Scottish Men of Letters in the Eighteenth Century

CHAPTER I
DAWN OF LITERATURE - ALLAN RAMSAY - HAMILTON OF BANGOUR - ROBERT BLAIR

The divisions of history into centuries may be highly convenient, but they are usually very arbitrary and artificial. There is no breach of continuity with the past as a century opens, no breach of continuity with the future as a century closes. It is like the division of a country into counties, which are marked by lines clearly on the map, while there is no visible partition in the landscape: fields join fields, rivers flow on their course, roads run on their way indifferent to the surveyor's marches, and to the outward eye it is impossible to see where or why one province begins and another ends. It is so with centuries - as divisions or periods in history - in most cases. In Scotland, however, it is not always so arbitrary, and certainly the eighteenth century stands out so markedly in all respects apart from other periods as to form no unnatural division in Scottish history in its social, industrial, religious, political, and literary life. It is with its literary aspects we have specially to interest ourselves in this volume. We have to note how throughout the century new intellectual interests were awakened, and fresh forms of literature were begun.

The century opens in Scotland to find the country almost devoid of literature. Men of letters there were none; of making books there seems to have been an end. For this literary stagnation there were many causes. The country was hotly stirred by political and ecclesiastical questions - by the intrigues of parties about the Union; by the oppositions of Whigs and Tories, of Presbyterians and Jacobites; by jealous commercial grievances and bitter trade quarrels with England. These causes dulled intellectual interest; other circumstances hindered literary productions. There was the depressing poverty of the land, whose nobles, merchants, and farmers were alike in sore straits for money; the people lived humbly, spent sparingly, travelled seldom, and read little. It was enough that in a laird's book-shelves was his ragged array of old school-books - a well - thumbed Cæsar or Horace, or Buchanan's *Latin Psalms* - reminiscent of a flagellated boy-hood. There side by side lay a dilapidated *Ovid*, *Samuel Rutherford's Letters*, Despauter's *Grammar*, and a *Confession of Faith* - telling of years when he had been drilled in Latinity at school and harrowed with piety at home. In several old country mansions, and in a few Edinburgh flats, there were, however, libraries

which showed that their owners or their ancestors had some taste for polite letters. Gentlemen who had finished their college course by study at Paris or Leyden or Groningen, and returned with a less supply of continental vices and a larger store of scholarly aptitudes than usual, had collections of classics of no mean size or worth. These men, when they went into winter - quarters in Edinburgh, consorted with lawyers and physicians who had learned their law or their physic and improved their Latinity at Utrecht or Leyden, and in maturer years had not forgotten their classics in devotion to drink.

There came from England by smacks to Leith or Bo'ness, occasionally, small supplies of English books - the newest productions of Mr. Addison or Sir Richard Steele, or the ponderous historical tomes of Echard and Rapin, whose bulk filled a large space in their purchasers' cupboards, and whose reading required a large space, of their lives. Certainly the Union had a great effect in stimulating Scottish intellectual interest and widening the literary tastes. Scots gentry who went as members of Parliament to Westminster - some giving their self-sacrificing services to their country for a comfortable salary from their constituency - would bring back books from London, and in various ways literature penetrated to remote rural mansions as to city life, conveyed in cadgers' creels. Thus to young ladies were borne the echoes of far-away gay London life, of fashions and follies and intrigues they should never share. By the firesides they would read aloud the adventures of Orindas and Millamants, or of Sir Roger de Coverley, in accents whose broad Scots would have amazed the heroes and heroines of whom they read - an uncouth, incomprehensible tongue, which would have made Will Honeycomb roar with laughter, and Sir Roger utter gentlemanly oaths of exasperation as he listened.

It is clear that there was as yet little encouragement for the home-made literature - no inducement for men to devote their talents to letters either for pleasure or for profit. The political atmosphere was wild and tempestuous; poets were silent, for in a storm no bird sings. The population, consisting of one million, being impoverished, purchasers were rare, and authors depending on them would have starved in Scotland. Nor could they have appealed to a wider and richer public beyond the Tweed, seeing that men who in daily life spoke the broadest of vernacular could not easily write in English, which to them was a foreign tongue in which they might make more blunders than in school-learned Latin. But most depressing of all was the burden of religious tyranny - the gloom with which mirth was checked, the discouragement given to all worldly entertainments - in song, in fiction, or in play - the censures levelled at all who indulged in profane literature,

against which ministers inveighed and the pious frowned. It is not surprising that the men who had taste of letters at that early period were Jacobites and Episcopalians, for sentiment and humour were starved in the cold austerity of the Kirk, which seemed unable to smile. Yet what was outwardly the difference between Episcopalian minister and Presbyterian when the century began? Their worship, their forms, their faith were the same. In private one could be known from the other only by the fact that the Episcopalian said grace standing and the Presbyterian sitting. Their differences were as foolish and whimsical as when the aristocratic Ghibellines cut their fruit cross-ways at table, and the democratic Guelphs sliced theirs long-ways. It was only later, when the clouds of dull pietism had drifted away, that genial literature could flourish without opposition, and did so even in the courts of the National Zion.

It is worth notice that, by the fine irony of events, it was the very austerity of the Kirk that led to the production of one of the greatest works of English fiction. There can be no doubt that if it had not been for the disciplinary severity of an obscure Kirk-Session in Fife, there would have been no Robinson Crusoe. It happened in this wise. The dull little fishing village of Largo was occasionally enlivened by the misdeeds of a scape-grace lad, Alexander Selkirk. In 1695 he had misconducted himself in church, [Largo Session Records.] and was summoned to appear before the Session, of which his father, a shoemaker, was an elder; but the report was brought back by the kirk-officer that he had absconded and "gone away to the seas." Six years after, he returned, and having in a rage shot at his imbecile brother, he was appointed "to stand at the pillar" as penance for his sin; and after being solemnly rebuked, he promised amendment, "in the strength of the Lord." Determined, however, to run risk of such disgrace no more, he ran off "to the seas" again. Thereafter followed his strange adventures, which ended in his lonely residence for four years in Juan Fernandez, his rescue from which stirred widespread interest after he landed at Bristol. It is certain that the shrewd Daniel Defoe founded his immortal Robinson Crusoe on those adventures, which never would have come to pass but for the disciplinary terrorism of the minister and elders of Largo over the village ne'er-do-weel.

At this period there was no possibility for a decent livelihood being gained by a professional man of letters. Scots printers were content to pirate English books - glad of a profitable retaliation on their aggressive neighbours in the South. In dark cellars in the Saltmarket of Glasgow, or Morocco Close, Edinburgh, were produced shabby issues in execrable type of the *Spectator* or the *Tatler*, or of Dryden's works.

But as a rule the productions that came from the superannuated wooden presses - bought second-hand from Holland - that wheezed forth their proofs, in dark wynds, were devoted to law-books, Whig or Tory pamphlets, Presbyterian or prelatic treatises in which the abuse was as villainous as the type, and tractates on antiquities and royal pedigrees which antiquaries refuted and the public never read. If we look for professional men of letters, we find that class in the most ragged type of mortals who ever wrote for bread. A considerable number of needy and thirsty men formed an Edinburgh Grub Street - broken schoolmasters, law-clerks, and students, who had failed of a profession. They hung on the skirts of fortune, poor starvelings, not too reputable or sober, who were ready with pens to indite funeral elegies in English, Scots, or Latin verses, on the "universally lamented" or "deplorable" death of some "incomparable" lord or citizen; or an epithalamium on the wedding of some person of quality. Whenever the news passed through the town that a lord of Session, merchant, or laird was dead, or had lost his wife, they went to their garrets, wrote out panegyrics, often in acrostics, and with them neatly copied out, but abominably spelt, they went up to the door of the house of mourning, at which they "tirled the risp." If a composition met with approval, the poet would receive a few shillings as payment, [So Sir J. Foulis of Ravelston in his *Accompt Books* notes, "To Mungo Murray, £4:16 Scots for elegy on his son's death."] and it was duly printed on a broadside with an appropriate border of cross-bones, skulls, spades, and hour-glasses, and sent to the friends of the bereaved. The diction of these first Scotsmen of letters is instructive as showing what poetry consoled great folk in time of affliction. The family of Atholl had their griefs assuaged by reading the "Elegy on the never enough to be lamented Death of the illustrious and noble John, Marquis of Tullibardine, in 1709":

> What sighs, what groans are these I hear always?
> What gushing torrents now run down my eyes?
> What wofull news, what killing sound is this
> That fills all hearts with tears and bitterness?
> Ah dolfull news! but they cannot be fled,
> The noble Marquis Tullibardin's dead.
> That sweet, that noble matchless paragon;
> Ah! is he gone? He's gone; alas, he's gone.

