

INTRODUCTORY HISTORICAL SKETCH.

FOR the heart to break forth in song, whether to express love, merriment, or national and political sentiment, is so natural, that we may safely contemplate song as one of the earliest forms of literary composition in all countries. As far as Scotland is concerned—we find that the death of Alexander III. (1286 A. D.) was bewailed in a popular song; that the Scots had satirical songs on Edward I. and admiring ditties regarding Sir William Wallace; and that the triumph over the English at Bannockburn was hailed in an outburst of rude, but joyful verse. We find various allusions to popular songs in the histories of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and in such poems of those ages as have survived, a whole catalogue of such ditties being given in the comic piece called *Cockilby's Sow*, which appears to have been composed in the middle of the fifteenth century. Only names, however, or at the utmost odd lines and verses of these early canticles, have been preserved; and, on the whole, they give us little insight into the general condition of song literature in those days. The utmost that we can be said to learn from them is, that there *were* songs in Scotland during the Bruce and early Stuart reigns—a fact of which a general knowledge of human nature would have assured us, even had not a trace of such compositions survived.

Another fact—a negative one, but of considerable importance—is revealed to us by the time we arrive at the middle of the sixteenth century. Scotland could then boast of a brilliant series of regular poets, all existing within the preceding eighty years—

Henryson, Douglas, Dunbar, and others ; but amongst all their compositions, there are none strictly of the nature of songs. Such men never thought of composing songs ; that is, lyrical compositions to be sung to music by the people. The People appear to have been in all but comparatively recent times the makers of their own songs. The occasion was the inspiration. A peasant felt the charms of his mistress, and a song upon that subject came as naturally from him as the sighs he expired. A droll, or a romantic, or a tragic occurrence, drew general attention, and was irresistibly crystallised into verse, through the medium of some mind that was poetical without knowing what poetry was. A crisis took place in the national affairs, and it somehow found expression through the same channel. It was beneath the poets of culture, the *bishop* Gavin Douglas, the *priests* Kennedy, Henryson, and Dunbar, to contemplate anything so natural and familiar as a subject for their muses.

And such continued to be in a great measure the case for a long time after the middle of the sixteenth century ; for when we examine the writings of Montgomery and Drummond, of Hume and Wedderburn, the poets of the reigns of James VI. and Charles I., we discover nothing strictly describable as a popular Scottish song.¹ The composing of such lyrics still mainly rested with the unpretending multitude, as it had always hitherto done. It is only to be admitted, exceptionally, that *probably* the song of *Tak your Auld Cloak about ye*, and perhaps one or two others, had been written about the reign of Mary, and, as we may infer from their good literary style, by bards of education and refinement, albeit too proud to acknowledge a contribution to the anthology of the vulgar. In the whole of the long series of poems collected into the Bannatyne Manuscript, anno 1568, it is remarkable that there are but two pieces—*The Wooing of Jenny and Jock*, and *Fient a Crum of thee she faws*—which have ever been accepted into collections of Scottish songs.

¹ It will be found that a composition of the nature of a song, but of a formal kind, by Montgomery, has been introduced in this collection.

The long era of the religious struggles brings before us but one fact in respect of our national minstrelsy—namely, that it was looked upon as a thing low, clandestine, and sinful: the clergy treated it as simply one of the bad habits of the people. Of this we have a curious illustration in a *Book of Godly Songs*, which was first printed in 1599, and a second time with additions in 1621, being an assemblage of dull religious lyrics, many of them composed to the tunes of the vulgar songs of the day, with a view to superseding these, ‘for the avoidance of sin and harlotrie.’ In this indirect and most unexpected manner, we become aware that there was then a popular song called *John, come Kiss me now*; a lullaby styled *Ba-lu-la-lu*; a song commencing with the significant inquiry, ‘Who is at my window? who, who?’ another, styled from its refrain, ‘Hey, the day now daws,’ &c. Of the success of this attempt to induce the people to chant the institutes of Calvinism, as an improvement upon such subjects as bonny lasses, good ale, and country merry-makings, history does not inform us.

