

WILLIAM ANDERSON.

VERY frequently in the course of these papers have we been faced with the questions—What is poetry? What constitutes a poet? We have tried to impress on our mind—not with very much satisfaction, however, be it confessed—what various writers have said about the matter—that poetry should aim at the ideal, the distant, the practically unattainable:—that the subject matter is the physical, intellectual, and moral beauty of the universe; the end, the elevation of the soul:—that the poet is one who feels strongly, and paints truly. These and numerous other attempted definitions we felt were true so far as they went, but we still wanted one to cover the entire field. On the whole, one of the simplest, most comprehensive, and most satisfying definitions we know is found in the preface to “Rhymes, Reveries, and Reminiscences, by William Anderson, Aberdeen, printed at the *Herald* office by John Finlayson, 1851”. In it he says—“When the imaginative writing of one

individual, either in prose or verse, *comes home* to the heart of another, that writing is poetry". Judging his published effusions by the above, we hesitate not to call them poetry, at least to natives of Aberdeen, for there are few productions of our native bards which "come home" with more force to the heart of a "toun's bairn" than do many of the productions of our present subject.

WILLIAM ANDERSON, the author of the above-mentioned volume, was a typical Aberdonian. Born in the Green in 1802, and dying in the Gallowgate, in 1867, he spent all the intervening years in the town, faithfully performing what his hand found to do, studying the idiosyncracies of the townfolk, all of whom, we may say, he knew by headmark; and, when leisure allowed, wandering about the many pleasant and interesting walks in the neighbourhood, with a keen eye to every beauty or eccentricity of nature, more especially if it were associated with some human interest. He was most intensely local—not in the offensive way of those who

Think the cackle of their bourg  
The murmur of the world,

but in the manner of one who finds all he wants in his own immediate surroundings, and bothers not his head about the great outside world.

His father, who was a carter, died when William was about fourteen years of age, leaving a widow and three daughters besides the young poet. He was apprenticed to the cooper trade, then a thriving industry in Aberdeen, but bad health caused him to give it up. He, some time after, was attracted to the weaving, then not far fallen from the hey-day of its prosperity, and, learning the loom at the Windmill Brae factory, under Mr. Milne, of Spring Garden, he stuck to the shuttle till 1849, when he exchanged the weaver's apron for the uniform of the police under the control of the Harbour Commissioners. Long before this, however, he had become known to a wide circle as a poet. He tells us himself that he had begun to rhyme at an early age; but when he began to read the poetry of Ramsay and Burns, he, with a modesty and an amount of good sense very unusual with youthful rhymers,

literally made it manifest that his jejune lucubrations were "words that burn" by making a bonfire of them. Later on, when, in the ordinary course of nature—more especially poetic nature—he began to see all beauty and perfection in the fairer half of human kind, numerous were the songs and sonnets he wrote and presented to various Ellens, and Marys, and Janes; but, as he generally gave away the original, without reserving a copy for himself, he was of opinion that these fair maidens, after having sufficiently laughed at the unlicked cub of an author, used them up for curl-papers—a useful end, if not a glorious fate!

Meanwhile his communings with nature and his keen eye for human character bore fruit more lasting than his juvenile productions; and some of his pieces attracting the notice of the late Mr. James Adam of the *Herald*, Anderson became a frequent and popular contributor to the poetical neuk of that newspaper. He joined the city police force in 1860, and ultimately rose to the rank of lieutenant. Faithful in the discharge of his often delicate and disagreeable duties, his kindness of heart and love for humanity, even when depraved, enabled him frequently to arrest a poor mortal on his downward course, when a harsh jack-in-office would only have accelerated the downward career. No man ever showed less of "shop" than William Anderson. Outside the office he ceased to be the policeman, and instead of details of his official experience, he would rather tell how—

There's nae a crook nor roundabout,  
 Frae Poynerook to Eildon Tree,  
 Where I've nae catch'd the silver trout,  
 Upon the winding banks o' Dee.  
 Ilk hour, I dookit in her tide  
 That I frae school or wark could spare;  
 There I hae gathered rasps—beside,  
 I woo'd and won my Nanny there.

