

JAMES PENNYCOOK BROWN.

IN decided contrast to the rough and ready Scottish effusions of our local muse about this period is the chaste, cultured

elegance which pervades "Poetical Ephemeras, by James Pennycook Brown, 1831". The author was at that time a compositor in the *Aberdeen Journal* office, and had for long been a valued contributor to various local newspapers and magazines. He was a native of the Mearns, where his father had been at one time a farmer, but latterly, through financial difficulties, had settled down in Brechin as an auctioneer, and in his old age wrought as a jobbing gardener. His mother (whose name was Pennycook) was a native of that place, and many relatives of the family were then resident there. The poet, after working for some time at Elgin, came to Aberdeen, where he made valued friendships and lasting connections with the brilliant coterie of writers who started and carried on Smith's *Aberdeen Magazine*. He returned to Elgin shortly after the publication of the above volume of poetry, having got an appointment on the literary staff of the *Courant*—was sometime afterwards a secretary of one of the Exeter Hall societies, and ultimately emigrated to Canada, from whence he returned, and (according to a note in Jervise's copy of "Poetical Ephemeras") visited his friends in Brechin in 1862-3. He is said to have died at Elgin some short time after.

Though the author of more than one publication, his first volume, mentioned above, has alone kept his name in whatever public notice it has hitherto commanded, and is undoubtedly a work which, when we consider the limited opportunities for culture possessed by a handicraftsman fifty years ago, is a marvel of taste and talent. He is the first of our working men poets who aimed at and reached a dexterity in the manipulation of felicitous language, which had hitherto been supposed to be exclusively the fruit of learned ease and cultured leisure. He seems to have had an inborn literary faculty which leaped into the possession of that which ordinary mortals may labour for and yet never attain. His poems are uniformly of a staid and reflective turn, with a tinge of sadness over them, which, if real, bespeaks in most young men an unhealthy tone of mind, and, if assumed, a bit of vanity which a wider experience is sure to correct. His subjects are usually of the kind which touch the soft and mellowing minor chords of human feeling—"Autumnal Flowers", "When First We Met",

“Life’s Changes”, “The Voices of our Home”, “The Stranger’s Grave”, “Where are the Days of our Youth?” and such like; and they are all written with a degree of elegance and refinement which bespeak considerable aptitude for dealing with the sentimental and pathetic. Humour he has none, while the solitary attempt at a rollicking song in his book, “Come, Push the Bottle Round”, is a sample of exceedingly “small-beer”. The leading characteristic of his poetry—indeed, we think the high-water mark of his genius—is found in the following poem on

THE DEATH OF CHATTERTON.

The poison cup is in his hand, and in his heart despair,  
For wildly back upon the earth he flings his weight of care;  
The glory of his soul is gone, and clouds are gathering fast  
Around his weary spirit’s shrine, the darkest and the last.

His palaces of hope are crushed, that once so brightly shone;  
The golden light of glorious fame from off his path has gone;  
The flowers are dead that promised wreaths to bind his burning brow,  
The sweet songs of his wondrous lyre are worthless offerings now!

The earth has lost the loveliness it once to him had borne,  
When from the east the gorgeous sun strode forth with smiling morn;  
The stars that everlastingly look from the lofty sky  
Seem not to him the same beneath whose light he loved to lie!

Now has he drunk the deadly drug, to chase his woes away,  
And through his heart the poison flows in willingness to slay;  
Yet in his breast at that dark hour, when death grows wildly strong,  
He feels the workings of his gift,—the noble gift of song!

And pouring forth the burning thoughts that crowd his troubled mind,  
He leaves the earth with all its cares, and blighted hopes behind;  
He pours them from his spirit’s fount, the glowing words of fire,  
Whilst boldly with his youthful hand is swept his tuneful lyre!

“Take back thine own, thou earth! to me thou hast no mother been,  
Else thou would’st not have left me thus in this my latest scene;  
Thou would’st have given to me the love which mortal mothers give,  
And flung a glory o’er my path, and wooed my soul to live!

“But I depart, and leave behind, to fill the trump of Fame,  
A tale of sorrow and delight—a deathless, blighted name;  
And my wild songs will yet be sung where stately anthems roll,  
And fair lips yet will ask of Heaven peace to the minstrel’s soul.

“I had not thought thus to have died, when, in my childhood’s prime,  
I floated in Hope’s rainbow bark adown the stream of time;  
While yet my head with mimic wreaths of future fame was crowned—  
Wreaths which around my youthful brow with pride my sisters bound.

“They are not with me now—I drink the cup of grief alone,  
But they will deeper sorrow feel when I, their hope, am gone  
For ever from among their smiles and hours of sinless mirth!  
Oh! think not of them now, my soul, ’twill win me back to earth!

“Back to that earth where I have pined in pride and feeling long,  
But now my panting spirit’s thoughts grow wildly dark and strong;  
And the blue beauty of the sky, and proud waves rolling free,  
And earth, with all its lovely flowers, are pleasureless to me”!

Even in minds of the highest culture there are certain moods in which poetry like Pennycook Brown’s gives more exquisite pleasure than would that of a far greater genius. On the other hand, he is just sufficiently elevated above the ordinary level of intelligence to make the effort to enter into his feelings more a pleasure than a strain; hence his fine imagination becomes a part of one’s own with so little labour that as his finely turned thoughts slip into the mind there is felt somewhat of that feeling of relief and that positive happiness which the writer himself experiences in being able to embody his own thoughts in words.