he acknowledges, such as would now "cover us with blushes," and greatly required amendment, but still, he says:—"It would be unjust to pretend that this age has more virtue, and unwise to suppose that it has a better taste, than the age which produced some of our brightest spirits. The songs which our great-grandmothers sang, we may suppose, gave them delight; and we are not to imagine that their delight came from a source less pure than our own. They were a simple people, who had not learned the art of attiring sensuality in a dainty dress, nor had they

found it necessary to live like us in 'decencies for ever. Yet I am no admirer of that primitive mode of expression which speaks bluntly out the hopes and wishes of the heart, nor am I sure that this direct and undisguised style is half so mischievous to innocence and youth as those strains which, like the angler's hook, hide their sting among painted plumes." The Reformation produced a change upon the character of our lyrics by the ecclesiastical discipline exercised, but that change could scarcely be said for the better, as the lewdness or profanity became mixed up with seeming holiness, under a very thin disguise.

It seems strange what a reverse has taken place in public opinion with regard to poetizing and song-making. Those gifted with the "faculty divine" are now held in the highest estimation, laurels are placed upon their brow while they live, and monuments are erected to their memory when they die. In olden times it was far otherwise, as those who practised the art of versifying were considered godless and profane. So late as the commencement of the present century this was generally the opinion of the lower and uneducated classes, and we believe that there are still some at the present day who hold that ballad-making has some connection with the "Black Art." The reader will, perhaps, remember how in the extract we gave, "Winning the Harvest Kirn," Ronald Rodan was stigmatized by some of the elder harvesters as a "sang-singin' haspin' o' a callant," and was advised to "give up the gowk-craft o' ballad-making" as being a godless trade. To be sure, this advice was given by those who belonged to a religious denomination

who were generally considered very strict in their morals, who would not listen to any music save that of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, and who would not tolerate dancing on any account, as John the Baptist had lost his head through the bewitching performance of a dancing damsel; but, besides these, a great body of worthies entertained a similar conviction. Cunningham was right when he said that "Poesy languished beneath the austere or morose enthusiasm of some of our fondest reformers; and as many of our voluntary minstrels were silenced from a sense of the unholiness of rhyme, or from the admonitions of the Kirk, minstrelsy became less popular than formerly."

The disquisition, which, as we have said, is very elaborate, and often highly eloquent, is followed up with short biographical notices of thirty-three song-makers, from King James the Fifth downwards, which are full of interest, and oftentimes throw light upon events and ballads which had heretofore been obscure. In one of these, that of the Rev. James Muirhead, D.D., minister of Urr, and author of "Bess the Gawkie," the only song he wrote, Cunningham pays the following tribute to the memory of his father, who was intimate with the reverend divine:—"That he was the author, I had the assurance of my father—a man fond of collecting all that was characteristic of his country, and possessing a warm heart, lively fancy, benevolent humour, and pleasant happy wit. To him I owe much of the information concerning song which I have scattered over these pages; and in all things connected with our national poetry, so much did our tastes corres-

pond, that in recording my own opinions I am only expressing his. A poet himself, and a correct judge of poetry, his curiosity was unbounded and his reading extensive. He had by heart many a historical and romantic tradition, many a moving story, and many an ancient verse; and so well did he feel, and so happily could he utter what others wrote, that I have heard many say they would rather hear him read songs than others sing them." This is very creditable to filial affection for a parent who had now been five-and-twenty years in the grave.

The work contained upwards of five hundred songs, many of them accompanied with variations obtained from several sources named, and criticisms as to their genuine or spurious character. The following pathetic one is by Cunningham himself:—

“LAMENT FOR LORD MAXWELL.

“Green Nithsdale, make moan, for the leaf’s in the fa’,
 The lealest of thy warriors are drapping awa’;
 The rose in thy bonnet, that flourished sae and shone,
 Has lost its white hue, and is faded and gone!
 Our matrons may sigh, our hoary men may wail,—
 He’s gone, and gone for ever, the Lord of Nithsdale!
 But those that smile sweetest may have sadness ere lang,
 And some may mix sorrow with their merry, merry sang.

“Full loud was the merriment among us ladies a’,
 They sang in the parlour and danced in the ha’—
 O Jamie’s coming hame again to chase the Whigs awa’:
 But they cannot wipe the tears now so fast as they fa’.
 Our lady does do nought now but wipe aye her een—
 Her heart’s like to burst the gold lace of her gown;
 Men silent gaze upon her, and minstrels make a wail—
 O dool for our brave warrior, the Lord of Nithsdale!