There I hae heard at break o' day  
 The blackbird chaunt his early sang—  
 The mavis, at the gloamin' grey,  
 Wake slumberin' echoes till they rang.  
 Fu' aft, in some bit plantin' snug,  
 Wi' books I've wiled awa' the time;  
 Or wandered by the auld Craiglug,  
 An' strung my scraps o' simple rhyme.

But I'll tak' leave o' queenly Dee,  
 And view her modest sister, Don ;  
 For there the dearest spots to me  
 Were Kettock's Mill an' Tillydrone.  
 There, lanely, in the pale moonlight,  
 Hae I indulged my waukin' dream,  
 Until the witchin' hour o' night,  
 Beside her calm, unruffled stream.

Through Seaton Vale uncheck'd I've rang'd  
 Where lav'rocks sing, an' wild flowers grow ;  
 But, ah ! the scene is sairly chang'd  
 From what it was lang years ago.  
 Through spots where we, 'mang broom an' whin,  
 Hae harrit nests and howkit bykes,  
 We daurna gang and canna win,  
 For fences, rails, and five-foot dykes.

Or wandering back into the memories of his boyhood days, he would reminiscentially detail to his old friend, and brother poet, William Cadenhead, how

By Scraphard or Torry we whiles took our route,  
 When school skaled—for care we kenn'd little about ;  
 The saum, an' the chapter, an' questions were got,  
 An' we screedit them aff like a parrot by rote,  
 Then hame we wad rin, wi' our sklata and our buik,  
 An' awa' to the Rake and the Pintler to dook,  
 Though mithers wad warn, an' threaten, or chide,  
 Lest some o' their loons should be drowned in the tide.  
 Then we swam owre the Dee, an' at Innes' farm  
 Took a neep or a carrot, ne're thinkin' on harm,  
 Till Growlie, the grieve, or the ha'netsman, Main,  
 Wad charge us across to the Brick Kilns again.

We caught in the tide whiles the baddock and fluke,  
 Wi' the seth an' the eel at the auld Poynernoon,  
 Then their skins roun' our legs, as we ran owre the braes,  
 Wad aften prevent us frae breakin' our taes.\*  
 Whiles whistles we cuttit frae the boortree or ash,  
 An' whiles plaitit buckie or cap wi' the rash ;  
 When wearied wi' ramblin', we finished the splore  
 Wi' a game at the "Bellums" or "Buffet the Boar".

\* The skin of an eel wrapped round the ankle was considered a preventative to the broken toes which were such a sorrow to the barefooted.

The mention of Mr. Cadenhead's name recalls the "flyting"

of the Wells, which many will yet remember caused much amusement in the columns of the *Herald*. One Saturday morning a rhyming appeal by the "Well o' Spa" from the pen of Anderson appeared, beginning:—

Please, Aberdonians, ane an' a',  
 To listen to the Well o' Spa,  
 Wha wi' your leave wad humbly shaw  
   A sma' petition ;  
 Now that I'm gane, for guid an' a',  
   To crockanition.

How happens it, I fain wad speir,  
 That I'm neglected year by year—  
 D'ye think the water is less clear  
   Comes frae my spout ;  
 Or is't because the iron eer  
   Is a' run oot ?

\* \* \* \* \*

They say my sister o' Firhill,  
 Wha can but common moss distil,  
 Can sell a hogshead for my gill—  
   D—— ! be their cure  
 Wha wad prefer a muddy rill  
   To mineral pure.

I've seen a core aroun' me sit,  
 An' drink till they were like to split,  
 An' crack an' joke as they thought fit—  
   Ilk canty body  
 Wad mak as happy flists o' wit  
   As owre their toddy.

She concludes with a pathetic appeal to be put in proper order, when she doubts not her fame and her virtues will be as widespread and as potent as of yore. Next week the Fir-hill Well, through the pen of Cadenhead, briskly resented the sneer cast at her in the stanza quoted:—

Could Well o' Spa no praise her springs,  
 Her "iron-eers" and sic-like things  
 (To which wi' desperate grasp she clings,  
   Tho' weel it's hinted,  
 For a' the evidence she brings,  
   She langsyne tint it).

\* \* \* \* \*

I'm sure the limpid Firhill Well  
 (Excuse me thus to name mysel')  
 Could mony a scand'lous story tell  
     'Bout Well o' Spa,  
 Wad gar her lugs ring like a bell  
     To hear them a'.

