

CAROLINE
BARONESS
NAIRNE



The SCOTTISH
SONGSTRESS



BY HER
GREAT-GRAND
NIECE

Aunt Margaret
- a New Year's gift
from

Her affect: niece
Marg^d M. M.

5th Dec^r 1894.

THE SCOTTISH SONGSTRESS

CAROLINE BARONESS NAIRNE



LADY NAIRNE AND HER SON

THE
SCOTTISH SONGSTRESS

CAROLINE BARONESS NAIRNE

BY
HER GREAT GRAND-NIECE

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CAROLINE BARONESS NAIRNE



WHO can tell the power of music and of song? Although the essence of time, they transcend time. As the wind or as the sunshine, their influence is everywhere, yet undefined. It may be like a breeze or a storm, a stray ray or the meridian glory. It is all around us. We are but the losers if our capacity be small. Oliver Wendell Holmes calls music a "bath for the soul." Shall we call it a tideless sea, or an atmosphere of light? For those who love solidity, music is like a temple or a shrine where the greatest in all ages have laid their offering, or at least inscribed their names, ere they passed on into

what is darkness to us and purer light to them. But though the singers pass on, what they were at their best remains in their song. The mother sings the lullaby at the cradle; the "toddlin' wean" runs an errand to the nearest shop, humming it as it goes; and thus a stream of song is set aflowing.

We had grown up so loving and learning Lady Nairne's songs, that it was a special joy to stand, in the summer of 1893, near the spot, at once her birthplace and her grave, where, as another poet wrote, "Lady Nairne had walked and ridden, and loved and sung, till Strathearn, that made Caroline Oliphant so beautiful and such a poet, was made by her more lovely and lyric still." It was nearly fifty years by the calendar since the day that her eyes were closed to all that lovely land. Fifty years!

Carmina morte carent

CAROLINA OLIPHANT

BARONESS NAIRNE

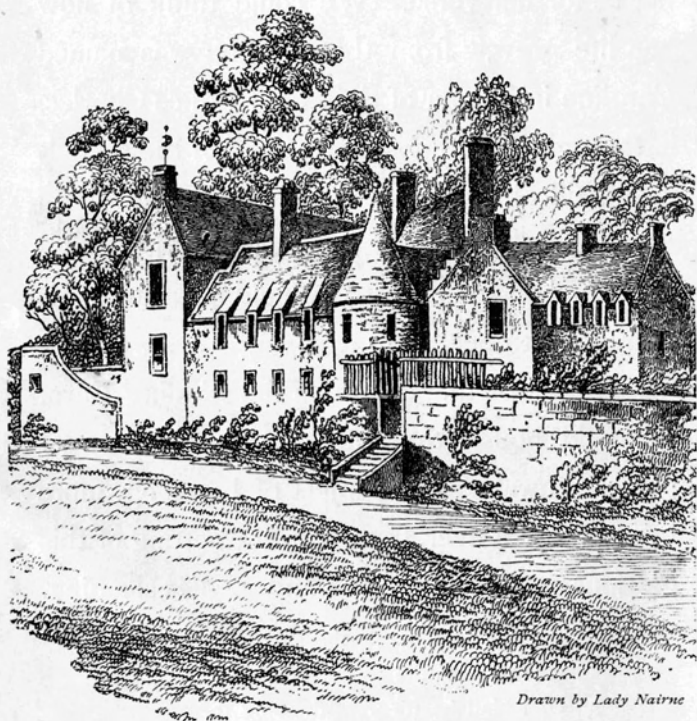
Born at Gask, 1766

Died at Gask, 1845

So the inscription stands on her obelisk, and the full, rich nature-life all around on that glorious summer day spoke of immortality for her as for her verse. We could think of how her life grew,—from the day she was named Caroline in honour of the exiled Prince Charles,—through the pretty “Miss Car” of the school-room, till she blossomed into the “Flower of Strathearn”; and, better still, how her mind grew in her songs. “The auld pear tree” is there, and to her, as to it, a ring of age meant a year of growth. There is the winding Earn, the auld house, the auld dial; but the sweet singer is awa’! The subject of her song, more beautiful than ever, framed in the setting of this glorious summer, lives on; and she lies sleeping.

