

THROUGH all ages the persistent eccentricity of genius has been more or less a subject of commonplace comment. To be erratic, to be impracticable in the ways of the world, to have too many, or no irons at all, in the fire, are amongst its most sacred and inscrutable prerogatives. Success in the every-day affairs of life, and the possession of literary or other genius, are usually in an inverse ratio to one another. These truisms have been verified over and over again in almost everybody's experience, so much so that whenever one stumbles across a reputed genius, there is no astonishment expressed at finding him on the unsuccessful side of life, where "the loaves and fishes" are few. Whether the force of these truisms was exemplified in all its fullness in the career of Francis Douglas, the well-known author of "A Description of the East Coast of Scotland", may be doubted, for he had some successes if many failures; yet, certainly, in his small way, the genius that possessed him made his earthly course erratic enough. He in his time played many parts—baker, poet, printer, farmer, and general *littérateur*; and, though every change in his versatile career was motivated to a considerable extent by a sense of service to contemporaries or probable benefit to posterity, yet, unfortunately for himself, they brought the usual gains which the old proverb attaches to "the rolling stone".

This worthy citizen was born about 1720, was bred to the trade of a baker, and in the pursuit of his calling wandered as far south as London, where, while working as a journeyman, he composed the poem which links him to our local "bardie clan".

Returning to Aberdeen, he commenced business as a bookseller about 1748, and got married to a Miss Ochterlony, "of an ancient family in the upper part of Aberdeenshire", probably a descendant of the Ochterlony's of Birse. Shortly afterwards he turned his attention to printing, a branch of trade which, locally, had for more than a century been a sort of monopoly enjoyed by the successors of Raban, as printers to the town and University. As far as we are aware, Douglas was the first to break in on this monopoly, for, in partnership with William Murray, a druggist in town, he set up a printing and publishing house in 1750. Doubtless attracted by the success of the *Aberdeen Journal* newspaper, which had been in existence for some years, and was at that time a strong Whig organ, it was not long ere they resolved to send out an opposition weekly, which would, in a way, appeal for support to those of the crushed-out Jacobite persuasion. Accordingly, on the 3rd October, 1752, the *Aberdeen Intelligencer* made its appearance. It continued an uphill fight for some years, but at last, a dwindling circulation impressing on its owners the fact that their cause was a dying one, it ceased after the issue of the 22nd February, 1757. Murray, no doubt soured by this unprofitable venture, retired from the printing business altogether, leaving Douglas to work it on his own account. As far as one can judge now from the number of books and booklets which bear his imprint, or are otherwise known to have passed through his press, he must have had a fair share of business for a printer and publisher in a provincial town. But, like many others now as well as then, he was perhaps not born to let well alone; some new project with an Eldorado in the distance was sure to allure him. In January, 1761, he began to issue *The Aberdeen Magazine*, the earliest and by far the rarest of all our local periodicals. In spite, however, of its excellence as a literary miscellany, the support accorded to it fell far short of what was anticipated; so much so, that the publisher deemed it prudent to discontinue it after the first year. The contents of this interesting volume form nevertheless a standing proof of the literary tact and taste of its editor, and should have secured a different fate from that which it met; for, turn up its pages where you may, its sketches of

persons and places, its anecdotes, letters, and poetical essays, let alone its notes of local affairs, have even to-day a freshness and relish seldom found within the covers of an old magazine. In the words of a local bibliophile, written some fifty years ago, "the *Aberdeen Magazine* for the year 1761 is a highly creditable performance, . . . and no one who can lay his hands on a copy will need our advice to purchase it forthwith, at whatever price".

About this time a society was formed in Aberdeen for the improvement and encouragement of agriculture, arts, and manufactures, and Douglas was appointed its secretary. Farming now began to occupy his attention, and, as was customary with him, he soon set his theory into practical operation on a farm which he leased at Drum. There can be little doubt but the failure of his magazine cast a shadow on his ordinary business, which helped to make any other prospect look brighter; nevertheless, along with the farming speculation, he continued his printing and publishing, but a divided attention was not likely to increase the prosperity of a business which seems to have been on the decline. Another distracting agent began to heave in sight. Shortly after the death of the Earl of Douglas in 1761, the celebrated law-suit between Archibald Stewart and Lord Basil Hamilton for the titles entered on its first stages. For eight years it hung in legal suspense—the interest it excited was widespread and intense—our farmer-bookseller got fairly absorbed in it, and latterly plied a vigorous pen in the cause of Mr. Stewart. In 1768 the case came before the House of Lords. That year Douglas wound up his bookselling and printing business in Aberdeen, but was still plodding on with the farm. He had written his pamphlet, "A Letter to a Noble Lord in Regard to the Douglas Cause", and brought it into town to be printed. In a letter (published some five-and-twenty years ago in *Notes and Queries*) which John Chalmers, the printer, wrote in 1805 to his brother George anent Francis Douglas, it is said regarding this pamphlet:—"I printed it for him, and Mr. Dilly's name was prefixed as publisher. Neither of us were aware that it is a breach of privilege to print anything in a cause pending before the House, and an order was moved that the author