But I forbear. In a' the toun  
 There's neither lad, nor lass, nor loun  
 But my superior praise will soun,  
     My beauties tell—  
*I needna rin anither doun*  
     To praise mysel.

Though the Well o' Spa, like the kettle in the "Cricket on the Hearth", "began it", the threat to throw scandal at her was more than the naiad of the Woolmanhill could stand, so the following week she (Anderson) "goes for" the Firhill in characteristic "you're another" sort of argument:—

She hints at tales—she'll better spare  
 Her threats lest I say something mair ;  
 That I o' failin's hae my share  
     I'll nae deny her,  
 But to rin down my virtues rare  
     I *do* defy her.

\* \* \* \* \*

But what she's seen, gin she wad tell,  
 Micht gar an honest cheek turn pale ;  
 There's stories I hae heard mysel  
     I daurna name,  
 Wad gar your lugs ring like a bell  
     Wi' perfect shame.

\* \* \* \* \*

Frae sic a graceless crew defend's  
 As I hae heard them say attends  
 On her, an' half the Sabbath spends—  
     Rank unbelievers—  
 Then Monday lots o' sutors sends  
     An' lazy weavers.

Though I could say a hantle mair,  
 I wad the creature's blushes spare ;  
 Things whilk I doot is rather rare  
     In ane sae young ;  
 In future she had best tak care,  
     An' guard her tongue.

The following week the Corbie Well from her "sequestered nook" has her say (by Cadenhead) about the

Unseemly sough—  
The tauntin' words and envious splatter  
About the virtues o' their water,  
That's risen between that glaiket twa—  
The "Firhill" and the Well o' Spa".

She lectures them severely on their "randy" conduct, and gives them some good advice regarding the amenities. The Well o' Spa's sneer at "souters" and "weavers" sets the old lady of the "woodie" a-moralising:—

Whene'er I turn  
A musin' glance across the burn,  
Whare yon three kirks and steeple high  
Stan' out atween me an' the sky,  
And think upon the times that's past—  
It aiblins was owre good to last—  
When on yon self-same spot a hive  
O' happy weavers ance did thrive ;  
Whase fair day's wark did mair than earn  
A scanty meal for wife and bairn,  
And left a clushach i' the moggan  
In times o' 'stress to keep them joggin',  
Or help a needy neighbour thro'—  
Alas ! the times are alter'd noo.  
And I aft think 'twere just as weel,  
And wad a heap o' heart-scads heal.  
Were yon Free Kirks laid on the plain,  
And my blithe weavers back again.

It is not, however, such playful verse-trifling as the Well controversy, nor the sweet bouquets of flowers and bunches of fruit which he has plucked from the quieter nooks of his poetic garden, nor even the curious reminiscential pieces like the "Bachelor's Room" and "Eppie's Aumrie", that has given Anderson an almost unique place among our local poets. It is emphatically his rare art of drawing a life-like portrait. His strength lay almost exclusively in this faculty. Like most of the better sort of the rhyming tribe, he certainly went to nature for his subjects; but unlike many of them, he selected animated nature, and found his inspiration strongest among the men and women he had known. For him the opening buds of the rejuvenated year—the lavish profusion of summer beauty—

the wondrous tints of the autumn woods—the awful sublimity of a winter storm, had but comparatively minor attractions. To him was unknown the methods of our modern school of morbid poetasters, who evolve such fearfully and wonderfully compounded effusions from the grotesque wobblings of what they call their inner consciousness. He fixed on a well-known character, and in a few stanzas—with a broad-pointed pen, not over particular about fineness of phrase, he drew a portrait with all the sharpness of a photograph, and all the nicety of detail of a policeman's description. He seems to have noted each peculiarity—shall we say professionally?—as with an eye to future identity. These portraits—about twenty in number—were immensely popular with the generation who knew the originals in the flesh. Even now, when modern modes of living have done much to reduce all to a dead uniformity, and almost destroyed individuality of character, their truth to nature is at once recognised. We feel that they are true to the life—that the author was painting real men and real women—not photographing a suit of clothes and a fixed grin. Let us take a cursory glance at Anderson's gallery. “Jean Findlater's Loon”, that reckless young scamp—the torment of his “mither” and the whole gate-en', but who turned out a hero and her prop in her old age—is known far and wide. Poor “Archibal' Black”, the “glazier an' wricht”, who was not only a genius in his way, but a moral oracle of wide repute, what is he but a humble Tannhäuser or Rinaldo ensnared and unmanned by the glamour of female charms. That the morally upright, though physically crooked, Archibal', who gave sage advice to “maidens and widows, young, mid-aged, an' auld”, should fall so far, on account of a “braw wanton widow”, as to lead to the episode of “the hammerman's laft” is a tragedy—but such is not uncommon. Of “Benjie Kilgour”,