“Oh, the auld house, the auld house,
What tho’ the rooms were wee!
Oh! kind hearts were dwelling there,
And bairnies fu’ o’ glee;
The wild rose and the jessamine
Still hang upon the wa’;
How many cherish’d memories
Do they, sweet flowers, reca’!

Still flourishing the auld pear tree
The bairnies liked to see,
And oh, how often did they speir
When ripe they a' wad be !



Drawn by Lady Nairne

The voices sweet, the wee bit feet
Aye rinnin' here and there,
The merry shout—Oh ! whiles we greet
To think we'll hear nae mair !

The setting sun, the setting sun,
How glorious it gaed doon!
The cloudy splendour raised our hearts
To cloudless skies aboon!
The auld dial, the auld dial,
It tauld how time did pass;
The wintry winds hae dung it doon,
Now hid 'mang weeds and grass."

We have seen on French roads larger and lesser milestones, divisions and subdivisions; so the fiftieth year seems like one of those larger milestones, a time to stop in this fast age of ours, and look at the writer of these songs from this distance, with the lights and shadows of well-nigh half a century.

"Why is it that we never, never know
The beauty of our treasures while they're ours?
A little way removed must be the flower
From where we breathe its perfume, ere we can
See all its beauteous bloom and paint it so.
A stone's cast from us must the sheltering tree
Rise in its greenness, ere we can behold
Its perfect form against the hill or sky.
Too interwoven with our own heart strings,
Too much a unison with our life's song,
Is all that meets us in the object loved
That we should well describe it."

In a friend's house, when we got tired of the immediate surroundings, we looked through a telescope and read the lettering on the pier-head of the opposite coast. Shall we do so now ere the shore recedes further, looking at the outline of Lady Nairne's chequered life till she returned to Gask to die?

"Buried among his works." So the Danish guide said of Thorwaldsen's grave at Copenhagen. All round the courtyard were the galleries, divided into little rooms, each containing a masterpiece, and he lay under a simple mound of ivy, with the words, "Bertel Thorwaldsen." No monument marked his grave. His works were his monument. *Her* monument is surely the songs she sang; and we say of her, "Buried among her works"—not of sculpture, but of song.

The visit to the spot recalled many memories. As we wandered on the turf, we thought of those who had gone since we last stood there. The proprietor of the mansion, the sweet song-

stress, the grandniece who made us sing the songs, and the brother whose ringing voice had blended its notes with ours, had all met above! We returned at night to the lovely villa on the Tay where our grandmother, Lady Nairne's niece, had told us many histories of her young days. We sometimes fear that the gentle art of story telling is dying out, or disappearing like the old hostelries on our deserted highroads. Long journeys by stage-coach and the more expensive postage of letters and absence of post-cards made stories a more essential part of the life in olden times; and the gloamin' in Scotland, when it was more difficult to get the lights lit, when there were tinder-box and flint and steel instead of matches, favoured their growth. At anyrate, our grandmother used to make the moments fly with her tales of bygone days.

Lady Nairne had watched her sister, Mrs. Stewart, my grandmother's mother, pass away. After the oil-painting of Bonskeid had been

placed opposite her bed, our grandmother, then a schoolgirl, was eagerly expected. "Take the storeroom key and have it brightened," she said to her little maid Christie;¹ "Miss Stewart must find it in good order." Lady Nairne used to say, "Ask me no questions about the visible glory that seemed to encircle my beloved sister in that solemn hour." Another story flits across our minds as we write, like a shadow on the wall. It must have been intended for an older listener, for we thought it pretty, but did not take in the meaning. A girl was in doubt as to whether she should accept or refuse a lover. "Gang and listen to what the kirk bells say," was the shrewd advice. "Well, what do they say?" the girl was asked when she came back. "The bells said, 'Tak' him, Jenny; tak' him, Jenny!'" These and many of the Gask stories were told in a bow window

¹ She still survives at the age of ninety-seven, and lives not far from the South Inch in Perth, where she delights to tell these old histories.

overlooking the Tay, with the Grampians beyond.

