

THE
BARDS OF BON-ACCORD.

JOHN BARBOUR.

THE origin of a nation's poetry, like the origin of many of its political institutions, is a fruitless theme for discussion, as far as certainty of results are concerned, and one which we have no desire to enter upon. As far as Scottish poetry is concerned, we are content to date its earliest production at 1375, when John Barbour, archdeacon of Aberdeen, wrote his metrical history of "The Bruce". For though many earlier scraps of verse in couplets, stanzas, and other fragmentary forms, have come down to us, yet this is the first undoubted poem of any size and worth which we know of, that was written in the native tongue. No doubt the "Sir Tristrem", attributed to Thomas of Erceldoune, was at one time supposed to be almost a century older; but recent authorities have come to the conclusion that it is no Scottish poem at all, but "a modernised copy of an old Northumbrian romance, derived more or less directly from a Norman or Anglo-Norman source". This leaves "The Bruce" undisputed master of the field. In placing Barbour first in our sketches of "Bards of Bon-Accord", we would not for a moment have it thought that we thereby deem him a "local poet", as the phrase goes. The limited sweep of influence, the mere parochial reputation which such a phrase implies, though characteristic of the majority of those whose lives and works we intend to throw into concise form, can never apply to one whose influence has been felt by all true-hearted Scotchmen from his own times till now. He appears here because he lived here, because the life of his manhood (a long life) was for the most part spent among us, and because we feel proud that from him the well-spring of

our great national poetry first broke forth, while a residenter near the venerable walls of St. Machar.

It may not be altogether unimportant, at the threshold of our subject, to point out in a sentence or two the general condition of the then national life, as revealed to us in the pages of history.

The current of events in Scotland, subsequent to the death of King Robert the Bruce, (and during the early years of Barbour's life) was of such a severe nature, as could not fail to brand itself deeply into the memories of a people, who were just beginning to reap the earlier fruits of that independence, which Bannockburn had seemingly sealed for them. Randolph the Regent had died. Edward Baliol, full of personal ambition and backed by the dispossessed barons (who had everything to gain and nothing to lose by any change that might come about), began to conspire against the young king (David) and his government. Partly through the treachery and duplicity of seeming friends, and partly through the incapacity of those in power, the whole liberties of the people were once again at the mercy of the king of England. Ostensibly to quell party strife, but really to re-attempt the subjugation of the land, his army entered Scotland, laying waste the country, and carrying utter ruin and destruction wherever it marched. If ever there was an eclipse of hope in the national heart it was then. If ever it appeared that all the vantage ground gained in their former struggles for liberty was lost, 'twas then. If ever men's minds reverted back with glowing admiration to deeds of prowess done for "dear auld Scotland's sake", 'twas then. So that when we contemplate this final armed attempt at crushing Scottish independence, and remember to what extent men's ideas are dominated by the social and political forces operating around them, we might well expect to meet with such a poem as "The Bruce", and such a Scotchman as John Barbour.

Very little is known, however, about his life. It is asserted, with some degree of probability, but no certainty, that he was born in Aberdeen about 1316; and some writers have even hazarded the conjecture that his father was a burgher of our "braif toun", and possessed a tenement in Castle Street. It is also conjectured that he received his education at the monastery

of Arbroath. Be that as it may, we have authentic documentary evidence that he was archdeacon of Aberdeen in 1357; for, in August of that year, the English king granted him a passport "while coming with three scholars in his company into England, for the purpose of studying in the University of Oxford". Again, in September of the same year, he was appointed, by the bishop of Aberdeen, one of the commissioners who were to meet at Edinburgh anent the ransoming of the Scottish king (David II.), then a captive in England. In 1365, a second passport was granted him to pass through England, in company with six knights, to St. Denis in France. In 1372 he was one of the auditors of the Court of Exchequer, and again in 1382, 1383, and 1384. In 1373 he held the office of clerk of audit to the King's Household (*Accounts of the Great Chamberlains of Scotland*), and in 1388 he received a pension from King Robert II. of ten pounds Scots from the revenue of the city, to which was subsequently added twenty shillings yearly from the burgh mails, this latter sum passing at his death to his assignees. This was probably a reward on the completion of his second large work, "The Brut", mentioned in Wyntoun's Chronicle, but of which no MS. is known to exist. He bequeathed a sum of money to the cathedral of St. Machar for the celebration of a yearly mass for his soul, which circumstance has enabled the date of his death to be ascertained with considerable certainty. For, as the last payment made to him was at Martinmas, 1394, and, as the mass was afterwards performed on the 13th March, he must have died on that day, 1395. The mass money is said to have reverted to the Crown at the period of the Reformation. Such are the few bald facts which the industry of our antiquaries has unearthed anent John Barbour.