And the afflicted poet proclaims his incapacity to recount all the virtues of the deceased:

> I'd hold the seas far sooner in my hand,
> And without pen or ink recount the sand.

A learned judge has expired, and the elegy (remunerated with £6 Scots) laments:

O! Senators who sable weeds put on,
Bowhill has scaled the heavens to a throne,
And trumpets forth the Mediator's praise,
Where angells flee about delight to gaze;
Who did pronounce pointed decreets 'mongst you,
With open face the Deity doth view.

Yet another scribe pens his woeful lamentation on Lady Anne Elcho, who was burnt to death, in broken accents and metaphors: -

My lady Elcho we the more lament,
That she by a malignant flame is sent,
And early to the charnel-house doth pass,
Since nothing of malignant in her was.
[*Scottish Elegiac Verses*, 1629-1729, 1842, pp. 112, 178, 208.]

It was thus that those scribblers in threadbare clothing and shabby old wigs, which had seen better days and had covered better heads, eked out a living with pens ready to write a venomous lampoon or a metrical lie, buzzing like wasps round any rival, and attacking the popular wigmaker with "A Block for Allan Ramsay's Wig," or malicious "Dying Words of Allan Ramsay," which the poet pretended not to feel. The cleverest of the tribe was Alexander Pennecuik, nephew of the laird of Romanno, always in need and generally in liquor, who could toss off a satire as quickly as he tossed off a glass, would sell it for five shillings, or get it sold in a broadside for twopence, and get drunk on the proceeds. It was in the natural course of events that he died in destitution. [*Lives of Scottish Poets*. The chief works of Alexander Pennecuik are *Britannia Triumphans*, 1713; *Streams from Helicon*, 1720.]

Of a very different stamp were the gentlemen who were addicted to verses, and produced songs which were long favourites in all circles - such as that lover of verse and country sports, William Hamilton, the laird of Gilbertfield, a lieutenant on half-pay, whose "Last Words of Bonnie Heck," his greyhound, which appeared in Watson's *Choice Collection*, 1706-1711, stirred Allan Ramsay's literary ambition. His rhyming epistles to his wig-making, verse-making friend made popular that form of verse which Francis Sempill of Beltrees in the former century had adopted in his "Habbie Simson, the Piper of Kilbarchan." That was to become the favourite style of stanza for Scots verse with Ramsay, Fergusson, and Burns, and their imitative successors.

Scottish Men of Letters

If we wish to seek for the beginnings of Scottish literature, we shall find it in the clubs of gentlemen that met in dingy taverns, in dark wynds of Edinburgh. There they had their gatherings over ale and claret, where they would discuss politics, books and ballads and after a prolonged sitting, and ample regaling, they would go argumentatively home, as the city guards' drum at ten o'clock gave the warning for all citizens to return decently to their families and to sleep. We can see them - wits and literati - in the periodical reunions in Niddry's Close, where the gilded emblems of the Cross Keys betokened that Patrick Steel had his inn, and where guests could get good claret wondrous cheap, [*Hamilton of Bangour's Life and Poems*, edited by Paterson.] and where once a week met the Musical Club, to which all fashion resorted. There gentlemen of taste and culture and joviality met in fine fraternity - antiquaries like Dr. Patrick Abercrombie, noted for his folios on the *Martial Atchievements of the Scots Nation*, who were not so dry in their cups as in their books; Dr. Archibald Pitcairn, with his dangerous wit; and Sir William Scott of Thirlstane, Sir William Bennet of Grubbit, and others with their excellent Latinity. The possessor of a pretty knack in English and Latin verse would take from his pocket his last effusion - humorous or pathetic, classical or amorous - which was recited, handed round, and maybe printed afterwards for presentation. At the Athenian Club, others held their literary Saturnalia; and at Thomas Ranken's hostelry gathered men who (with carnal refreshments) discussed philosophy. [Tytler's *Life of Kames*, i. 60.]

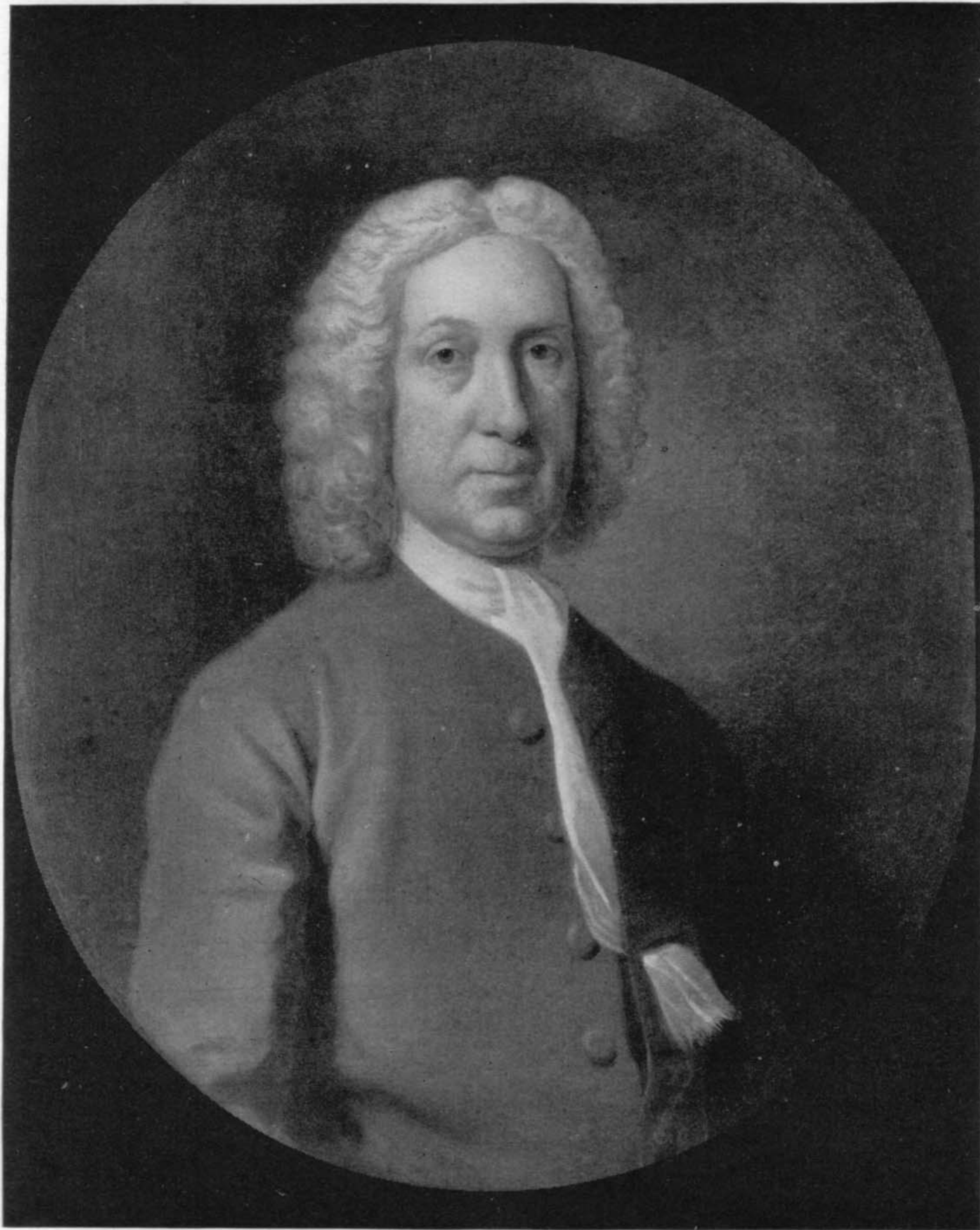
It may indeed be said that in taverns Scots modern literature was born, and the first public it addressed was in a public-house.