There is now a railway along the whole road between Springland and Bonskeid, the two homes of our childhood; but when we were young we used to leave the train at Dunkeld, near where the Wolf of Badenoch (whose descendant had married Lady Nairne's eldest sister) lies buried, and enter the stage-coach close by the lovely grounds of Murthly Castle, belonging to the Stewart line. It was in these grounds that Lady Nairne passed through the crisis of her life. "She was on a visit," my mother has told us, "to the old Castle of Murthly, where an English clergyman had also arrived. He was a winner of souls. At morning worship she was in her place with the household, and listened to what God's ambassador said on the promise, 'Him that cometh unto Me, I will in no wise cast out.' Faith grasped it. From that hour she never had one doubt of God's love to her in Christ.

But that forenoon she was seen no more. Her fair face was spoiled with weeping when she again appeared. Her eye had caught the glory of the Son of God, and burned with love to Him of whom she henceforth could say, 'Whose I am and whom I serve.'"

When not beside the Tay, it was within sound of the rushing Tummel, in the very heart of Perthshire, that we eagerly listened to our mother's tales. Hers was a magician's wand. The land she led us into was an enchanted country. The scenery around helped the artist story-teller. When reduced to paper the tales may seem dull and cold, like lantern-slides without the magic light. Later years tell us that it is not so much the stories themselves as the listeners which make these old tales live. Life for us older people puts in the punctuation, even the pronunciation, but to a child the web is woven quicker than we can supply the flax. Our fancy loves to linger over the long summer days, where the country

around reminded my mother of the happy summers spent on the Continent as a girl of fifteen with her grand-aunt, Lady Nairne. The bound volume of that loved singer's *Lays from Strathearn* was never far away. It seemed to illustrate the country round. The rowan tree, watched by day at one end of the Bonskeid bowling-green, with its crimson berries and its golden leaves, was sung of at night with childish ardour.

“O! Rowan tree, O! Rowan tree, thou'lt aye be dear to me
Intwin'd thou art wi' mony ties o' hame and infancy.
Thy leaves were aye the first o' spring, thy flow'rs the
 simmer's pride ;
There was nae sic a bonny tree, in a' the countrie side.
 O! Rowan tree.

How fair wert thou in simmer time, wi' a' thy clusters
 white !
How rich and gay thy autumn dress, wi' berries red and
 bright !
On thy fair stem were mony names, which now nae mair
 I see,
But they're engraven on my heart—forgot they ne'er
 can be !

O! Rowan tree.”

In the same way, the bonnie burn beyond was at night arrested in its course and captured in song.

“Bonnie ran the burnie doon,
Wand’rin’ and windin’;
Sweetly sang the birds aboon,
Care never mindin’.

The gentle simmer wind
Was their nursie soft and kind,
And it rockit them, and rockit them,
All in their bowers sae hie.

The mossy rock was there,
And the water-lily fair,
And the little trout would sport about
All in the sunny beam.”

If a Highland piper appeared on the gravel, it was easy to make him into a hundred. A child loves multiplication, subtraction to it is not so easy. And the voices pealed out the melody—

“Wi’ a hundred pipers an’ a’, an’ a’,
Wi’ a hundred pipers an’ a’, an’ a’;
We’ll up an’ gie them a blaw, a blaw,
Wi’ a hundred pipers an’ a’, an’ a’.”

If a stray lamb wandered past, we had its

picture in her grand-aunt's lines, which my mother loved to repeat—

“The mitherless lammie ne'er miss'd its ain mammie,
We tentit it kindly by nicht and by day;
The bairnies made game o't, it had a blythe hame o't,
Its food was the gowan, wi' dewdrops o' May.”

It was her own vivid imagination that made those evenings so delightful. She used to say when no longer able to travel: “Send me a telegram, that I may fancy it all. Even in my strong days imaginations of a place were sometimes better to me than the reality.” If we were beside her putting up a parcel, as once for a first-born child, she, who could not do a prosaic thing, scattered a handful of fresh snow-drops over the cardboard box to make more artistic the baptism-robe with the stiff lace and the insertion from the laundry-folds! She said of her grand-aunt: “Poetry burned in her soul higher than any flame but faith; and she was always trying how to send home a divine truth on the wing of a fine thought.”