Few men, however, can altogether suppress themselves in their writings. Some trait of the personality, some glimpse of the mind which groups and marshals the facts it works on, which forms and shapes its subject so, and not otherwise, reveals itself to him who studies an author closely. This is true in a great measure of John Barbour and "The Life and Acts of King Robert the Bruce". For though the main interest of his work to modern readers is that of a rhymed chronicle of

the doings of Bruce, Douglas, Randolph, and others, and as such will ever be of great historical value, yet no one can peruse its narrative very far without perceiving many of the characteristics of the poet standing out clear and sharp from the work of the mere chronicler. We early note his deep love of country, his intense sympathy with its oppressed people, the undertone of sadness which runs through his terse and graphic pictures of a life of thralldom, the numerous traits of conduct and views of life which he persistently and prominently brings into the foreground and lingeringly dwells on—all bespeaking the strong emotional medium through which he viewed the facts he would narrate. Along with these there gradually shapes itself in the imagination a faint figure of the man as he lived and moved in that thriving village of “four ploughs”—Old Aberdeen. We can in fancy look down the line of the Chanonry on the prebends’ lodgings, with their glebes or yards, with “little tails” at their ends, stretching down to the Balgownie road, the whole surrounded by a wall of defence to meet the turbulence of the troublesome times. Here, in comparative security, the school of the canons went its daily round of instruction in civil and canon law, mixed with the routine of daily prayers and services. But outside these walls dwelt a thriving little community of agriculturists and fishers, who held houses and land in feu from the bishop as superior. Among these would the Archdeacon move, as his duties touched more on the secular side of life than did those of the other ecclesiastics. We are fain to catch a glimpse of this broad-shouldered, clear-eyed, muscular Christian as he appeared to the forgotten tillers whose patient industry was changing moorland to meadow, and making the lower haugh of the Don smile in yellow plenty—but the light has almost gone out. Travelling, as he did in the discharge of his office, round a diocese comprehending almost the entire territory between Dee and Spey, we cannot doubt but the contrasted conditions of life, visible in those who held of the barons with those in the valley of Seaton who held of the bishop, were the “contrair thingis” that discovered to him the blessings of freedom and the evils of thirlage. As collector of the church funds, and distributor, not only to the support of the various orders of

clergy but to the necessities of the general poor, he must have touched at all points on the daily life of the society around him, and felt, as no one else could, the pulses of joy and sorrow beating through the plodding life of industry. Many a time in the afternoon sun must his kindly shadow have fallen over the threshold of the mud hut, where some aged and work-worn peasant was wearing out his closing days. Kindly word, coupled to kindly deed, was sure to be his; for he who loved so well to recount the deeds of mercy done by others could never hold the alms-purse of the Church with a greedy gripe. And certain we are that if the maw of oblivion could admit of us having a glance into the quiet seclusion of the secular life that clustered round the rising "St. Machar's", we would see something to admire and something to imitate in the wise and kindly deeds by which the Church, in her early life, and through men like John Barbour, nurtured the good seed of much that is valued in our present civilisation.

We must now, however, turn to the work by which he is best known, and see what we find there. And, first, as a piece of literature, we will look at its general character.

One of the leading features of his poetry is its directness, its lack of the allegorical—no "down on the angels' wings", none of the flowery froth which bulks so largely in the poetry of to-day—but a presentation of whatever occupies his mind, with as much concreteness as the language of his day would admit of. It is this objective tendency, this turning of the mind to the contemplation of facts and movements outside itself, which is the secret of the perennial freshness of all our greater poets. That Barbour's attitude was such (with now and again a moral reflection or pious ejaculation), the whole conduct of his "romance" bears witness, while the permanent hold which that "soothfast story" has taken of the minds of his countrymen is the highest tribute which genius can command.

We proceed now to give our readers a few samples of the kind of thing they will find in "The Bruce", our selections being classified for handiness into (1) Sketches of Nature, (2) Delineation of Character, (3) Battle Pieces.