There was indeed an obvious distinction to be made between the *words* and the *tunes*; as, while the former might be coarse, puerile, or otherwise disqualified for decent society, the attractions of the music were in no such way alloyed. It has hence resulted that we have a manuscript so early as the reign of Charles I., containing a large selection of the national airs, while no such collection of the songs appears to have been thought of till some generations later. The manuscript in question appears to have been the lute-book of a lady of the family of Skene of Hallyards, so eminent in the law in the reigns of James VI. and Charles I. It contains eighty-five tunes, many of which were dances, as the titles *Brangle*, *Currant*, &c., suggest, while others were obviously the airs to which the popular songs of the era were sung. Of the latter, however, but a few can be recognised as identical with airs still popular, and these for the most part are much altered, and have undergone a change of name. Only two airs still popular—namely, *The Flowers of the Forest*, and *Bonnie Dundee*—appear under the same, or nearly the same

names, and with little difference of strain, in the Skene Manuscript.¹

As far as the literature of the subject is concerned, it fully appears to have pursued a life of contempt till after the Restoration, when what Ritson calls the golden age of song commenced in England. The earliest glimpses we have of it on the horizon of the parlour or concert-room, occur in the reigns of Charles II. and James II. It is not in Scotland, however, that it first emerges among the polite, but in England. It fell to the lot of those who supplied music and song to the court and its connected circles in London, to perceive that there was some merit in the songs which passed from mouth to mouth amongst the people of Scotland. They accordingly began to write new verses for the Scotch tunes, and to compose new tunes and songs in what was called 'the Scotch manner:' some of the latter, strange to say, made their way back to Scotland, and were accepted there as true Scotch productions. The famous Thomas Durfey was an active labourer in this field, as appears from his well-known collection styled *Wit and Mirth*; and the Roxburghe Collection of broadside ballads in the British Museum, shews that Grub Street contributed a large quota to the stock of what may be called Anglo-Scottish songs.

When Scotland herself began, after the Revolution, to rise above her religious troubles, and to pay some attention to secular matters, the upper class, and especially that section of it which inclined to Episcopacy and Jacobitism, became also aware that their country possessed an inheritance of some value in her popular songs and melodies.² There remained, indeed,

¹ The tunes in the Skene Manuscript were printed with a learned dissertation by William Daune, Esq. Edinburgh, 4to, 1838.

² The earliest published collection of Scottish music appears to have been Henry Playford's, which is dated 1700, being for the violin and flute. In the list, which embraces thirty-nine tunes, many of them dances, we recognise what may be presumed to be still existing favourites in, *I love my Love in secret*; *Good-night, and God be with you*; *Gingling Geordie*; *Stir her up and haud her gawn*; *Bessie Bell*; *Wap at the*

the serious objection that the upland Muse was of upland manners and upland dress. Although the ladies and gentlemen of that day were not by any means what we should now call overrefined, still they were on a different level from the lads and lasses of the farmer's hall. It became necessary for the reception of the melodies, many of which were of the highest beauty, that they should be adapted to songs of a pure, or comparatively pure character. Accordingly, the era of Anne and George I. is marked by a large fresh growth of Scottish song, mostly by persons of condition, as Robert Crawford, William Hamilton of Gilbertfield, Lady Grizel Baillie, &c.—but, in a greater measure, by Allan Ramsay, who further promoted the cause by his collection of songs styled *The Tea-table Miscellany*, which began to be published in 1724. Under this new flush of song literature, the old popular ditties fell like weeds before a garden culture, to the loss, no doubt, of much we should now wish to possess, for its power of illustrating the history of the national intellect, but as undoubtedly to the benefit of the public taste and morality. Then it was that such polite society as assembled for the winter in Edinburgh permitted, for the first time, of the singing of Scotch songs at their tea-parties, or other meetings, with the accompaniment, it might be, of the spinnet or lute, but more generally without any such aid, and still more rarely with a second or third voice. Allan Ramsay assisted to make this a favourite amusement by publishing, in connection with his *Tea-table Miscellany*, a small collection of Scottish airs, the title-page of which, representing a lady at the spinnet and a gentleman with a violoncello, is here reproduced as a sort of glimpse of the musical enjoyments of the period. Nearly about the same time, an instructed musician, named William Thomson, produced a handsome