One eminent antiquary - James Anderson - whom Scots Parliament had rewarded for upholding the independency of the Scottish crown, tried to live by his pen. In consequence he was obliged to sell his books, and before dying to pledge the plates for his most learned *Diplomata*.

Among the scholars stands conspicuous the figure of Dr. Archibald Pitcairn - famous at the opening of the century as a physician, a wit, a scholar, and a *bon vivant* - who had been born in 1652. He had been professor of medicine at Leyden - a signal honour - where he had the famous Boorhaave and Dr. Mead as his pupils, before he settled as a doctor in Edinburgh, where his practice and his fees were of the largest. Rival physicians mocked at his theories of applying mathematics to the practice of physic - a curious combination of the most exact of sciences with the least exact of arts. The State authorities eyed askance the ardent Jacobite, and threatened him with prosecution for treason after tearing open one of his private letters, which he explained limply he had "written in his cups." And most of all did

the pious Presbyterians regard with even horror a man who was reported to be a free-thinker as well as a free-liver - a man who mocked at Scripture, flouted at religion, jeered at ministers of the everlasting Gospel, and entertained his iniquitous friends with profanity. Mr. Robert Wodrow groans forth his soul over these devilries, of which he heard dreadful rumours, fit to bring judgment on the city. He records his pious tattling about the physician who was haunted with "an apparition," who with his friends "doe meet very regularly every Lord's Day and read Scripture in order to lampoon it," who was "drunk twice every day" - and so on with equal veracity. [Wodrow's *Analecta*, i. 328; ii. 255.] The person of the learned and very able doctor, whose wit was somewhat profane, and his pen rather licentious, [Of which his play, *The Assembly*, first published in 1729, affords an instance.] is familiar from the painting of Sir John Medina and engravings therefrom - a pleasant, confident, smiling countenance, shrewd, sagacious, humorous, under his flowing periwig. At six o'clock in the morning he was to be found in that cellar room below the level of the street - called from its gloom the "groping office" - ready for a consultation on any case, and during the day borne in his sedan-chair to visit patients of high degree, from whom his fee was a guinea, though the poor he served from kindness. In the evening he was to be found in the tavern with choice spirits and learned cronies, with whom he jested too freely and drank too much, till the night and the liquor were far spent. His Latin and English epigrams and verses which he would print in broadsides for his friends count for nothing to-day, though they were admired and even famous in his time [*Selecta Poemata Archibaldi Pitcairnii*, 1729.] - and some of them John Dryden was pleased to translate and Matthew Prior to turn into nimble English verse. Pitcairn before he died in 1713 did much to revive in his town the taste for classics, which amidst theological strife and fanatical pietism was dead in the universities, dying in schools, and rare in society. "If it had not been for the stupid Presbyterianism," he would grumble, "we should have been as good as the English at longs and shorts."

After the Union there was a growth in antiquarian and classical interests, and this was largely due to Thomas Ruddiman. One day in 1699, Dr. Pitcairn happened to be stayed by stress of weather in the village inn at Laurencekirk in Kincardineshire, and on asking if there was any one of education whom he could have to dine and talk with, he was told that the schoolmaster was a man of learning. [Chalmers's Life of Ruddiman, p. 31.] The threadbare young dominie was invited, and was found to be a scholar and a Jacobite to boot. At the physician's encouragement, Ruddiman next year quitted his thatched school-house, and his



THOMAS RUDDIMAN

By permission of J. Steuart, Esq., W.S., from the Painting by De Nune, 1749.

beggarly salary of £5, chiefly paid in meal, and came to Edinburgh, where by his patron's influence he became, with a salary of £8, sub-librarian of the Advocates' Library, then stored in a dismal room in Miln's Court. The needy scholar copied out chartularies, composed theses for aspirants for the Bar, whose Latinity and intelligence were weak, revised manuscripts for authors and proofs for booksellers, sold books by auction in the Parliament Close, and kept boarders (£30 Scots each for their chambers for the half-year) in his humble home. While Ruddiman was thus laboriously engaged, there were only two respectable printing-presses, both belonging to keen Jacobites, in the city; the other booksellers were Presbyterians who printed atrociously. [Lee's *Memorials of Bible Society*, p. 150.] It was from the press of James Watson, at the miserable little room called majestically the "King's Printing House," that there issued the *Collection of Scots Songs*, 1706-1711, sold in his booth opposite St. Giles, which marks the dawn of literature in the North. But it was from Robert Freebairn that the best editions began to come after 1712, and the scholarly Jacobite librarian found a congenial friend in this Jacobite printer, who was the son of a nonjuring "disorderly" bishop. In zeal for the Cause, the printer followed the rebels in '15, and printed proclamations for the Pretender at Perth, and yet afterwards was magnanimously allowed to print books for the Whigs and proclamations for the King in Edinburgh. [Lee's *Memorials of Bible Society*, p. 183.] In the grim dusty crypt under the Parliament House to which the library was transferred, Ruddiman pored over dusty manuscripts, exhumed Scots authors, edited Gavin Douglas's *Virgil*, which came out in stately folios, with a glossary, learned and erroneous, and many a book on knotty points of Scottish history over which there were shed much ink, party enthusiasm, and ill temper. On his producing an edition of George Buchanan's works, in which the historian was charged with fraud, forgery, calumny of Queen Mary, the Whig scholars - generally grammar-school masters - rose in their wrath at the "aspertions and animadversions" of the accuser, and wrangled for forty years. No more energetic soul than Ruddiman lived in Edinburgh, and he added to his many callings that of printer - from his press issuing his famous *Latin Rudiments* in 1714, school classics, vended at sixpence a copy, and the Jacobite newspaper the *Caledonian Mercury*, which began in 1718. His time was passed in writing historical treatises learnedly, printing classic texts accurately, controverting vituperatively, marrying frequently, becoming prosperous yearly. At last, in 1757, when deaf and almost blind, the old grammarian died, who had done so much to revive learning and excite controversy. [Chalmer's *Ruddiman*, p. 269.] Then there disappeared from the High Street the well-known and eminently

respectable figure of the old scholar, with his thin, wiry form, erect and active walk, his solemn face, with the bushy eyebrows, and those piercing eyes which daunted any who ventured to question his opinion; clad on "best days" in an orange-coloured coat and a scarlet waistcoat, with cocked hat over the curled, grizzled wig. A sober, sedate man, he knew when at convivial boards he ought to stop, saying, "The liquor will not go down."