As might be inferred from what we have already said of "The Bruce" (being mainly a chronicle of the stirring events

of King Robert's life), the author needs rarely touch otherwise than incidentally on aspects of nature. Occasionally, however, he does linger a little on these, and we think the examples below will show how, with a few bold strokes, he can present to the mind's eye of the reader the salient features of the scene or situation he contemplates. There is a terse, compact pithiness about them all, which, to ears accustomed to the verbosity of current poetry, may seem bald and bare; but every line tells:—

A MOUNTAIN PASS.

Ane ewill plass,
That sa strayt and sa narow was,
That twasum samyn mycht nocht rid
In sum place off the hillis sid.
The nethyr halff wes peralous ;
For a schor crag, hey and hidwouss,
Raucht to the se, doun fra the pass.
On athyr halff the montane was
Swa combrowss, hey, and stay,
That it was hard to pass that way.
Crechinben hecht that montayne.
I trow that nocht, in all Bretane,
Aye heyar hill may fundyn be.

Book VII.

MAY.

This wes in the moneth off May,
Quhen byrdis syngis in ilk spray ;
Melland thair notis with seymly soune,
For softnes of the suet sesoun :
And levys of the branchys spredis,
And blomys brycht besid thaim bredis ;
And feldis ar strowyt with flouris
Well sawerand, of ser colouris :
And all thing worthis blyth and gay.

Book XI.

SPRING.

This wes in ver, quhen wynter tid,
With his blastis hidwyss to bid,
Was our drywyn : and byrdis smale,
As turturis and the nyctyngale,
Begouth rycht sariely to syng ;
And for to mak in thair singyng
Swete notis, and sownys ser,
And melodys plesand to her.

And the treis begouth to ma
 Burgeans, and brycht blomys alsua,
 To wyn the helyng off thair hewid.
 That wykkyt wyntir had thaim rewid.
 And all gressys beguth to spryng.

Book IV.

We next notice his delineations of character; they are numerous and full of insight. Before proceeding with our selections, however, we will revert for a moment to what we called the emotional medium through which he viewed things. For instance, no one now-a-days can read his episode of "The Douglas Larder" (as the old writers call it) in Book IV., without being more or less moved at the wanton sacrifice of human life therein recorded. Yet so strong is the pulse of nationality in the worthy Archdeacon, the "patriotic bias", as it is now called—"his country, right or wrong"—that he can talk of the butchery of a number of Englishmen with as little remorse as we now talk of extirpating vermin. Had the circumstances been reversed, had the English done as much to the Scots, we may guess the measure of his wrath by remembering what he says of Macnab, who betrayed Sir Crystal of Seatoun—

"In hell condemned mot he be!"

He is indeed a splendid hater—hates his country's enemies as intensely as he loves its friends. It is, in fact, one of the results of the poetic temperament that, however wide its sympathies may be, yet outside the circle of its likings, there is an equally intense hatred of that which is opposed to them. The circle of his sympathies happened only to be a little narrower than ours of to-day. For, on the other hand, how deeply he feels for "the hewers of wood and drawers of water" groaning under English seigniorship is not only seen in that noble clarion blast of freedom (so well known to all freemen)—

"Ah! freedom is a noble thing,"

but the amelioration of their condition is ever in his view, and is made universally a test point in the character of all his heroes. Loyalty, friendship, compassion, as well as the fiercer forces which make men "wicht in war", are the qualities

which call out his loudest praises for his countrymen. We select two of his best portraits :—

RANDOLPH.

He wes swa curageous ane knycht,
 Sa wyss, sa worthy, and sa wycht,
 And off sa souerane gret bounté
 That mekill off him may spokyn be.
 And for I think off him to rede,
 And to schaw part off his gud dede,
 I will discryve now his fassoun,
 And part off his condicioun.
 He wes off mesurabill statur,
 And weile porturat at mesur ;
 With braid wesage, plesand and fayr,
 Curtaiss at poynt, and debonayr ;
 And off rycht sekyr contenyng.
 Lawté he lowyt atour all thing ;
 Falset, tresoun, and felony,
 He stud agayne ay encrely.
 He heyit honour ay, and larges,
 And ay mantemyt rychtwysnes.
 In cumpany solacious
 He was ; and tharwith amorous,
 And gud knychtis he luffyt ay.
 And, giff I the suth sall say,
 He wes fulfillit off bounté
 Als off wertuys all maid was he.

Book VII.

DOUGLAS.