Ye scarcely could mention a trade or profession,  
 But Benjie had wrought at an' tried in succession;  
 Frae the fettlin' o' watches to men'in o' sheen,  
 He was Jack o' a' trades, and the maister o' nane.  
 By the folk o' the clachen he aye was allowed  
 To be worth wi' his cunnin' his full weight in gowd;  
 An' as proof o' the maxim that “knowledge is power”,  
 There was naething on earth baffled Benjie Kilgour.

But the watches he sorted were aye gaen wrang;  
 Wi' the sheen that he mended naebody could gang;  
 An' gin they'd been richt, it a wonder had been,  
*For the same set o' tools sorted watches and sheen!*

\* \* \* \* \*

For twenty lang years, wi' a steady devotion,  
 He fought to fin' oot the perpetual motion;  
 An' ten o' his lifetime employed had been  
 Constructin' what he ca'd a fleein' machine.  
 His "ever-gaun-motion" excited folks' fun,  
 His fleein' machine wadna rise frae the grun;  
 A contrivance wi' water to measure the hour,  
 Like the rest, brought nae honour to Benjie Kilgour.

Evidently poor Benjie's inventiveness was badly seconded by his powers of execution.

The sketch of "Lady Babie Moir" contains the materials for a regular romance—the details of which each reader may fill in according to the bent of his imagination. "Annapple Bain" is the heroine of a tragedy, gruesome as ever emanated from the brain of Monk Lewis. Her figure is graphically drawn:—

Though bou't to an angle o' near forty-five,  
 Yet her head stood erect, an' she weel could contrive  
 To put on sic a look o' prood scorn as to mak'  
 Ony ane keep their distance wha freedoms wad tak'.  
 She passed through the street wi' the air o' a queen,  
 Though crooket an' auld she was tidy and clean;  
 An' observers got frae her but looks o' disdain,  
 Sae sullen an' haughty was Annapple Bain.

"Drunken Sands", "spittin' saxpences", and shading

His half-cockit e'en wi' his hands,  
 To look for a sign wi' Devanha entire,

is a deplorable figure, and would have been worth something as a "frightful example" for a teetotal lecturer.

Blin' Tibby Hogg, the

Dealer in cabbage an' kale,  
 Neeps, ingans, an' leeks which she sauld by retail—

was a well-known character, who made literally a pretty considerable noise in the world, at least in that part of it near her domicile in the Windmill Brae. She was not only notorious for her prowess in "flyting", but she was also noted for her pheno-

menal ugliness—if we may be allowed to use such a phrase of one of the fair sex. Her face was sadly disfigured with small-pox—“run like a dander”, we have heard it described. She was more than half-blind, and had but a rare acquaintance with soap and water. A once well-known character about the Castlegate quarter—a carter, Sandy Mair, who prided himself on his extreme ugliness—was brought up at the Bailie Court for some simple breach of the peace. Fiscal Low, who had more of the satyr than the Hyperion in his appearance, was at that time the public prosecutor. Sandy, being mulcted in a small fine, was busy collecting the requisite coins from the recesses of his pockets, at the same time gazing with admiration on the figure which so nearly rivalled him in his own pet quality, when he astonished the Court with the following proposition addressed to the worthy fiscal:—“Weel, sir, there’s you, sir; and there’s me, sir; and blin’ Tibby Hogg i’ the Windmill Brae; an’ gin ye get three uglier deevils within the boon’s o’ the toon, I’ll pay double the fine!” History says not whether the challenge was accepted or not. Here is Anderson’s description of the redoubtable Tibby:—

Though she couldna weel see, she could baith speak an’ hear,  
As her neighbourhood kent o’ for mony a year;  
Wi’ her pockmarkit face, black an’ rough as a scrog,  
There were few wad hae fouchen wi’ blin’ Tibby Hogg.