“Wae to thee, proud Preston!—to hissing and to hate
 I give thee: may wailings be frequent at thy gate!
 Now eighty summer shoots of the forest I have seen,
 To the saddle laps in blude i’ the battle I hae been,
 But I never kenn’d o’ dool till I kenn’d it yestreen.
 O that I were laid where the sods are growing green!—
 I tint half mysel’ when my gude lord I did tine—
 He’s a drop of dearest blood in this auld heart of mine.

“By the bud of the leaf, by the rising of the flower,—
 By the song of the birds, where some stream tottles o’er,
 I’ll wander awa’ there, and big a wee bit bower,
 To hap my gray head frae the drap and the shower;
 And there I’ll sit and moan till I sink into the grave,
 For Nithsdale’s bonnie Lord—aye the bravest of the brave!—
 O that I lay but with him, in sorrow and in pine,
 And the steel that harms his gentle neck wad do as much for mine!”

To this song is added the following note:—“The hero of this song, the Earl of Nithsdale, was taken prisoner, along with Viscount Kenmure and many other noblemen, at Preston in Lancashire, and sentenced to be beheaded. His Countess, a lady of great presence of mind, contrived and accomplished his escape from the Tower. Her fortitude, her patience, and her intrepidity are yet unrivalled in the history of female heroism. A letter from the Countess, containing a lively and circumstantial account of the Earl’s escape, is in Terregles House in Nithsdale, dated from Rome in the year 1718. From the woman’s cloak and hood, in which the Earl was disguised, the Jacobites of the north formed a new token of cognizance—all the ladies who favoured the Stuarts wore ‘Nithsdales,’ till fashion got the better of political love.”

An original interesting anecdote inserted in the notes is the following:—"At the close of the last rebellion a party of the Duke of Cumberland's dragoons passed through Nithsdale; they called at a lone house, where a widow lived, and demanded refreshments. She brought them milk; and her son, a youth of sixteen, prepared kale and butter—this, she said, was all her store. One of the party inquired how she lived on such slender means. 'I live,' she said, 'on my cow, my kale-yard, and on the blessing of God.' He went and killed the cow, destroyed her kale, and continued his march. The poor woman died of a broken heart, and her son wandered away from the inquiry of friends and the reach of compassion. It happened, afterwards, in the continental war, when the British army had gained a great victory, that the soldiers were seated on the ground, making merry with wine, and relating their exploits. 'All this is nothing,' cried a dragoon, 'to what I once did in Scotland. I starved a witch in Nithsdale; I drank her milk, I killed her cow, destroyed her kale-yard, and left her to live upon God—and I daresay He had enough ado with her.' 'And don't you rue it?' exclaimed a soldier, starting up—'don't you rue it?' 'Rue what?' said the ruffian; 'what would you have me rue? she's dead and damned, and there's an end of her.' 'Then, by my God!' said the other, 'that woman was my mother—draw your sword—draw.' They fought on the spot, and while the Scottish soldier passed his sword through his body, and turned him over in the pangs of death, he said, 'Had you but said you rued it, God should have punished you, not I.'"

The work on its appearance received quite an ovation by the general public, and the leading magazines and reviews spoke highly in its praise. Professor Wilson noticed it favourably in his "*Noctes Ambrosianæ*" in *Blackwood*, in the following terms:—"A very good collection indeed. Allan is occasionally very happy in his ardent eulogy of his country's lyrical genius, and one loves to hear a man speaking about a species of poetry in which he has himself excelled." He then sings, to the delight of the Ettrick Shepherd, Allan's song, "*My ain Countrie.*" In a subsequent *Noctes* he reverts to the subject, and says,—“Some of Allan's songs too, James, will not die.” To which the Shepherd is represented as replying, “Mony a bonny thing dies—some o' them, as it would seem, o' theirsels, without onything hurtin' them, and as if even gracious Nature, though loth, consented to allow them to fade awa' into forgetfulness; and that will happen, I fear, to no a few o' baith his breathin's and mine. But that ithers will surveeve, even though Time should try to ding them down wi' his heel into the yird, as sure am I as that the night sky shall never lose a single star till the morning o' the Day o' Doom.” The *Edinburgh Review* characterized it as “an exceedingly agreeable, and to Scotchmen, in many respects, a very delightful publication,” while it gave the author credit for the “warm and unaffected interest he took in the subject—his deep feeling of the beauties of his favourite pieces, and the natural eloquence of the commendations by which he sought to raise kindred emotions in the minds of his readers.”