Lady Nairne's physician at Brussels had advised that, as far as possible, the widow, whose only son lay dying, should have some one with her—especially in her carriage on her journeys—who did not remind her of her loss. It was thus that my mother became her constant companion on the Continent for two years. Long years afterwards, when the boxes were brought out at Bonskeid for the autumn flitting south, she would recall one of the sayings of the travellers on that memorable journey, "We always get very honest at packing-time." At such times Lady Nairne's maid, Henriette, was in her element; for, like George Sand's Marie, and Michael Angelo's Urbino, and many another attendant unknown to fame, she was the faithful companion and friend for many years of her beloved mistress. Dominique, her son's servant, had fitted up a *banc à volonté* in the front part of the carriage to contain her books, work, and provisions for the day on the long drives. It was also a foot-rest.

Together, my mother and she crossed the Stelvio and dined at the highest habitable hut in Europe, where Lady Nairne "found the air very invigorating." At Munich she met Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg with the Prince Royal of Bavaria at quiet parties, and kept in her writing-table the invitation to our Queen's Coronation, with the young Sovereign's signature—a model of clear and bold writing. She kept a book of extracts, and never read without taking longer or shorter notes of striking passages.

Amongst the things to be disposed of at packing-time were articles of Lady Nairne's own work, purchased or rather bought back by her nieces at a bazaar for the poor. In talking to my mother she said: "These purchases remind me of the time when your dear grandmother sent her garnets from Perth to Ravelstone, that Aunt Keith might dispose of them and buy a handsome folio edition of Scott's *Commentary of the Bible* for her to

present to your grandpapa. Mr. Keith noted the jeweller's name, recovered the garnets, and kept them for your mamma." These garnets, now lying near me as I write, were given to me by my grandmother, who also told their history.

My mother could never forget the shock which she got on reaching Brussels in 1837, hoping to hear that Lord Nairne was better, to be told instead that the funeral carriages had just left the courtyard of the Rue de Louvain, nor her first sight of the beloved authoress exemplifying her own song—"Our bonnie bairn's there, John."

She once wrote: "It was a cold December night. The north wind, more dry and sifting than in Britain, was felt in the large apartment in spite of the open stove and the screen that surrounded her sofa. Lady Nairne sat at a writing-table. The green shade of the lamp concealed in a great measure the wrinkled face and blood-shot eyes; and she looked still lovely,

and much younger in her seventy-second year than one would have expected. Her cap, of Queen Mary shape, had a large white crape handkerchief thrown over it. She made the kindest and most minute inquiries about everything at home, and when the effort became too great, she gave me a book to read.

“She listened with interest to Lockhart’s *Life of Sir Walter Scott*, which recalled to her the scenes and many of the personages with whom, during her residence in Edinburgh, she had been familiar. One evening, while reading aloud to her, we came upon a note discussing the authorship of ‘The Land o’ the Leal.’ To the young reader it was somewhat like going to the cannon’s mouth to read it to her, and if blushes could betray the knowledge of a secret, Lady Nairne’s observant eye must have seen them.

“I never saw her allow herself to laugh heartily but once, and it was not long after our first meeting. She had been repeating

some lines of which she said she had often tried to discover the author. On my insisting that his name was in a collection of poetry, she said, 'You must bring it to me next night.' She did not forget, and I told her the name of the author was 'Anonymous. When a very little child I had got it into my mind that this was a clever man who wrote most of the pretty things we learned: not pronouncing the word properly to myself, the error had not been discovered, and the existence of 'Anon' was as firmly believed in. To have made such a blunder before most people would have been a lasting humiliation, but not with her. How true it is that one feels most at ease in the presence of a great mind, and never hurt or awkward! He who has most mastered his subject will often most patiently explain its rudiments to the ignorant.

"She was kinder than ever, and said, 'Now tell me, dear Maggy, what collection of hymns do you use?'

“ ‘*Sacred Poetry, and Montgomery’s Christian Psalmist.*’

“ ‘And where do you learn your hymns when at Springland?’

“ ‘In a crooked little beech tree, just like an arm-chair, after breakfast till church time on Sundays; and other days, when there is time to go further, up at the long stone seat on the bank of Annaty Burn, where it runs into the current of the Tay, between us and the Scone grounds.’

“ ‘The view is very fine there, is it not?’

“ ‘We never miss going on the fine sunset evenings to see it over the Grampians; with the clouds and the broad river, and just in front of a long little island; the sky looks like a way up to heaven.’