He wes in all his dedis lele ;
 For him dedeyneyt nocht to dele
 With trechery, na with falset.
 His hart on hey honour wes set :
 And hym contenynt on sic maner,
 That all him luffyt that war him ner.
 Bot he wes nocht so fayr, that we
 Suld spek gretly off his beauté :
 In wysage wes he sumdeill gray,
 And had blak har, as Ic hard say ;
 But off lymmys he wes weill maid,
 With banys gret, and schuldrys braid.
 His body wes weyll [maid and lenye ;]
 As thai that saw hym said to me.
 Quhen he wes blyth he wes luffy,
 And meyk and sweyt in cumpany :

Bot quha in battaill mycht him se
 All othir contenance had he.
 And in speck wlispyt he sum deill ;
 Bot that sat him rycht wondre weill.
 Till gud Ector of Troy mycht he
 In mony thingis likynt be.
 Ector had blak har, as he had ;
 And stark lymmys, and rycht weill maid ;
 And wlyspit alsua, as did he ;
 And wes fulfillyt of leawté ;
 And wes curtaiss, and wyss, and wycht.
 Bot off manheid, and mekill mycht,
 Till Ector dar I nane comper,
 Off all that euir in warldys wer.
 The quethyr in his tyme sa wrocht he,
 That he suld gretly lovyt be.

Book I.

For women, too, he had a wonderfully tender consideration—the simple artless manner in which he talks of the sex, of love and gallantry, bespeaking something deeper in the ecclesiastic than the mere conventionalities of a current chivalry. But, after his portraits of Scotch worthies, his main strength lies in his battle pieces. Few poets indeed can make a reader feel so distinctly the clash and shock of closing combatants as Barbour does. While on the larger field, where gathering thousands meet, the glitter of arms, the wave of banners, the charge of cavalry, and showers of arrows, fill the mind with such sense of warlike confusion and tumult, as almost makes one feel as if he were in the thick of the fight. Here is the opening of an onset between King Robert and Sir Aymery. The foremost of the Englishmen,

Enbrasyt with the scheldis braid,
 And rycht sarraly to gydder raid,
 With heid stoupand, and speris straucht,
 Rycht to the King thar wayis raucht ;
 That met thaim with sa gret vigour,
 That the best, and off the maist valour,
 War laid at erd at thair meting.
 Quhar men mycht her sic a breking
 Off speris, that to fruschynt war ;
 And the woundyt sa cry and rar ;
 That it anoyus wes to her.
 For thai, that fyrst assemblyt wer,

Fwyngyt, and faucht full sturdely.
The noyis begouth then, and the cry.

Book VI.

The following is the account of how Sir Thomas supported Sir Edward Bruce at Bannockburn :—

The gud erle thiddyr tuk the way
With his bataill, in gud aray.
And assemblit sa hardily,
That men mycht her, that had bene by,
A gret frusch of the speris that brast :
For thair fayis assemblyt fast,
That on stedis, with mekill prid,
Come prikand, as thai wald our rid
The erle and all his cumpany.
Bot thai met thaim sa sturdely,
That mony of thaim till erd thai bar,
For mony a sted wes stekyt thar ;
And mony gud man fellyt wndre fet,
That had nae hap to ryss wp yete.
Thar mycht men se a hard bataill,
And sum defend, and sum assaile ;
And mony a reale romble rid
Be roucht thar, apon athir sid ;
Quhill throw the byrnyss bryst the blud,
That till erd doune stremand yhude.

Book IX.

He seldom forgets to note the tricks or stratagems by which the Scotch, with numerically small forces, overcame the legions of their Southern foes ; and he puts such a well-told fable into Douglas' mouth, when that worthy is explaining to Moray how he intends to make his escape, that we shall give it in this place. During an invasion of England, Douglas made a night attack upon his enemies, but finding them not only more numerous and better provisioned than he expected, but likely to cut off his retreat, he consulted with Earl Moray. The Earl advised a plain fight for it ; Douglas replied that they should do with their foes—

“ As Ik herd tell this othyr yer
“ That a fox did with a fyscher.”
“ How did the fox ? ” the erle gan say.
He said ; “ A fyscher quhilum lay
“ Besid a ryver, for to get
“ Hys nettis that he had thar set.