Wi’ a blue-spotted wrapper, an’ egg-doupit mutch,  
At her side were a cushion, a sheers, an’ a pouch—  
There she carried her purse, wi’ her sugar an’ tea,  
A biscuit or bun, as the case chanced to be.  
Ilka hour o’ the day—for she never wad tire—  
Her kettle or trokie was seen on the fire;  
Wi’ her head i’ the aumrie, sae cosy an’ snug,  
Right strong was the tea drunk by blin’ Tibby Hogg.

She flyted at mornin’, at noon, an’ at nicht,  
She flyted when wrang an’ she flyted when richt;  
She flyted when waukin’, an’, whiles they wad threep  
That even at times she wad flyte thro’ her sleep.  
She flyted when selling, she flyted when buying,  
She flyted through life, and she flyted when dying;  
She banned an’ she flyted at man an’ at dog—  
There was nane lang in friendship wi’ blin’ Tibby Hogg.

Her nephew, Jock, managed to exist with her till he reached an age when he could make his escape from the clangour of her tongue, and, being so inured to noise, he felt himself at home in the artillery. But Tibby bitterly resented the desertion, and cursed all and sundry:—

She cursed a' the army baith horseman an' foot;  
She cursed kings an' courtiers, the Kirk an' the State,  
She stormed like a fury, an' banned her ain fate.

All this terrible cursing, however, was about as harmless as the celebrated Ingoldsby curse, for “nobody seemed one penny the worse”, except it were the poor body herself, for

At last she grew dumpish, believed she was dead,  
Next thought there was clockwork an' wheels in her head;  
Was offered a prayer frae Dominie Shaw,  
But she banned till she fleggit the body awa;  
She mumbled an' flyted as lang's she had breath,  
An' some thought she even was flytin' wi' death,  
Wha forced her upon her lang journey to jog.  
Makin' peace in the quarter where lived Tibby Hogg.

We would fain go on noticing his sketches of “Bob Clerihew”, “Moorican Roum”, “Feel Willie”, “Gley'd Sandy Gray”, “Big Bob”, and all the rest, but to those of our readers who are old enough to remember their appearance in the columns of the *Herald*, they are well known. To others, the samples we have given may be an inducement to become acquainted with a collection of local worthies well worth knowing.

Before we close the two volumes which contain the legacy which this true son of Bon-Accord has left to his townsmen, we would notice that many of his pieces will be of considerable value to the future student of our social life and surroundings in the early part of the 19th century. His sketch of the Denburn Valley, appended to his “second edition”, is already much esteemed, and as time rolls on, its value and interest will be sure to increase. The same may be said of such poems as “The Siller Marriage” and “Forty Year's Sinsyne”. The silver marriage described in his pages will be found somewhat different from the fashionable celebrations known by that name at the present day; while the latter is his recollections of a period, which differ from the present fully as much as the silver marriages of then and now do.

William Anderson continued in his somewhat uncongenial post of police lieutenant till his death in 1867 at the age of 65. Unlike many of his brethren of song, he not only could sing the joys of domestic life, but he had the sense or good fortune to enjoy it. If he did not realise all his youthful dreams he could still sing:—

Of blessings such as sweeten life  
I think I've got an equal share—  
I wished for children and a wife,  
And Heaven thought fit to grant my prayer.  
When I was young my hopes were fair,  
My future prospects bright were seeming.  
But soon they vanished into air,  
And I found out I had been dreaming.  
Yet think not that I felt regret  
To find my air-built fabrics tumbling;  
No; cheerfully I bowed to fate,  
And thought there was no use of grumbling.

His “Rhymes, Reveries, and Reminiscences” was published in 1851. Another volume, called “a second edition”, with the same title, was published posthumously in 1867, but they are practically distinct and separate collections, the 1851 volume containing upwards of fifty pieces not in the 1867 volume, while the latter contains about forty not in the former.