Allan Ramsay

While scholars and antiquaries were busy wrangling in dingy pamphlets and treatises over obscure points of Scottish history and Royal claims and pedigrees; while Freebairn was issuing some seemly folios, such as his Sallust, in noble type; while men of fashion with a taste for letters and facility in rhyme were meeting at Coffee-houses (where no coffee seems ever to be drunk), and at concert-rooms, balls, and suppers, there was living in two rooms, in the wooden-fronted tenement in the Canongate, the wigmaker, Allan Ramsay. Outside, over the door, was a figure of a flying Mercury, and inside, in the ill-lighted little apartment, was a collection of periwigs, tiewigs, bobwigs, of dimensions to suit all pates, and of qualities to suit all purses, from fourteen shillings to £10 sterling. There a little "blackavised" man with a friendly smile, a familiar smirk and twinkle of humorous eyes, nightcap on head, tended any customer who came to get flaxen or hair wigs changed, trimmed, and perfumed.

But this man was more than a wigmaker, he was a verse-maker too. [*Works of Allan Ramsay* (Life, by G. Chalmers), 1806, 2 vols. *Gentle Shepherd*, *with Illustrations of its Scenery*, 2 vols., 1808.] No one was more popular than this framer of perukes: his songs were sung at every festive meeting; his verses were hawked about the streets at nights, and the melodious voices of gingerbread women were heard above the plash of household filth from the windows, crying, among their chap-books, "Satan's Invisible World Displayed," and Allan Ramsay's "new piece" at the price of six bodles. He was a boon companion at the Easy Club, where gentlemen and citizens of taste were wont to meet in the tavern to drink, to sing new songs, to hear essays, to discuss literary points, suggested by papers in the weekly Tatler. Each member bore some nickname - Allan's was "Isaac Bickerstaff" or "Gavin Douglas" - and the merriment of jocose lawyers and lively Jacobites was tempered by fines for neglected rules, which went to buy more ale. Of this gay fraternity Allan Ramsay was made poet laureate.

ALLAN RAMSAY

From the Drawing by Aikman in the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, Edinburgh.

Allan Ramsay

It was in 1686 that Allan had been born among the high bleak Leadhills, where his father had been manager of the mines; there he lived after his father was dead and his mother married again, with his stepfather, herding sheep and cattle in that dreary district - a treeless waste in summer, a snowy waste in winter, swept by all the winds that blew. When his mother died, he found his way to Edinburgh, where he became apprentice to a wigmaker - joining the most flourishing of trades in that wig-wearing age. But other tastes and talents were soon roused. In the book-shops in Parliament Close were exposed for sale editions of Pope and Addison, revealing to the apprentice the glories of English poesy in most inglorious type, which he was eager with his earnings to buy, and in leisure hours to read. In 1707 he was master of his own shop, and there came for barberising and for trimming citizens of all sorts, while the little bustling young man was as keen over poetry as over periwigs. He was busy making verses and songs in 1711; his humorous eye saw every foible and characteristic of city life, and his muse did not soar to greater heights in his earliest verses than an ale-wife and a scold. He was satirical, but he was cautious; he made no enemies, he took no side in Church or State, for he was mindful not to spoil his trade. Sagaciously he made verses as he made wigs, to please the heads of all customers. Printed on broadsides, they were sold in the streets for one penny a piece; and some were pirated by the nefarious Lucky Reid, the printer's widow, and hawked about the Canongate by strenuously-voiced beggars. In time the list of fugitive poems had grown so large, they were so popular with people who had heard no such quaint lively humour in verse before, that Ramsay proudly resolved to publish them in a volume in 1721. Four hundred copies of the little quarto were subscribed for, and advocates and lairds, noblemen and merchants paid down their money without a grudge. So forth to the world the work went with the poet's benediction: "Far spread my fame, and fix me an immortal name." Horace in such confidence had written in his *Ad librum suum*: why should not he? His fame did spread far and wide - it passed even to England. Gay admired the verses; Pope heard of them and condescended to read them; and Hogarth, charmed by a congenial painter of homely manners, inscribed to him his plates for *Hudibras*. Allan was a successful poet, and not less happy was he as a family man. He had married a small lawyer's daughter, who was as prolific in children as he was in verses. Every twelvemonth there would appear in the parish records some contribution to population with the name Allan Ramsay, "weeg-maker" or "periwige-maker," as father - offspring of whom he was vastly proud. [*Gentle Shepherd, with Authentic Life*, i, 98.] Only a tradesman as he was, he was welcome in all company, even the highest.

After all, could he not claim as his great-great-grandfather, Ramsay, the Laird of Cockpen, brother to the Lord Dalhousie? Did not the very best in the land have cousins who were shopkeepers, silversmiths, linen-drapers in Edinburgh, under the vague denomination of “merchants”?

Two of the pleasantest literary resorts in Scotland were at the mansions of Newhall and Pennecuik, where Ramsay was a frequent guest. At the latter place lived Sir John Clerk, distinguished as antiquary, lawyer, and congenial spirit - a kindly rival of the poet, if he did indeed write the song, “O merry may the maid be, that married the miller” - who afterwards showed his esteem for his friend by erecting an obelisk to his memory in his garden. At Newhall, the hospitable home of Mr. Forbes, met a clever set of men with a taste for letters, who gathered in the chamber called the “Club-room,” adorned with portraits of its members from the skilful brush of William Aikman, the laird of Cairney. Among them was old Dr. Alexander Pennecuik, laird of Romanno, whose ne’er-do-weel nephew was lampooning everybody and drinking everything - a physician who, from choice rather than need, doctored the people in Tweeddale, over forty miles of bleak country [*Pennecuik's Works*, 1817, including a “Description of Tweeddale.”]; who loved his carouse in the roadside inn, enjoyed the humours of gypsies and ministers and small lairds of West Linton, of whom there were forty-five - “four-teen of them on the poor box.” He could write in verses not decorous, and withal was learned in Latin, Spanish, and. French. It was this old gentleman who suggested to Allan Ramsay the plot of *The Gentle Shepherd*, the scenes of which lie round Newhall. A notable humorist in his time, he died in 1727, an old man of eighty-one, leaving poems, some clever, most of them coarse, which we read with a yawn.

To return to the better poet. Old Scots lyrics existed in abundance, and the airs to which they were set were charming - whence these came none can tell - but many of the ancient ditties were deplorably gross and coarse to the ears of a modern age. Many were more suitable for the harvest-field and penny wedding than for ears polite and ladies, who now were singing songs to viol da gamba and virginal. Ramsay therefore saw a task to his taste, though the wigmaker’s notions of delicacy were peculiar. He took many a familiar song to change, and to purge of wanton words, for ladies’ lips; and in the process he improved some and spoilt not a few; left many hardly cleaner than before, and added others by himself and his friends. These were issued in his *Tea-Table Miscellany*, the first volume of which appeared in 1724. His collection was a valuable boon to society at the time; but not altogether an unmitigated boon to literature, for many poor songs being composed

by him for old airs, the originals passed into oblivion, and words familiar to bygone generations, whose preservation, with all their crudity and coarseness, would have been invaluable to students of old manners, were lost for ever. We would rather have the rudest of the rejected songs than many of those mocking-bird verses, that sang notes which were not their own. In the work of emendation and addition he was helped by some "ingenious gentlemen." These were young men of taste and talent who wrote with ease, and often with success, whose presence was frequent at the tavern clubs - sons of lairds like Robert Crauford, whose "Leader Haughs and Yarrow," "Bush aboon Traquair," and "Tweedside" remained popular long after he was drowned in 1733, while returning from France. There was the witty, genial ex-lieutenant, Hamilton of Gilbertfield, represented best by his "Willy was a wanton wag," a favourite in all convivial parties. None was so congenial to Ramsay as he; they exchanged rhyming epistles, jocular and humorous - the young laird the wittier, and destined to receive the compliment, sixty years later, of being imitated by Robert Burns.* Still more popularly was Hamilton to be known by his abridgment of Blind Harry's "Wallace," published in 1722, which became a chap-book to be found in every cottage - ill-printed, peat-begrimed, thumb-marked, and in later days to give a patriotic thrill to the Ayrshire ploughman, prompting to "Scots wha hae." He died in 1751.