The only hostile critic we have met with is Motherwell, who, instead of cherishing a fellow-feeling for a brother poet, seems to have borne Cunningham a grudge, as he speaks of his works in very disparaging terms. With regard to the "Remains of Nithsdale and Galloway Song" he says—"There never was, and never can be, a more barefaced attempt made to gull ignorance than this work exhibits." And again, "More pretension, downright impudence, and literary falsehood, seldom or ever came into conjunction." Why, he forgets that he himself palmed off as an ancient ballad one of his own invention! Then of "The Songs of Scotland" he thus writes:—"Nor did it ever occur that the celebrity these compositions had obtained would be sapped, and the spot they occupied in the affections and memories of the people be supplanted by their editor substituting his own compositions in their place, decorated with their names, and built upon their sentiments and incident. To his pious care had been willingly consigned the sacred duty of gathering, as it were, the sacred and unurned ashes of departed and of anonymous genius, and of placing these in a shrine at which posterity might bend the knee, without any of those misgivings regarding the genuineness of the reliques it contained which paralyze the devotion of the heart. Never, however, was it contemplated that these reliques should be made part and parcel of what the collector should find himself in the vein of fabricating in a similar style; nor was it asked of him to repair the devastations time and accident had wrought on these, with any interpolation, amendment, or addition, however appropriate, well-

imagined, or cleverly executed. It is an unholy and abhorrent lust which thus ransacks the tomb, and rifles the calm beauty of the mute and unresisting dead." No doubt Cunningham saw this criticism, as it appeared the year following his publication, but he outlived the depreciation of his brother poet, lauded, and supported, and encouraged, as he was, by those whose opinion was accepted in the world of letters.

A clever critic in *Blackwood*, reviewing "The Literary Souvenir" for 1824, edited by Alaric A. Watts, and to which Cunningham had contributed, says:—"Perhaps the best poem in the volume is by Allan Cunningham. It is full of real warm human feeling of the best kind, finely tinged, too, with the spirit of poetry, and written in language almost Wordsworthian. Cunningham is far superior to Clare, and we say so without meaning any disrespect to that most amiable and interesting person. He has all, or nearly all, that is good in Hogg—not a twentieth part of the Shepherd's atrocities—and much merit peculiarly his own, which, according to our notion of poetry, is beyond the reach of the Ettrick bard." The piece here referred to is the following, which Mrs. Hemans, in a letter to the author, characterized as "beautiful," as introducing her to his wife, and making her feel greatly interested in the subject of the song:—

"THE POET'S BRIDAL-DAY SONG.

"O! my love's like the steadfast sun,
Or streams that deepen as they run;
Nor hoary hairs, nor forty years,
Nor moments between sighs and tears,

Nor nights of thought, nor days of pain,
 Nor dreams of glory dream'd in vain;
 Nor mirth, nor sweetest song that flows
 To sober joys and soften woes,
 Can make my heart or fancy flee,
 One moment, my sweet wife, from thee.

“Even when I muse I see thee sit
 In maiden bloom and matron wit;
 Fair, gentle as when first I sued,
 Ye seem, but of sedater mood;
 Yet my heart leaps as fond for thee,
 As, when beneath Arbigland tree,
 We stay'd and woo'd, and thought the moon
 Set on the sea an hour too soon,
 Or linger'd 'mid the falling dew,
 When looks were fond and words were few.

“Though I see smiling at thy feet,
 Five sons and ae fair daughter sweet,
 And time and care and birthtime woes
 Have dimm'd thine eye and touch'd thy rose,
 To thee, and thoughts of thee, belong
 Whate'er charms me in tale or song.
 When words descend like dews unsought,
 With gleams of deep enthusiast thought,
 And fancy in her heaven flies free,
 They come, my love, they come from thee.

“O, when more thought we gave, of old,
 To silver, than some give to gold,
 'Twas sweet to sit and ponder o'er,
 How we should deck our humble bower:
 'Twas sweet to pull, in hope, with thee,
 The golden fruit of Fortune's tree;
 And sweeter still to choose and twine
 A garland for that brow of thine:
 A song-wreath which may grace my Jean,
 While rivers flow, and woods grow green.