" A litill loge tharby he maid ;
 " And thar within a bed he haid ;
 " And a litill fyr alsua.
 " A dure thar wes for owtyne ma.
 " A nycht, his nettis for to se,
 " He rase ; and thar wele lang duelt he
 " And, quhen he had doyne his deid,
 " Towart his loge agayn he yeid ;
 " And, with licht of the litill fyr,
 " That in the luge was brynnand schyr,
 " In till his luge a fox he saw,
 " That fast on ane salmound gan gnaw.
 " Than till the dur he went in hy,
 " And drew his suerd deliuerly :
 " And said ' Reiffar, thow mon her out.'
 " The fox, that wes in full gret dout,
 " Lukyt about sum hole to se ;
 " Bot nane eschew persave couth he,
 " Bot quhar the man stud sturdely.
 " A lauchtane mantell than him by,
 " Liand apon the bed, he saw ;
 " And with his teth he gan it draw
 " Out our the fyr : and quhen the man
 " Saw his mantill ly brinnand than,
 " To red it ran he hastily.
 " The fox gat owt than in gret hy :
 " And held his way his warand till.
 " The man leyt him begilyt ill,
 " That he his gud salmound had tynt ;
 " And alsua had his mantill brynt :
 " And the fox scaithles gat away.
 " This ensample weill I may say,
 " Be yone ost and ws that ar her.
 " We ar the fox ; and thai the fyscher
 " That stekis forouth ws the way."

Book XIV.

Within recent years, an important addition to our literature has been made in the discovery, by the late Henry Bradshaw, librarian at Cambridge, of a MS. containing fragments of a poem by Barbour on the Trojan War, and again of another small oblong octavo MS. of 365 leaves, containing a series of metrical "Legends of the Saints". Both these have been printed in the two volumes, "Old English Legends" and "Legends of the Saints", published at Heilbronn in 1881-2,

under the editorship of C. Horstmann, and add not a few important items to our scanty knowledge of the author. Although Barbour's name is nowhere mentioned in the last named MS., the internal evidence is so full and complete as to leave no doubt that the author of "The Bruce" and "The Legends of the Saints" was the same individual. From the prologue to these fifty legends, we learn that Barbour was a much more voluminous writer than had hitherto been supposed, as he mentions a long series of metrical works which he had written on the life of the Virgin, the life of Christ, and the lives of the Apostles. And, he goes on to say,

Sene I ma nocht wirk
As mynistere of haly kirke
Fore gret eld and febilnes,
Yet, for til eschew ydilnes,

he continues the series into the lives of the Saints, fleeing idleness, though "eld and falt of sycht", because it gives "novrysingis to vicis". Occasionally we come across passages like those in the opening of "St. Julian", which have a personal reference to the writer of considerable interest:—

Qwene that yunge mane I was,
I trawalyt oft in sere place,
Sic thinge in my yuthe to lere
Quhare-with myne elde I mycht stere,
And drew me to gud mene, parde,
Thocht lytil thare-of be bydyne one me !
The trawalouris thane custume had,
That alday yed ore rad
And for trawale ware wery :
Quhene thai come til thar herbry,
And namely fra thai nicht It se,
Quhethyr that It ware scho ore he,
Hat or hud tak of ore clath,
The rycht fut of the sterape rath,
And to sancte Julyane dewotly
A pater-noster say in hy,
In hope that all gud herbry sud haf
That in sik wyse It suld crafe.
Sic hope ine to sancte Julyane
The trauaalouris thane had tane,
As mony mene yet are
That sammyne oysis, here and thare.

Bote, for that fele, ma thane ane,
 Haly mene are callit Julyane,
 I yarnyt to wyt quhilk was he
 Mene socht ine sic necessaryte :
 And sa his story I fand al hale,
 As til yow here tel I sall.

For the sake of comparison with some of the delineations of character given above from "The Bruce", we will quote his description of St. Ninian :—

Tharfor, gudmen, be-hald and se
 Hou (gud) and blissit and haly wes he
 That of god had sa gret grace
 That ay folouyt thus his trace !
 For thi ensampil ma be tane
 Of this haly mane, sanct Niniane.
 Suerdome and Idilnes for to fle
 And agane al wite wicht to be ;
 And prese we for to folou hyme
 That feile this gert leif thare syne.
 And his clething scheu he was meke,
 And debonar (wes) in his speke,
 Deuote als in oracione
 And ful ithand in lessone
 In Jugment leile and stabile,
 And in thewis honorabil,
 Large in almus-dowyng
 And stedfaste in his hafyng,
 In al office of to preste abile,—
 He wes al tyme honorabil ;
 Of sic compacienc he wes eke
 That with thame gretand he wald gret
 And with blyth blyth he wes
 Gyf thare blythnes wes in gudnes ;
 And in vertuise he wes notabile
 And in al gudnes ful lowabile.