Less good work did Ramsay achieve in his *Evergreen, being a Collection of Scots Poems wrote before 1600*, in which old Scots pieces were garbled and spoiled in words and versification, and his own "Vision" was audaciously foisted as an ancient poem. In this collection appeared "Hardyknute," which had been issued first in the folio sheets in 1719, as an antique ballad.

* Hamilton's second Epistle has this as its first stanza:

When I received thy kind epistle,
It made me dance and sing and whistle;
O sic a fike and sic a fistle
    I had about it!
That e'er was knight of the Scots thistle
    Sae fain I doubted.

Burns's "First Epistle to Lapraik" has this as its last stanza:

And to conclude my lang epistle,
As my auld pen's worn to a grissle;
Twa lines frae you wad gar me fissle,
    Who am, most fervent,
While I can either sing or whistle,
    Your humble servant.

None guessed then that it was the work of clever Lady Wardlaw of Pitreavie.

All literary faults which proceeded from Allan's profound conceit of his powers and his taste were to be condoned by his *Gentle Shepherd*, which appeared in 1725, based upon earlier efforts. For this Hamilton of Bangour wrote the dedicatory address to the ever-charming Susanna, Countess of Eglinton - the sweetest patroness a poet could find, then in her matchless beauty and wit, who was the loveliest dowager at the Assembly, the fairest burden borne in a sedan-chair along the High Street; who was to grace the balls in far later years with seven daughters, as lovely as herself, to charm the great Dr. Johnson in 1773, and yet to live till 1791, a dear old woman of ninety-one. In his pastoral play, Ramsay is at his best, for its racy humour, its genuine poetry, its scenes of country life and manners. The characters are human beings, not the shepherds and shepherdesses of conventional, pastoral songs, with crooks adorned by dainty ribbons, and clad in attire no mortal ever wore, with reeds which no lips ever played on, and "pipes" which no sheep ever followed. It was surely providence that interfered to prevent the worthy man from imitating Guarini's *Pastor Fido*, which he read in a translation and desired to emulate. This comedy at least has the freshness of the country; the broad Scots speech is real, the characters have life; yet it is true the town-bred wigmaker idealised rural ways and peasant life, of which he knew nothing very familiarly. It does not present the people as they lived in his day, still less in the time of Cromwell, in which the plot is laid. We smell no dirt, we find no squalor, we touch no rags, we see no hovels, all which were in the common lot of the peasantry. But then we must remember that after all it is a pastoral, which dare not be a squalid picture of real life; it is poetry, and often very good poetry too. [Some papers in the *Guardian* (1718) first ridiculed the fantastic form of pastoral, and urged that, instead of the conventional Corydon and Phillis, Tityrus and Amaryllis, there should be English rustics and real English scenery. These papers would be read and remembered by Ramsay and his friends of the Easy Club.]

Never had been such success for a Scots poem: it sold edition after edition; it won a fame in England as in Scotland; Gay was charmed. Pope was pleased, as his friend Dr.Arbuthnot read it to him and explained the Scots - an unknown tongue to the poet of Twickenham. [*Ramsay's Poetical Works and Life*, 1806, p. 80.]

Now prosperous, in 1726 Ramsay quitted the dingy old shop near the Tron Kirk, and established himself in the Luckenbooths - a row of "lands" standing in the High Street fronting St. Giles', and blocking the street to a narrow entry. Above his door he placed the busts of William Drummond of Hawthornden and Ben Jonson, instead of the dilapidated figure of Mercury which had adorned the door of the

wig-shop - for the poet had abandoned the trade in periwigs, razors, and curling-tongs, and become a bookseller, as befitted his dignified literary position. He started the first circulating library in the kingdom, and lent out books at a penny a night, sometimes of a description which made the godly weep. Instead of soul-guiding works like those of the reverend and faithful minister of God, Mr. James Durham, *The Groans of Believers*, or the *Balm of Gilead*, there were the works of Congreve, Wycherley, Dryden, and Matt Prior: yea, the scandalous *Atalantis* of Mrs. Manley, which was found in the hands of young ladies. One knows how the Reverend Robert Wodrow wrote his lamentation that "all the villainous, profane, and obscene books and plays, as printed at London, are got down by Allan Ramsay and lent out, for an easy price, to young boys, servant weemen of the better sort, and gentlemen . . . by these wickedness of all kinds are dreadfully propagat among the youth of all sorts." [Wodrow's *Analecta*, iii. 516. Alexander Pennecuik issued a lampoon entitled "The Flight of Religious Piety from the Land upon account of Ramsay's Lewd Books and the Hell-bred Comedians who debauch all the Faculties of the Soul of our Rising Generations."] Magistrates, who were pious elders, examined the shelves to see if ugly rumours which the pious hypocrite Lord Grange had reported were true, but the pawky librarian had hidden the worst before they looked, leaving ministers to moan in vain over the soul-destroying influence of the scurrilous and godless books which were in circulation, for a villainous obscene thing is no sooner printed at London than it is spread and communicat at Edinburgh."

Thus, in making books, selling them, and lending them, the little poet was prosperous as well as famous, and how delightful it was in his shop to have little paunchy Mr. Gay, the poet, when on a visit to her capricious grace the Duchess of Queensberry, to hear his talk about the great world of letters, of the great men he knew, and to point out to him from his window all the Edinburgh notables as they passed along the street. He was proud to think that he was known in London, that his songs were sung there, and his "Sodger Laddie" was rapturously received in Marylebone Gardens - though it must be owned it was listened to less for its vapid words than for its music; for Scots tunes had been made fashionable by William Thomson, now musician to Queen Caroline, formerly oboe player in Edinburgh. By 1730 he ceased to write; he felt his Pegasus getting old and stiff, his muse was less inspiring. But he must be busy; he must be an important personage. He loved play-actors, had written prologues for the plays performed surreptitiously "gratis" as part of a concert of music to evade the law, and now he ventured to build a theatre in Carrubber's Close in 1736. To his dismay, under the new licensing Act it

was summarily closed by the magistrates, and the proprietor was ruefully left with injured feelings and an empty purse, while the luckless theatre was left to pass through many vicissitudes - to be the meeting-place for nondescript societies and sects, to become a Jacobin club, and a Roman Catholic chapel. Poverty seems even to have come to Ramsay, for he is found writing abject letters to Forbes of Culloden, asking assistance in his sore straits - "Will you not give me something to do?" - a bitter pill for the vain little man to swallow. [Carruthers's *Highland Note-book*, p. 63.]

The worthy soul in later years was ensconced in his brand-new house - of whimsical form, popularly likened to a "goose pie" - on the brow of the hill overlooking what was then the Nor' Loch, and facing the green fields on which Princes Street stands, looking away to the Fifeshire coast. There he was happy with his family of daughters, while his son Allan had become a famous artist, a fine scholar, a leader of society. His daughters married, and his wife died, passing away without one of those elegies which he wrote so readily, "because," suggests George Chalmers kindly, in his inimitable style, "the loss was too affecting for loquacity to deplore." [*Poems of A. Ramsay* (Life, by G. Chalmers).]

He went in and out of his shop, adjourned to tavern suppers, trotted up and down the High Street, with his little squat form, his big paunch, his short legs, his head adorned with fair round wig and cocked hat, surmounting a kindly, smirking, self-complacent face - the best-known and vainest man about town. In 1758, January 8, the little poet ended his prosperous career, at the age of seventy-two.