and printer should be sent for by a messenger and carried to London. Mr. Dilly, however, got the then Lord Littleton and some other peers to interfere, and we were excused on the score of ignorance". The case was decided in Mr. Stewart's favour, and some years after, when he had come into full possession, he did not forget the humble writer who had made such hearty exertions on his behalf, for he put him into the farm of Abbot's Inch, near Paisley, where his later years were spent in the ease and comfort he had for a long life been struggling to obtain.

His claim to recognition among our local bards is based on his poem "Rural Love, a Scottish Tale", printed by himself at Aberdeen in 1759—a poem which was impudently stolen, diluted, and re-published in 1832 as "Rural Felicity" in Alexander Beattie's Poems. It is a story of Scottish courtship, written in the vernacular, having the full tang of genuine rustic life, and told in strains as simple and pleasing as the story itself. Away at a village in Cromar lived "a widower with ae lass bairn". Gibbie, the father, was wealthy; Meggy, the daughter, was fair to look upon—a couple of facts which as a matter of course drew many wooers that way. First came the dominie,

Deep learn'd in Greek, and Latin reading,
And famous for his skill in bleeding;

but he, poor man, for all his erudition, signally failed in his approaches to her father, who had made up his mind to favour the suit of Peter Shaw. Peter's father was a "weel gather't carl",

. a zealous saint,
Who fought for kirk and covenant;
Till ae day, on the muir of Affort
He got a maist uncanny sclassort,
The antichristian aim'd sae sicker,
He made his head ring like a bicker.

In making off from the field of battle, he came on one of the enemy wounded, but with a well filled purse in his fob. Old Shaw helped him to die, and, relieving him of his coin, made for home, fully resolved that,

"Frae this day, I'll fight nae mair,
Nor in kirk quarrels tak a share".
The carl strictly kept his word,
And in the hen-roost stuck his sword.

It delighted the heart of old Gilbert to think that the son and heir of this worthy should mate with his daughter, but Meggy's affections had long been won by a neighbour lad, Johnny Smart.

But John, alas! had not the ready,
 And durst not ask her of her daddy.
 Eleven sheep and ae beast hog,
 A horse, a cow, a cat, a dog,
 A house and pantry thinly plenish'd,
 A wob his mother left unfinish'd,
 Twa site of clais, ane double blew,
 And ane of tartan, maist split new;
 A sword, a pistol, and a gun
 Which mony a youl the prize had won;
 A new blew bonnet and cockade,
 A shoulder belt, and tartan plaid; }
 Was a' the gear that Johny had. }

The story, however, proceeds to a definite issue in the following manner:—

Now on a day when Pate was there,
 Auld Gilbert took the gardy-chair,
 Megg was cried ben, then quoth her dad,
 “My chiel, ye're shortly to be wed,
 To Peter here, my honest friend;
 My day, God help me, 's near an end;
 And Megg, fan I'm laid i' the grafe,
 To leave you single were not safe;
 Heaven only kens fan that may be,
 Neist Reed-day I'm threescore and three;
 Sae what nig-naes a bride wad need,
 Provide yoursel' with a' your speed”.
 “Doe sae”, quo' Peter, “want for naething,
 But get frae tap to tae new claiting;
 My lad's gaen in to Aberdeen,
 I'se gar him buy ye heigh heel'd sheen.
 And if the bear sells well, a ring,
 A ribbon belt, and mony a thing.
 Ye's want for naething I can gie ye,
 For be my contens, Megg, I lo'e ye;
 Ye's live with me as guid a life
 As ever yet liy'd marry'd wife;
 And if I happen first to die,
 There's nane sall heir me, Megg, bat ye”.

“Gae keep your heirships”, answered Megg,
 “When young I’ll sere, when auld I’ll beg,
 Afore I marry sic as ye,
 Ye’re maist three times as auld as me”.

This outburst of Megg’s, supplemented at a further stage of the conference by the declaration—

“I’ll never lie,
 I loo a lad, and he loes me;
 And ye sall as sein tak my life,
 As mak me ony ither’s wife”—

brought matters to a crisis. In the course of the talk, however, it became pretty evident to Gilbert that Peter had a keener eye for the tocher than for the girl herself, an aspect of affairs he could not brook—the confab finally ending with Peter being shown to the door.

Megg’s heart was then as blyth and light
 As ever a bride’s on bridal night;
 But ay she grat—nor wad she still,
 Till Gilbert said, “Ye’s ha’e your will;
 Tak’ wha ye like, if ’tis your ruin,
 Mind, it’s a browst of your ain browin’.”