Turning to the 27th Legend, "St. Machar", which, however, is contained in the volume, entitled "Old English Legends", we glean the following, which has a local reference :—

Nocht lang eftire apone a day
 (To) sanct Machor a mane cane say :
 That sanct Dewynnik In-to Catnes
 Thru gret eilde falyeit and ded was ;
 And quhene he one his dedstra lay,
 To thaime that nest war he cane say :

Sene that ye se ded sall me tak,
 I coniure you for godis sak
 That yhe for na trawall be Irke
 To bere my body to sume kirk,
 Quharfor sanct Machor has keping,
 And pray hyme for the hewynniss king
 That he meyne one and thochtfull be
 Of his hicht that ye mad to me
 Of his gud will at our partyng.
 With this of spek he mad ending
 And yaulde the gast but mare abad.
 And thai that this commawndment had,
 To tak his body war nocht Irk
 And one a bere brocht till a kirk
 That was bot litill fra that place
 That befor to thaim lentyne was.
 And quhene that sanct Machor this tale
 Has herd as I haf tald yu hale,
 He mad regrat and had disese.
 But, for he durst nocht god disples,
 That nycht but slepe all haile he lay
 In his prayere, till it wes day:
 And in that kirk with fleschely eyne
 Full feile brycht angelis he has sene
 Fle upe and doune, makand thaire play,
 Quhar at the cors of Dewynniss lay.
 Thane was sanct Machor blyth and glad
 For this fare sicht that he sene had.
 And one the morne quhene it was day,
 Till his discipulis this cane say:
 Lowe we all god, my brothir dere,
 That has ws send a gud gestenere !
 Tharfor mak we ws redy tyt
 Hyme, as a spe afferis, to visidte
 And yeld till hyme forout delay
 That office that we acht to say
 For worthi mene, quhene thai ded are !
 With that thai passit furthmare
 To the kirk quhar at sanct Machor
 The angelis play had sene befor.
 Bot thai that the cors brocht thiddire,
 With It had gane thar way to-giddir
 Ner-by of Creskane to the hill,
 And thare abad, to reste in will.
 Bot sanct Machor forontyne firste,
 Folouit and fand thaim thaire tak reste.

And he and his thar with thame abad
 Till thai the seruice all had mad
 That to sic deide mene suld parteyne
 Ar ony wink come in thar eyne.
 And syne bare the cors deuotely
 Till a place callit Banchory.
 And thare solempni with honoure
 Thai grathit for it a sepulture,
 And one hyme thare thai mad a kirk.
 Quhar god yeit cesis nocht to wirk
 Thru his prayere ferleis full fele,
 To sek and sar folk gyfand heile.
 Mene callis that place quar he lay
 Banchory Dewynnik till this day.

Throughout the whole of these legends, which Horstmann traces to their originals in the "Legenda Aurea", and other works of a like kind, there is interspersed no small amount of matter which Barbour must have gleaned in his travels; while it will be found that his introductions, prayers, exhortations, and reflections, give considerable insight into his character as a man, as well as illustrate how much of the poet he carried into his declining years.

These selections will, perhaps, enable the reader to understand, in a way, the character of the verse to be found in our author's principal works, "The Bruce" and "Legends of the Saints", and we would hope that they may at the same time help to stimulate to a better acquaintance with the originals. Before closing, however, we may note how injudicious some of the Archdeacon's admirers have been in their excessive praise of him. Not satisfied to accept him on his own undoubted merits, they have sought by a comparison with Chaucer to show that on the common field of poetry John was as good as Dan. Now, this is not only a mistake, but a decided injustice to our great countryman. Barbour's poetry we are proud of; but they are not the friends of his famous memory who would court a comparison that cannot fail but to lower our estimate of his genius. Chaucer was a courtier, a soldier, a man of world-wide experience, with a knowledge of men, sources of culture, and general life surroundings far more congenial to the development of a rich and varied genius than that of his northern contemporary.