It is in Scots verse he lives: his English efforts are as forced and feeble and mechanical as his more learned friends' Latin elegiacs, mere echoes at the best of the poets he studied and whose phrases he copied. His songs are not his best work, though "Farewell to Lochaber" and the "Lass o' Patie's Mill" deserve to live. At his best he writes pieces which have sly humour, with touches of racy satire; verses which give graphic pictures of city life and portraits of character, caustic and vigorous, but sometimes only coarse and squalid. But with self-complacency he produces much cleverish commonplace with a too nimble fluency. Old Edinburgh, in those writings of his, is vividly pictured for us. We see the ladies wearing their green and red plaids - for whose continued use he pleaded so well [In his *Tartans*.] - held with one arm round the waist to keep them tight to the body, and gloved hand holding them close to the face, from which the eyes sparkled brightly - a costume so useful in kirk to hide the modest from the ogler's eye, and to hide the slumbering eyelids from the preacher's sight. We see the archers, eight brigades, marching in blue St. Andrew's bonnets, trimmed with green ribbons on their wigs,

to shoot at the butts on Leith or Musselburgh links, while a splendid array of fashion watch as the Duke of Hamilton [Oliphant's *Jacobite Lairds of Gask*, p. 101.] and his comrades compete for the Silver Arrow amid thunders of applause. Then comes the supper at the tavern, when at the chairman's word toasts are given of ladies fair, and the glass goes round. "My lord, your toast the preses cries," and in bewildering succession each proposes the lady of his praise. We hear at mid-day the chimes of St. Giles' playing the gay tunes of Italy and France, and sweet airs of Scotland, over the romantic and dirty capital of the north, and hear the tread of hasty citizens leaving their shops to drink at taverns their "meridians" at the sound of the "gill bells." There are the caddies in their rags and impudence, running their errands from wynd to wynd, and gilt sedan-chairs borne by Gaelic porters trotting on the causeway. In the Meadows, which Mr. Hope of Rankeillor has just reclaimed (in 1727) from morass, and planted and hedged, professors walk when their classes are over, and ladies and gentlemen saunter on the grass beside these trees, as yet too small for shade or shelter. In the afternoon we see the crowd in the grim West Bow, as the Assembly meets at five-o'clock - sedan-chairs blocking the narrow lane with their behooped occupants, and gentlemen in silk and satin, gold-laced coat and waistcoat, and clinking-sword, and wavy periwigs, making their entrance up the dark turnpike stair. As night goes on, we hear the roysterers as they reel and sing on their way home from the taverns, when the sound of the drum's tattoo rumbles through the dark streets -

> With tattered wigs, fine shoes, and uncocked hats,
> And all bedaubed with snuff their loose cravats.

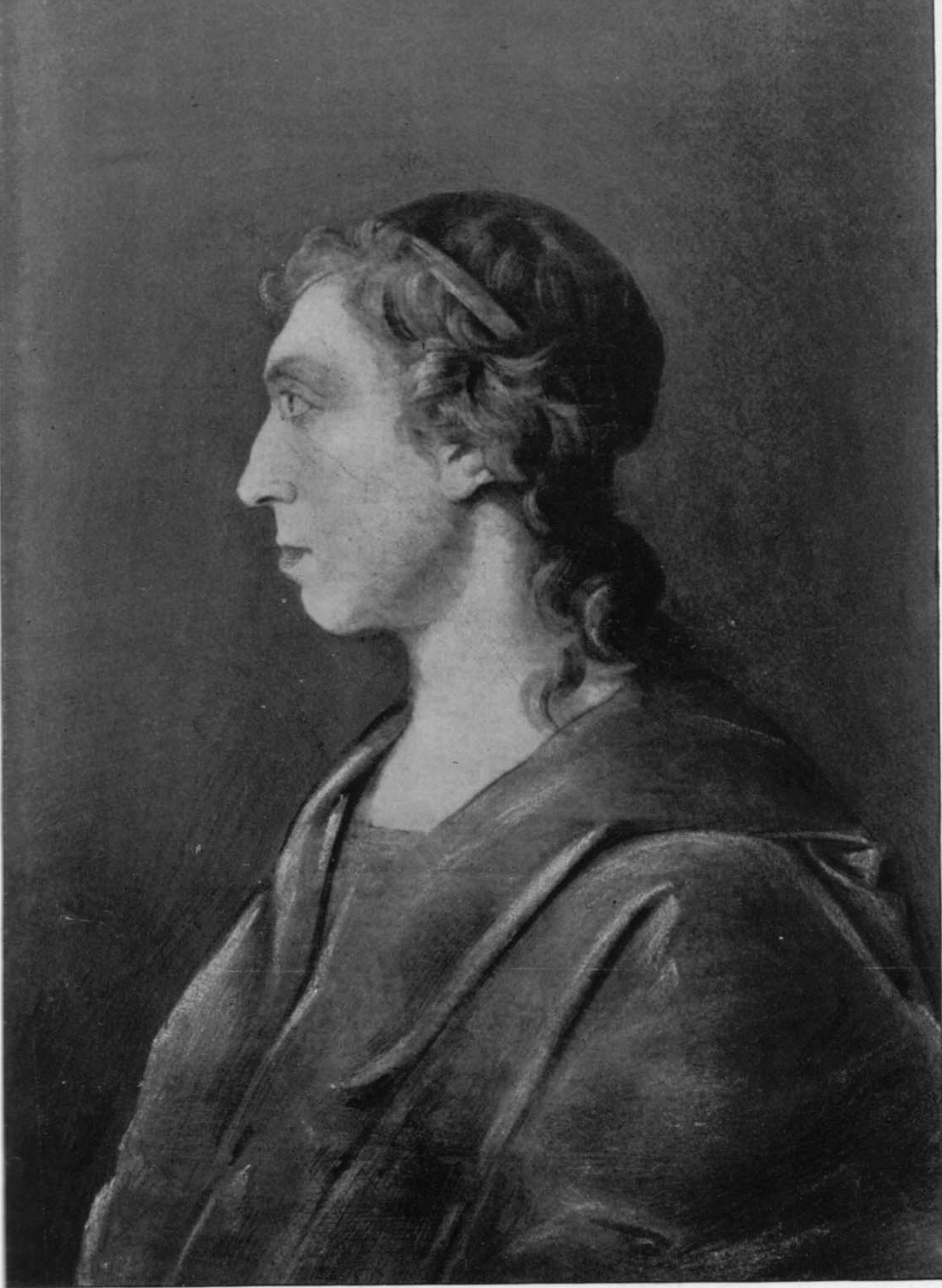
And then the hawkers sell and sing their songs with sounds that make hideous the malodorous air. On Saturday the Bruntsfield Links are full of golfers, whose balls smashed the knee of that now wooden-legged scholar Mr. William Lauder - who pretended to prove Milton a plagiarist, and proved himself a forger - and then they adjourn to the little inn at Morningside, where Maggy Johnstone dispenses "tippeny" of rarest quality to her customers who lie sprawling on the grass, drinking damsels' healths and playing "high jinks" - that game of drunken gambling; and the modest toper, whose glass is not yet emptied, at their warning cry of "Pike yer bane!" drinks it to the dregs. Sunday comes, and the throngs go forth to listen in the High Kirk to the Rev. James Webster, who with a leaden cap on head, expounds his texts and pounds the pulpit with rampant vigour; while in the evening,

in the silent streets, the Kirk-treasurer's man slinks along to detect any Sabbath "vaguers," or to report the transgressor to the session, or extort hush-money from their trembling victim. All these scenes live over again in the works of Allan Ramsay.