“ ‘What hymn did you last learn there?’ she asked.

“ ‘A cloud lay cradled near the setting sun,

A gleam of crimson tinged its braided snow:

Long had I watched the glory moving on,

O’er the still radiance of the lake below.’

“ ‘Just a place to learn hymns about heaven at; they should never be learned as a task. And at Bonskeid, which is the favourite seat?’

“ ‘Up in the west wood where you painted the house from. But last summer our governess found it dull, and we sat often on a little hill where she could see the post-runner pass, and the tourists’ carriages, and the carriers’ carts. She got a fright with a roe deer and an adder, and did not like the wood after.’

“ ‘I hope they do not oblige you to write verses of your own, as some are made to do.’

“ ‘No.’

“ ‘And you never tried?’

“ ‘Never.’

“ ‘True poetry is involuntary; it will force its own way. You and I must have many talks about these wonderful men, Anonymous and Anon, who have between them caused me more delight than any authors. I must tell you a story of our youth at Gask, where the mistake of a word not only caused merriment

for us at the time, but ever since. Aunt Harriet had got a special summons by a messenger on horseback to Athole to go to see Lady Lude, who was said to be so ill that if she wished to see her in life she must come instantly. Aunt Harriet gave a letter, ordering a *large chaise*, to the horseman to deliver in Perth on his arrival there, nine miles distant, as you know. We all set to making preparations for her journey. May (your grandmother) was the director, as in everything else, and we were all seated round Aunt Harriet in her grief, wondering how the *chaise* she had ordered (she had written to Perth that the biggest to be had should be sent immediately) was so long in coming, as the journey to Blair Athole was tedious and it was getting late. Suddenly the door of the room opened, and two men entered carrying an enormous *cheese*! Aunt Harriet was always a great laugher, but *this* time (owing to the tension on the nerves caused by sorrowful preparations, parting with

us, and the illness of her sister) she was seized with an immoderate fit. Tears even ran down, the more her ludicrous mistake in spelling became plain to her. She without power to explain, the two men with the cheese on the floor between them, we gazing in utter wonder, formed a scene we could never forget. The journey was given up till next morning.' ”

With that tour abroad were continually bound up memories of a dear old lady whom we all called “Cousin,” Margaret Harriet Steuart, who was the daughter of Mrs. Steuart of Dalguise—Lady Nairne’s sister Amelia. In a green old age her store of memories is very rich.

When the writer was a child, Miss Steuart was living at Wynberg, Cape of Good Hope, with her brother the Chief Justice of the colony. Our mother used to dictate to us letters to the distant cousin, and now she alone is left of the group who spent that time together. She was a reverent observer of

Lady Nairne's times of deep sorrow, and saw how the energy of the mountain torrent fell into the deep lake of later life—not to expend itself in selfish idleness, but in self-forgetfulness, letting the surface be frozen over to bear up companions in sorrow who would else have sunk.

As much speaking tired her, we asked her to put down on paper her memories of her aunt, Lady Nairne; and we received, in the form of a letter, this precious piece of chronology. It is written by a hand that was learning to hold a pencil when the century began, and carries into its closing years much of the fineness of work and deftness of touch, so hard to attain in the bustle of our railway age. At ninety-seven she paints, plays and embroiders; and has lately sent a little work through the press. She remembers Trafalgar and Waterloo, has entertained Sir Walter Scott with her music, and tells how in the daytime Miss Scott and she would shut the shutters that they might tell one another ghost stories in the dark.

When all the rage is for old furniture, old pictures, old wine, here is a manuscript not with yellow, mouldy markings, but precious; it is rare to get chronology from so old a living memory, reckonings from such an old ledger. She corroborates the accounts of Lady Nairne's wish for secrecy, and how she wrote under the title of Mrs. Bogan of Bogan for the *Scottish Minstrel*. She acts the part of critic too, wondering how anyone could say "The Land o' the Leal" was composed in old age, when it was written in Lady Nairne's prime. But we leave her to tell her own story.