“At times there come, as come there ought,
 Grave moments of sedater thought,
 When Fortune frowns, nor lends our night
 One gleam of her inconstant light;
 And Hope, that decks the peasant's bower,
 Shines like a rainbow through the shower;
 O then I see, while seated nigh,
 A mother's heart shine in thine eye,
 And proud resolve and purpose meek,
 Speak of thee more than words can speak.
 I think this wedded wife of mine,
 The best of all things not divine.”

After a long silence, his friendship with the Ettrick Shepherd was renewed, on the occasion of a nephew of the latter going up to London to engage in business, and who was confided to his good offices and attention. To this application he returned the following interesting letter, in which he recalls the scene long ago enacted on Queensberry hill, when but a lad not out of his teens:—

“27 Lower Belgrave Place, 16th Feb., 1826.

“My dear James,—It required neither present of book, nor friend, nor the recalling of old scenes, to render your letter a most welcome one. You are often present to my heart and fancy, for your genius and your friendliness have secured you a place in both. Your nephew is a fine, modest, and intelligent young man, and is welcome to my house for his own sake, as well as yours. Your ‘Queen Hynde,’ for which I thank you, carries all the vivid marks of your own peculiar cast of genius about her. One of your happiest little things is in the ‘Souvenir’ of this season—it is pure and graceful, warm, yet delicate; and we have nought in the

language to compare to it, save everybody's 'Kilmeny.' In other portions of verse you have been equalled, and sometimes surpassed; but in scenes which are neither on earth, nor wholly removed from it—where fairies speak, and spiritual creatures act, you are unrivalled.

“Often do I tread back to the foot of old Queensberry, and meet you coming down amid the sunny rain, as I did some twenty years ago. The little sodded shealing where we sought shelter rises now on my sight—your two dogs (old Hector was one) lie at my feet—the ‘Lay of the Last Minstrel’ is in my hand, for the first time, to be twice read over after sermon, as it really was—poetry, nothing but poetry, is our talk, and we are supremely happy. Or, I shift the scene to Thornhill, and there whilst the glass goes round, and lads sing and lasses laugh, we turn our discourse on verse, and still our speech is song. Poetry had then a charm for us which has since been sobered down. I can now meditate without the fever of enthusiasm upon me; yet age to youth owes all or most of its happiest aspirations, and contents itself with purifying and completing the conceptions of early years.

“We are both a little older and a little graver than we were some twenty years ago, when we walked in glory and joy on the side of old Queensberry. My wife is much the same in look as when you saw her in Edinburgh—at least so she seems to me, though five boys and a girl might admonish me of change—of loss of bloom, and abatement of activity. My eldest boy resolves to be a soldier; he is a clever scholar, and his head has been turned by Cæsar. My second and third boys are in Christ’s School, and are distinguished in their classes; they climb to the head, and keep their places. The other three are at their mother’s knee at home, and have a strong capacity for mirth and mischief.

“I have not destroyed my Scottish poem. I mean to remodel it, and infuse into it something more of the spark of living life. But my pen has of late strayed into the regions of prose. Poetry is too much its own reward; and one cannot always write for a barren smile, and a thriftless clap on the back. We must live, and the white bread and the brown can only be obtained by gross payment. There is no poet and a wife and six children fed now like the prophet Elijah—they are more likely to be devoured by critics than fed by ravens. I cannot hope that Heaven will feed me and mine while I sing. So farewell to song for a season.

“My brother’s (Thomas) want of success has surprised me too. He had a fair share of talent; and had he cultivated his powers with care, and given himself fair play, his fate would have been different. But he sees nature rather through a curious medium than with the tasteful eye of poetry, and must please himself with the praise of those who love singular and curious things. I have said nothing all this while of Mrs. Hogg, though I might have said much, for we hear her household prudence and her good taste often commended. She comes, too, from our own dear country—a good assurance of a capital wife and an affectionate mother. My wife and I send her and you most friendly greetings. We hope to see you both in London during the summer.

“You have written much, but you must write more yet. What say you to a series of poems in your own original way, steeped from end to end in Scottish superstition, but purified from its grossness by your own genius and taste? Do write me soon. I have a good mind to come and commence Shepherd beside you, and aid you in making a yearly pastoral *Gazette* in prose and verse for our *ain* native Lowlands. The thing would take.

“The evil news of Sir Walter’s losses came on me like an

invasion. I wish the world would do for him now what it will do in fifty years, when it puts up his statue in every town—let it lay out its money in purchasing an estate, as the nation did to the Duke of Wellington, and money could never be laid out more worthily.—I remain, dear James, your very faithful friend,

“ALLAN CUNNINGHAM.”