HAMILTON OF BANGOUR

Among the literary obscurities or celebrities of that age, one of the best known to posterity is William Hamilton, son of the laird of Bangour. When only twenty years old, he wrote a song which made him famous in his country, and has earned for him an attenuated immortality - the "Braes o' Yarrow," composed in 1724. It was sung many a time at the symposia in the Crosskeys, kept by Patrick Steel - no common tapster, but a musician who made violins as well as played them [Chambers's *Domestic Annals*, ii.] - where young Hamilton and his friends so often met, and found its way by manuscript copies to town and country houses, where the verses were sung to the fine old Scots melody. Where was there lady with voice or ear who did not sing to virginal or harp "Busk ye, busk ye, my winsome marrow," by Willy Hamilton? This young poet was a man of taste and sentiment. He could write verses in colloquial Scots and fluent lines in English, in which his deftness was considerable, though in that foreign tongue his vocabulary is limited. To his countrymen, who could not be critics of English, his verses seemed admirable, and he certainly deserves the credit of being the first Scotsman in that century to write poetry in good English. He would copy verses in plain hand on folio sheets, gilt-edged, and present ladies with lines adoring their persons, their virtues, and all that were theirs, and much that was not - which they carefully transcribed into their albums, where they lurked for many a day, till 1748, when, without the author's knowledge, they were published.

Hamilton was a man of fashion, and where was life more fashionable than in Edinburgh? Year by year, as winter drew near, and the snows began to tip the Ochils or the Lammermuirs, and the country looked bleak and bare, coaches set forth from mansions and castles laden with families bent on the gaiety of the capital. Slowly, noisily the vehicles ploughed the roads, and on the leathern straps their huge bodies swung and creaked. It was to Edinburgh, rather than to the foreign and expensive court at London, that the Scots nobility flocked, and society was made brilliant with the presence of the Dukes of Hamilton, Douglas, and Perth, my lords



WILLIAM HAMILTON OF BANGOUR

From the Painting by Gavin Hamilton in the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, Edinburgh.

Annandale, Eglinton, and Panmure, Kilmarnock, March, Dundonald, and many more, who, with the ladies, readily exchanged baronial homes for lofty flats, fine avenues for dirty wynds, fresh country air for city smells. On week days they would go to see Signora Violante, the Italian dancer and tumbler, with her mountebanks, in Carrubber's Close, next door to the poor little chapel to which Jacobites went on Sundays. Once a fortnight they went in their silks and brocades, and hoops of vast rotundity, to the "consorts" held in the Steel's Crosskeys, in the close off the Canongate, listening to hautbois, 'cello, and virginal, where musicians with "sweetest sound Corelli's art display" - the laird of Newhall on the viol da gamba, Lord Colville on the harpsichord, and Sir Gilbert Elliot of Minto on the German flute, which he was the first to introduce into Scotland. To the Assembly they would go, where, from five to eleven o'clock, at charge of half-a-crown, with serious grace they danced their minuets in those several sets - the "maiden set," the "married set," the "heartsome set," the "quality set," and the "beauty set" - at which last all eyes were fastened on faces which showed how justly Scotland was famed for beautiful women. Those high-born, country-bred dames and damsels were not richly dressed - the parental incomes were too small for that; they were not powdered or painted - their complexion was too fine for that; they were not noisy, intriguing "misses" - their simplicity was too good for that; their attire displayed no jewels; their hair was simply worn in ringlets; and their modest mien showed forth the freshness of Scottish damsels, whom all travellers from England admired. Nor were they without accomplishments: they learned from the celebrated Lamotte to dance; they learned from foreign masters who came north in winter how to sing, if not to speak Italian; and with a grudge their fathers supplied the fees to learn virginal and harpsichord, which their daughters sang so well. [*L''Éloge d'Écosse et des Dames Écossaises*, par Mr. Freebairn, 1732.] There were men of fashion, too, who imitated London modes - from the days when that beau, John Law of Lauriston (before he blossomed into a disastrous financier in France), was known as "Jessamy John," from his assiduous polishing of his shoes with oil of Jessamine, [Wilson's *Memorials of Edinburgh*, ii. 83.] modishness attained its height in Beau Forester of later times - known afterwards as the "Polite Philosopher" from his book so-called - who sat in chintz négligé to be dressed and powdered by his valet on the open balcony on the High Street. In Edinburgh young men of rank were far from uncouth; and often vain of their "flaxen hair perfumed, their Indian cane, embroidered coat, and stocking silver clocked," as Bangour describes them.

It was in such high society that Hamilton lived - himself a flirt, a

philanderer, inflammable as tinder to female attractions. His hospitable, commodious soul could entertain several loves at once, or receive them in quick succession, while he gallantly speeded the parting guest. He loved in facile verse to celebrate the charms of fair daughters of lords and lairds and judges that graced the balls. "Sweet Humeia's lips," "Kinlochia's shape," "Maria's snowy breast," "Dundasia's face" - these were the themes to which he "strikes the golden lyre" with painful alacrity. At tea-parties, to circles of admiring ladies, the polite poet would recite his verses, while "fair Pringle" accompanied them on harpsichord, and lovely Mistress Jane Erskine sang them. Love-lorn strains they were, expressive of tears he never shed, and of passion he never felt. The poetic "laird of a small estate of rural acres" fluttered from one "Cynthia of the minute" to another with the vagrant ease of a butterfly - yet too careful to give to any an exclusive devotion. There was Mistress Jane Stewart, whose beauty the versifier loved to celebrate, who, being vexed what to do with this dangler, in perplexity asked the lank, long advocate, Henry Home (for the Lord Kames of the future was a beau in those days) how she could get rid of his attentions. "Dance with him at the Assembly to-night, show him every mark of your kindness, as if you resolved to favour his suit. Take my word for it, you'll hear no more of him." The lady took the shrewd advice, and the cautious poet took his leave. [Tytler's *Kames*, i. 63.] Yet twice did the poet marry - the first time, because he loved the lady; the second time, because the lady loved him. But Hamilton had other companions and more robust delights, and when the concerts and the balls were over he, with his friends, would go to Maclauchlin's tavern to drink deep and recite sentimentally his stanzas, or visit Coutts's cellar, of "Cimmerian darkness"; for he, like Allan Ramsay, despised a "tea-faced generation" - descending as to the bowels of the earth with unequal steps to drink the claret from tin cans. [*Hamilton's Life and Poems*, ed. Patterson.]

Facile, good-natured, changeable in his politics as in his affections, though a Whig by training under President Dalrymple, his sympathies were transferred as he was sauntering one day at the Capitol of Rome, and a hand was laid on his shoulder, and a smiling voice said, "Well, Mr. Hamilton, whether do you like this prospect or the one from North Berwick Law?" This - a greeting from Prince Charles - made him a Jacobite to his cost. [Ramsay's *Scotland and Scotsmen*, i. 29.] In the '45 he followed the Prince, and escaping from Culloden in the guise of a serving-man, he was seized in a cave and discovered with love-verses in his pocket addressed characteristically "To the Mysterious Inmate of my Heart," which was fatuously supposed to mean the Pretender. After hiding in the garret of a manse for six weeks,