"My earliest recollections of my Aunt Nairne are of spending a winter with her at Montrose, when I was about seven years old. She was very fond of children; and in the evenings my eldest brother John and I were always allowed by her to cut out paper, paste, paint, or make any mess we pleased; and we were much annoyed when nurse came and proclaimed that it was bedtime! Then my

dear mother and I paid a short visit to her at Portobello. It was then that they made the purchase of Caroline Cottage, now, I am told, called Nairne Lodge. My next recollection is a very sad one—soon after my mother's death. This time I went with my Aunt Margaret Oliphant, afterwards Mrs Keith of Dunnottar. Aunt Nairne asked if I remembered with whom I had come before! The answer was *tears*.

“Major Nairne, as well as his lady, was always extremely kind to me. She called me ‘Quiet Maggy,’ for I was not loquacious in those days, being rather shy. In June 1808, my Cousin William was born in Hope Street, Edinburgh, my aunt and I being then in the house. The next winter was spent by the Nairnes at 43 Queen Street, Edinburgh, and I lived with them for two years, going daily to school. In July 1813, I accompanied Major and Lady Nairne in a cutter bound for the Shetland Isles. To them I went; but poor Aunt Nairne was so ill at sea that we had to

lay to at Peterhead whilst she and her boy were put ashore, and they both went to St. Andrews by land, where they joined your great-grandmother, my Aunt Stewart of Bonskeid.

“My next visit to Aunt Nairne was at Holyrood House, where her husband had the royal apartments for some years, until His Majesty George IV. thought fit to show himself in Scotland. It was a very pleasant dwelling. The side of the square was gloomy, but the windows of the living rooms all looked to the Park and Arthur’s Seat. The chambers were of a very large size, except two smaller ones which were divided off by high screens. These were hung with very fine old tapestry, whereon were depicted immense human forms with the heads of toads. One of these chambers was my bedroom when I visited the Palace, and I confess to very eerie sensations as I looked at them at night. One anteroom was so very spacious that it was divided off into several, and allotted to the servants. The

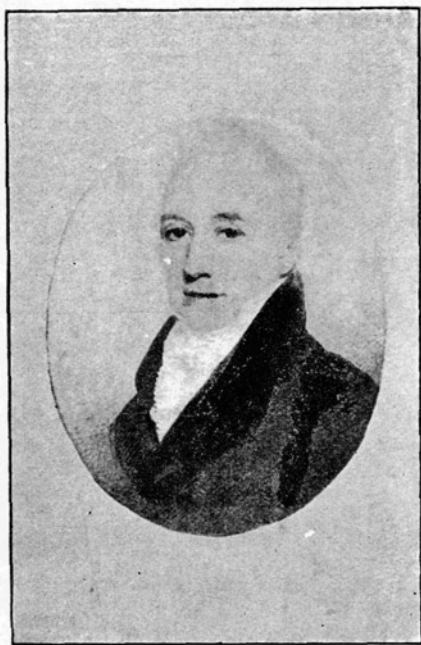
whole royal apartments were done up and beautified for the King ; and to the very great amusement of my young cousin, the throne was placed exactly where the cook's bed had stood ! In 1830 Lord Nairne, whose forfeited title had been restored, died at Caroline Cottage.

“ In 1834 we all went to Italy and spent the greater part of the winter at Rome. Aunt Nairne went sometimes to the wonderful galleries, and I think she once ascended the outside of St. Peter's to see the village on the roof. Mrs. Keith and I came home in October 1835, but we joined in the autumn of the following year at Berlin, and there my poor cousin caught the cold which proved fatal in December 1837.

“ I have found several mistakes in written memoirs of my aunt. Their son was not delicate, neither was it on account of his health that he and his mother went abroad. The cold caught at Berlin was the beginning of his illness.

“ I was with her later on at Pau and Eaux

Chaudes. I remember staying in a very dilapidated chateau, where the servants were so frightened by mysterious noises that we



LORD NAIRNE BEFORE HIS RESTORATION

had to leave sooner than we intended. The society in these out-of-the-way places is very primitive, the ladies seldom wearing bonnets.

One nice, elderly dame had a very lively recollection of the Peninsular War, and told me that when the troops were all about, they



CAROLINE BARONESS NAIRNE
née OLIPHANT OF GASK

applied to the British for protection, as they placed more confidence in them than in their own soldiers. The winter that we spent at