The variety of life and character exhibited in "The Canterbury Tales" shows a width of culture and acquaintance with men and manners far in advance of anything which Scotland had produced in that or almost any age, and is, we should think, sufficient in itself to bar any comparison between the two poets. Let us rest content with our heroic Archdeacon as he is, a manly writer of bold and vigorous verse, the first spokesman of our country's yearnings for political freedom, the representative Scotchman of his age. There are innumerable pinnacles of fame under that where Chaucer sits, to which the tooth of time can never reach, and where the air of immortality circles for ever. On one of these rests John Barbour!

INTERMEDIATE LINKS BETWEEN BARBOUR AND ARBUTHNOT.

SCOTTISH poetry during the latter part of the fifteenth and the first half of the sixteenth century was much cultivated, and considering the rude state of the language at that period, Henryson, William Dunbar, Gavin Douglas, and Sir David Lyndsay attained great excellence in it. But while this is true of Scotland as a whole, of the immediate successors of Barbour in the poetic sphere of our countryside, for over a period of almost two hundred years, local history gives us very meagre information.

The ballad of "The Battle of Harlaw, fought upon Tuesday, July 24, 1411, against Donald of the Isles", and bearing on the face of it to have been written very shortly after that event, is the first item we come upon in our survey. Though it is mentioned in the "Complaynt of Scotland" in 1549, the ballad, as we now possess it, was first printed in 1724; and while some have suspected that Ramsay's hand gave it final shape, yet Ritson, one of the most competent authorities we have, says of it, "that it may, for anything that appears either in or out of it to the contrary, be as old as the 15th century". In the first eleven stanzas we have a rapid sketch of the origin and progress of the strife, to which follows an enumeration of the chiefs and hosts which met at Harlaw,—

For to suppress the tyrannie
Of douted Donald of the Yles.

* * * * *
The armies met, the trumpet sounds,
The dandring drums alloud did touk,
Baith armies byding on the bounds,
Till ane of them the field sould bruik.
Nae help was thairfor, nane wald jouk,
Ferss was the fecht on ilka syde,
And on the ground lay mony a bouk
Of them that thair did battill byd.

With doutsum victorie they dealt,
The bludy battill lastit lang,
Each man his nibours forss thair felt ;
The weakest aft-tymes gat the wrang :
Thair was nae mowis thair them amang,
Naithing was hard but heavy knocks,
That eccho maid a dulefull sang,
Thairto resounding frae the rocks.

But Donald's men at last gaif back,
For they war all out of array.
The Earl of Marris men throw them brak,
Pursewing shairply in thair way,
Thair enemys to tak or slay,
Be dynt of forss to gar them yield,
Quha war richt blyth to win away,
And sae for feirdness tint the feild.

Then follows a list, in eight or nine stanzas, of—

Quhat slauchter was on ilkay syde
Of Lowland and of Highland men.

Altogether, it is one of our best historical ballads, full of passages of considerable graphic power, and has many telling lines gracefully quaint and alliterative.

It has been conjectured that the poet mentioned by Dunbar in his "Lament for the Makaris" (composed about 1507)—where, speaking of Death, it is said—

He has tane *Rowl of Aberdene*,
And gentle *Rowl of Corstorphyne* ;
Twa bettir Fallows did no Man see,
Timor Mortis conturbat me.

—that this "Rowl of Aberdene" belonged to the same family

as Thomas Roull, Chief Magistrate of Aberdeen, 1416. Beyond the bare mention, however, of his name in the above lines, no record is left either of the man or his works. What is characterised by Pinkerton as "a stupid piece called *Rowl's Cursing*", is preserved both in the Maitland and Bannatyne MSS., but whether it is by the "Rowl of Aberdene" or him of "Corstorphyne" or by neither, it is impossible to determine.

To the period, 1503-7 belongs the fragment of a song printed in the "Book of Bon-Accord" (p. 178), but of which only one stanza is sufficiently intelligible for quotation here:—

I sall ger fasone weile a flane
 And schut it fra my hart,
 The schaft sal be of soroweful mein
 The hede of paines strang (smart?)
 Weile fedderit with the tyme has bene
 Adoue deir hart of Aberdene.

To all appearance there have been four verses in the original of this ditty, the author of which is entirely unknown.

Another fragment of a very superior order occurs on a fly-leaf of the Register of the Sheriff Court of Aberdeenshire, 1503-11, and is printed in the Miscellany of the Spalding Club, from which we glean the following beautiful lines:—

WINTER.