he escaped with impaired health from his martial adventures, and joined that pathetic little colony of Scots fugitives at Rouen which lived frugally in scanty quarters, waiting eagerly for news from the old country many were never to see, and for remittances from their estates that few were ever to get, dreaming of a Restoration which was never to come. Stout Stewart of Threipland was there, and shrewd Andrew Lumsden, afterwards ill-paid secretary to the Prince, who dismissed him because he would not accompany him, when his Highness was drunk, to the Opera. There, too, was Lumsden's brother-in-law, Robert Strange, the engraver - a Jacobite *malgré lui*, all to please his vigorous spouse, who remained in Edinburgh in a garret trying to support herself and child working her spinning-wheel while she rocked the cradle, and would go forth at dusk in threadbare gown to dispose of her work for sixpence. [J. H. Smith's *Life of Nollekens*, i. 27.]' Hunter of Burnside touched Smollett's heart by telling him how, when resident at Boulogne, he and his companions used wearily to pace the beach, to feast their longing eyes with a prospect of the white cliff's of Albion, which they were never to approach. [*Peregrine Pickle*, chap. xxxvi.] Meanwhile at home the songs and poems of the amiable exile were remembered. At every Tory tea-table was sung his "Ode to the Battle of Gladsmuir," in which he celebrated victory at Prestonpans, to music set by the favourite M'Gibbon. In 1748 a collection of his poems, edited by his friend Adam Smith, was published in Glasgow, to forestall a pirated edition, and in this were old pieces reprinted and verses gathered from private collections and feminine desks without the exile's knowledge. His land was restored to the harmless rebel, and he returned to take possession - only to be forced by ill-health to leave once more and die of consumption at Lyons in 1754. He left behind him memories of an amiable soul, of merry nights and literary days, of gay visits to subterranean cellars, "full many a fathom deep." Ladies long recalled the kindly, harmless ways of "Willy Hamilton," and when they were old and grey and wrinkled, lean or corpulent, they would read over the lines which he had presented them, describing their "beauteous form," their "snowy breast," their waists of divine proportions, when they were young; and then giving a furtive glance at their tell-tale mirrors, would wonder if ever these glowing words could really have been true of them. But did not the spinster aunt of Sophia Western boast to her niece that she - even she - had in her time been called the "cruel Parthenissa"?

When news of the poet's death was heard, the *Caledonian Mercury*, kindly to a Jacobite, proclaimed him to be "in language, sentiment, and numbers a poet little (if at all) inferior to a Dryden, an Addison, or a Pope"; with which assertion the

editor of his works in 1763 was in full accord, for David Rae (afterwards Lord Eskgrove) in his preface shows he was hardly less absurd when he was young and an advocate than when he was old and a judge. There are one or two fine lyrics, there are a few fine lines, but the verses are stone dead, except the "Braes o' Yarrow." Odes, elegiacs bleat forth their grief in melodious tears over people long vanished, and magnify the graces of those long passed from this fleeting world. Dr. Johnson scoffed when Boswell praised this Scots poet, and admiringly quoted from his "Contemplation" unhappy lines, though the great doctor in his *Lives of the Poets* lauded versifiers far worse than he. Boisterously he laughed at a writer who made "wishes" rhyme with "blushes," having evidently been wont to pronounce it "wushes" in society. But Bozzy tells the world (though assuredly he did not dare to tell his revered friend) that "I comforted myself with thinking that the beauties were too delicate for his robust perception." [Boswell's *Life of Johnson* (edit. Croker, 1848, p. 544).]

Robert Blair

Allan Ramsay had ceased to write, and was spending a complacent old age trotting up and down the High Street to his shop, and meeting old friends in familiar taverns. Hamilton of Bangour was penning sentimental nothings, and handing them round for the delectation of his many friends. William Meston, the Jacobite, and ex-professor of Latin of Aberdeen, was writing clever Latin verses and Scots satires; living as a dependent on kindly Jacobite dames - the Countess Mareschal and Lady Erroll, who gave him food and clothing; drunken when in funds, destitute when he was out of them, the merriest, wittiest, most learned of companions over a bottle; till, forlorn and broken in constitution and character, he died in 1745. [*Poems*, by W. Meston, 1765.] Meanwhile, at the manse of Athelstaneford, a grave, stately minister of the Gospel was trying to get a bookseller in London to publish a poem of solemn import - as unlike the light verses of his contemporaries as the toll of a funeral bell to the merry "gill bells" of St. Giles'.

At last, in 1748, there appeared a tiny volume *The Grave*, by Robert Blair. The author was a member of a distinguished clerical family - grandson of the Rev. Robert Blair who had been appointed to treat between Charles I. and Oliver Cromwell. A reserved man he was, known intimately to few even in his neighbourhood - keeping himself much to the precincts of the manse garden, except when he wandered among the glens and moorland botanising; yet full of scientific

interest, corresponding with authorities on optics and microscopic science in England. He was a courtly, dignified friend with county families, but not intimate with his clerical brethren, who little frequented his house, in spite of his wife being "frank and open and uncommonly handsome." Young folk, like Alexander Carlyle when he was a lad, avoided that manse, with its minister "austere and void of urbanity." [Carlyle's *Autobiography*, p. 94; Blair's *Grave* (with Life by Anderson),1797.] For several years Mr. Blair had been busy in his book-room, which long after his death was known as "The grave," with his science, his books, and also in writing poetry, though he had as yet only published an elegy on Professor Law, his father-in-law. Anxiously he sought a publisher for the poem on which he had long been engaged. But booksellers knew that the public cared only for something light and lively - epigrams that glittered, or satires that stung - and such literary wares the Presbyterian minister did not offer them. Not far from his parish were living the soldier-saint Colonel Gardiner and his wife Lady Frances; they were intimate with Mr. Blair, who was pious and preached sermons "serious and warm," and through Lady Frances, who loved saintly dissenters, [Fergusson's *Henry Erskine*, p. 40.] acquaintance was made with non-conforming lights. [Fergusson's *Henry Erskine*, p. 40.] Dr. Watts on his behalf tried the book-sellers; but they doubted if "a person living 300 miles from London could write so as to be acceptable to the fashionable and the polite." Doddridge next exerted his interest, and the poem was finally accepted. But not yet were his troubles over. Society did not care for poetry of the charnel-house, the bookseller insisted that he should relieve the gloom of his poem; and the disconsolate author was obliged to sit down in his book-room - as he says bitterly to Dr. Doddridge - "to use proper arts to make such a piece go down with a licentious age which cares for none of these things." If the piece was more lugubrious before he began to alter it "to suit the licentious age," it is difficult to imagine how he had ever managed to make it so, for it treats sombrely enough of "skulls and coffins, epitaphs and worms." The work met with unexpected success. It appeared at a period when there was in many quarters a reaction from the frivolous tastes of society, when Wesley and Whitfield were beginning to touch the more earnest hearts of the age, when Watts and Doddridge were leaders in dissenting communities. To such sober circles The Grave, like Young's *Night Thoughts* and Hervey's *Meditations among the Monks*, was grateful, if not exhilarating. It says much for Blair that, treating of a subject where there is but the one perilous step between the sublime and the ridiculous, he never makes the fatal step. Unequal as it is, with intervals of solemn commonplace, there is a striking

impressiveness and sombre power which raise *The Grave* to a high level of poetry. That the poet carried in his mind, and imbedded in his lines, thoughts and phrases from other writers need not much diminish his claim to originality.* Little known to the world while he lived, and leaving few memories behind when he died, at the age of forty-seven, in 1746 [His third son, a distinguished advocate, became Lord President of the Court of Session.] he has left one poem which merits an honourable place in literature, and has earned continued distinction from the designs, instinct with genius, which come from the pencil of William Blake, whose weird fancy revelled over these grim pictures of mortality.

* [Reminiscences of his reading of English poets recur here and there.

Nat Lee's lines -

> While foulest fiends shun thy society,
> And thou shalt walk alone, forsaken fury
> (*Alexander the Great*, Act i. sc. 1)

are reproduced in

> The common damned shun their society,
> And look upon themselves as fiends less foul.

Dryden's

> Whistling to keep myself from being afraid
> (*Amphitryon*, Act i. sc. 1)

suggests his schoolboy

> Whistling to keep his courage up.

Norris's

> Like angels' visits, short and bright,

suggested his

> Like those of angels few and far between.

(Compare Campbell's

> Angels visits few and far between.)

And Norris's lines

> Some courteous ghost, tell this great secrecy,
> What 'tis thou art and we must be
> (*Meditation*, 1697)

are copied in

> O that some courteous ghost would blab it out,
> What 'tis you are and we must shortly be.