Widow, my Laddie ; If Love is the cause of my Mourning ; The Birks of Abergeldie ; For old long syne, my Jo ; Widow, gin thou be wakin ; Alas, my heart, that we should sunder ; The Lass of Livingstone ; The Deil stick the Minister.—See *Additional Illustrations to Johnson's Museum*, by Mr D. Laing, xc.

assemblage of the best Scotch songs with the music, under the title of *Orpheus Caledonius*, the first volume of which was dedicated to the Queen, and the second to the Duchess of Hamilton.



Lady playing on Spinet, with Violoncello Accompaniment.—From a volume entitled *Music for Tea-table Miscellany*, published by Allan Ramsay.

During the sixty years following upon the publication of *The Tea-table Miscellany*, the repeated editions of that collection and the appearance of several others, particularly the ample one of Mr David Herd, attested the continued esteem of all classes for the national songs of Scotland. In that time, we find many capital songs produced, some of them by persons of elevated station; as, for example, Sir Gilbert Elliot, Miss Jean Elliot, and Lady Anne Lindsay. Others expressing the feelings of a portion of the community for the cause of the Stuart family, were thrown into the general stock, and not a little to its enrichment, as, somehow, what stood ill with the parliamentary senate of Great

Britain contrived to make a tolerably fair appearance in the court of Apollo. We find in the productions of this era much effective poetry, free from all objections in point of good taste and morality; but no one can read Mr Herd's volumes (1776) without acknowledging that there was still a great infusion of the rude, and even the licentious, in the class of songs familiar to the common people.

It is also to be observed, that during this middle part of the eighteenth century, considerable additions were made to the national stock of melodies. The popularity which the original rustic airs had acquired in the time of Ramsay, caused a number of airs in the same style to be composed by instructed musicians; amongst whom none was more notable than James Oswald, originally a teacher of music, successively at Dunfermline and in Edinburgh, but who, about 1741, settled as a music-publisher in London, where he attained the appointment of church-composer to George III. During the same epoch, several ample collections of the Scottish melodies were published; one in twelve small volumes by Oswald himself.

It remained for ROBERT BURNS to arise and purge away what dross remained in the national song. At the time of his appearance in Edinburgh (1787) a worthy tradesman named Johnson, who practised a style of music-engraving by punch or stamp-marking, had commenced a collection of the national songs and airs, under the title of the *Scots Musical Museum*. The project caught the fancy of Burns, and he threw himself into it with characteristic ardour. He contributed songs of his own. He gathered others heretofore inedited. He furnished purified and improved versions of many homely ditties. He noted down many airs also hitherto unknown to paper. He induced others to assist him. At the same time, a respectable musician, Mr Stephen Clark, adjusted the airs and fitted them with accompaniments. The final result was, that Johnson's *Museum* became all but an exhaustive collection of the Scotch songs and their melodies, the entire number comprehended being *six hundred*, whereof a hundred and seventy-nine were furnished by Burns,

generally with at the least some brightening touch from his masterly hand. It remained only to be regretted, that a considerable number of songs unfit for decorous society was permitted to mingle with the general mass. A new edition of this work was published by Messrs Blackwood in 1838, with an ample supplement of prose notes by the late Mr William Stenhouse and Mr David Laing—the former a type of all that is faithless and inaccurate in editorship, the latter precisely the reverse. It is on the whole a valuable book, and one not to be dispensed with by any one who desires a minute acquaintance with the subject.

The present Volume is intended to embody the whole of the Pre-Burnsian songs of Scotland that possess merit and are presentable, along with the music; each accompanied by its own history, as far as that can be ascertained. It is meant as historical in its general scope and arrangement, and may be sufficient, perhaps, to satisfy all ordinary inquirers into the subject, as a department of the national literature. It is also hoped that the collection may be serviceable amongst those who have not consented to the entire banishment of our national airs from the drawing-room.