At this stage Johnny Smart stepped in, got “a’ the story frae tap to tail”, talked to Gilbert on the occasion like a sensible young fellow—

“If I might be sae bauld’s advise
 A man like you, baith auld and wise;
 Your dother ye sud gie to nane
 Who wadna tak her gown-alane
 Nor wad I hae their age unev’n,
 Can twenty ’gree with fifty-seven?
 Owr aft we see what weary lives
 Are led, twish auld men and young wives;
 For auld fouk bein maistly fretfu,
 A’ that’s nae grave, to them seems hatefu;
 Contrair to that, young things are wantin,
 Their tongues ay gaen, their hearts ay pantin’
 For something new—While these tak pleasure
 In naething earthly but their treasure”.

* * * * *
 Quo Gilbert, “John ye speak fu well,
 I doubt ye’re preachin for yoursel;
 Come tell me dame, wha ’tis ye loo?”

This straight question got a very straight auswer; the old man

was satisfied—the young folks more than contented. They listened to his advices, received his blessing, got married, and helped to smooth his declining years.

Auld Gilbert liv'd till aughty seven
Then slept on earth, to wake in heav'n.

Bower, in speaking of Beattie's connection with the *Scots Magazine*, says:—"There is some difficulty in ascertaining exactly all the verses contributed by him, because an Aberdeen bookseller of the name of Francis Douglas, and a Mr. Charles Gordon, a writer in Aberdeen, who had a great facility of expressing themselves in rhyme, were much in the practice at that time of sending their verses to the same publication". We are only aware, however, of one piece of fairly respectable verse (which occurs in the *Scots Magazine* for September, 1750) that can with any certainty be claimed for Douglas. It is entitled "Verses occasioned by reading the 2nd verse of the 91st Psalm, in the Old Translation", Signed, "Aberdeen, F.D." Of the other poetical pieces which have been attributed to him, it may be useful to note:—(1) "The Birthday, with a few Strictures on the Times: a poem in Three Cantos, with a preface and notes of an edition to be published in the year 1782. By a Farmer. Glasgow, published by Foulis for the author: 1782". The late Mr. John Dunn, of Paisley, the friend of Motherwell, and a great authority on Scottish bibliographical matters, believed from certain items of internal evidence that Douglas was the author of this piece—the writer (? Mr. D. Chalmers) of the brief memoir of Douglas prefixed to the Aberdeen reprint of "The East Coast of Scotland" also says:—"In 1788 (?) Mr. Douglas published another poem, not so good (as 'Rural Love'), called 'The Birth-Day'";—and Campbell, in his "Introduction to the History of Scottish Poetry", likewise credits Douglas with the authorship. (2) "A Panegyric on the Town of Paisley, by a North Country Gentleman. Printed in the year 1765". This poem of thirty six-line stanzas has been attributed to Douglas by a Mr. M'Vean, a Glasgow bookseller; but it has also been ascribed to a Mr. Riddoch, and to John Wilson, author of "The Clyde", this latter being more likely the author of it than any of the others. Curiously enough, another piece of Wilson's craftsmanship has been credited to Douglas, and an account

of it forms a very interesting item in Chalmers' letter to his brother quoted above. In making a note of Douglas' works he mentions (3) "The Earl of Douglas, a Dramatic Essay, 8vo, 1760". "I forget", says Mr. Chalmers "whether he called it a dramatic history or not, but it is mentioned, not in the most honourable manner, in the *Monthly Review*. In the play, a bull's head, the signal of death to one of the company, is brought in and set on the table. This drew upon him the ridicule of the wits here, who one night set up over his shop door a bull's head, and underneath it, in large letters,

O Francy Douglas! Francy Douglas, O!

This black bull's head hath wrought thee mickle woe!"

A correspondent to *Notes and Queries*, shortly after the appearance of the above, pointed out that in Leyden's "Scottish Descriptive Poems" there is a memoir of John Wilson, in which the "Dramatic Essay" is mentioned as his first publication, and that he afterwards developed the subject in his tragedy of "Earl Douglas". This is decisive: but how came the Aberdeen wits to link the production to Douglas? A likely explanation is that he had printed the essay; for though it was ostensibly a London printed work, that does not count for much when we remember that just about the same time he was working at Beattie's poems, which also purported being London printed. A dramatic essay on such a subject, to be printed by him, and issued without an author's name, was almost certain to be set down by those who knew how eagerly he entered into the contemporary "Douglas Cause" as a production from his versatile pen.

After all, the abiding reputation of Francis Douglas as a writer rests wholly on his "Description of the East Coast of Scotland" and his fine story of "Rural Love"—two items of local interest which will long command the attention and kindle the admiration of the "indwallers" of Bon-Accord.