The soyll that earst so seamlie was and seene,
 (Now) was despoyled of hir bewties hew,
 And for fresche fleuris quhairwith the sumaris queen
 Had clad the erth, now Boreas blastis down blew,
 And small fowlis flocking in their sangis did rue
 The winteris wrath, quhairwith ech thing defast,
 In wofull wyss bewailed the somer past.
 Hawthorne had lost his motlay luverye,
 His naked tuigs war shiuering all for cold,
 And dropping doune the teiris abundantley.
 Ech thing (me thocht) with weiping eyine told
 The cruall season, biding me withold
 My self within, for I was gotan out
 Into the fieldis, quhair as I walk about—

Now, whoever wrote these lines possessed the poetic gift in no small measure. Let anybody read them alongside selections from Thomson or Cowper, who are *par excellence* the poets of "the stern ruler of th' inverted year", and the unknown writer will be found to possess the same eye for nature, the same

subtle fancy which invests natural objects and appearances with an interest borrowed from human experience (*e.g.*, the *naked twig shivering* for cold); which investiture is the permanent basis on which the interest of poetry rests. We never read these lines without feeling that there had been at least one giant in those days which we little wot of, when such has been found among the intellectual *debris* of the period. It was indeed the golden age of Scottish literature, with Dunbar as its greatest exponent; and we might expect from what is known of that period, that even the fragments which belong to it would partake somewhat of its excellence.

We cannot omit to mention a poem of this period, which, though written by Dunbar, contains such a minute description of a gala day in Aberdeen as to give it a local historical interest almost equal to its poetical worth. King James IV. had been married, in 1503, to Margaret, daughter of Henry VII. of England. Both then, and in 1506, at the birth of their son, the magistracy and inhabitants of Aberdeen evinced their joy "by libations of wine at the cross, and by breaking the glasses as was customary on such occasions". Both these seasons, however, were eclipsed by the pomp and pageantry, the "wine and wax, the gamen and glee" of the Queen's first visit to Bon-Accord. The poet Dunbar was in her train, and in his account of her reception by the citizens, has left such a picture of local manners as cannot be altogether left out in our pages. The spelling is slightly modernised:—

Blithe Aberdeen, thou beryl of all townis,
The lamp of beauty, bounty, and blitheness;
Unto the Heaven ascendit thy renoun is
Of virtue, wisdom, and of worthiness;
Hie noted is thy name of nobleness,
Into the coming of our lusty Queen,
The wale of wealth, guid cheer, and merriness
Be blithe and blissful, burgh of Aberdeen.

After this encomium, he relates how the burgesses of the town, richly arrayed, chose four of their number, dressed in velvet gowns, to bear the "velvet cramasie" pall over her head, while great peals of artillery were given. The procession met her at the Port with "the sound of minstrels blowing to the skies". These minstrels were followed by various representations of

character taken from the Scripture Mysteries, as the fore-runners of the drama proper were then called. There were the Three Orient Kings with their offerings to Christ of gold, incense, and myrrh ; the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise ; representations of Bruce and others from our own history.

Syne came there four and twenty maidens ying,
 All clad in green of marvellous beautie,
 With hair detresst, as threads of gold did hing,
 With white hats all braident richt bravelie,
 Playing on timbrels, and singing richt sweetlie ;
 That seemly sort, in order weel beseen,
 Did meet the Queen, her saluand reverentlie ;
 Be blithe, and blissful, burgh of Aberdeen.

The streets were all hung with tasterie,
 Great was the press of people dwelt about,
 And pleasant pageants playit prethlie
 The lieges all did to their lady lout,
 Wha was convoyed with ane royal rout
 Of great baroness' and lusty ladies sheen ;
 Welcome our Queen ! the commons gave ane shout
 Be blithe and blissful, burgh of Aberdeen.

At her coming great was the mirth and joy
 For at their Cross abundantly ran wine ;
 Until her lodging the toun did her convoy ;
 Her for to treat they set their whole ingine,
 Ane rich present they did to her propine ;
 Ane costly cup that large thing wald contene,
 Coverit and full of coined gold richt fine ;
 Be blythe and blissful, burgh of Aberdeen.

Kennedy, our city annalist, however, tells us (and it comes as a bit of companion picture to the above), how great the difficulty was of raising the money requisite to defray the expenses incurred. "The magistrates," says he, "adopted the expedient usually resorted to in such cases of granting leases in reversion of certain lands and salmon fishings belonging to the community for payment of grassums or fines, which enabled them to provide for the donation to the Queen, and the expenses of the preparations which had been made at this time for her reception."