

ROB GAIRNS,

ST MARTINS.



MR. R. GAIRNS.

WEAVER AND RHYMER.

XXIV.

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ST MARTINS.

From Sir Walter Scott to Robert Gairns of St Martins the stretch is considerable, and the same might be said of oak and sprig of heather, both of which are admirable and lovable in their own particular ways. But, in whatever more, there was at least one link of kinship between the two rhymers in the fact that they both found their audiences at a comparatively late period of life. It is doubtful that the comparison ever suggested itself to the humbler votary of the muse, for he was the last man in the world to think of himself in any such connection, however nominal; but that he was over 40 years of age before he found "measured speech" for the expression of his ideas is sufficiently curious to arrest the attention of anyone taking up the facts of his quiet, uneventful career. He was born in the cottage of New Loudon, about two miles east of New Scone, Parish of St Martins, on the 12th May 1804, his father being a pendicler there. Rob got what education was going at the parish school, but most of his spare time was devoted to helping his father in one way or another. He was soon set to the weaving, and when the length of a young man could hold his own with any one in the district.

Blairgowrie and Strathmore Worthies:

He learned all about land and bestial, and, indeed, was able

TO TURN HIS HAND

to almost anything in a general way. By and by his father died, and Rob took up the burden of the household, managed the bit croft, wrought harder than ever at the loom, and bent his back to his work with good heart and determination, chiefly for the sake of his mother, for whom he had a great affection, and during whose life he chose to remain single himself. Meantime he was storing up those critical judgments on men and things which he was afterwards to utilise with such telling effect in his various effusions. He was noted for a keen, vivacious nature, which compelled him to go into everything that attracted him with characteristic whole-heartedness; as a great reader of books and periodicals, and gifted with a retentive memory; a ready and eager debater on political and social questions; a warm and generous and transparently sincere and likeable individual. He was the last man to be thought of in connection with anything savouring of guile or underhand dealing, and could not tolerate anything of the kind in others. Nothing delighted him more than "a crack" about current affairs, such as the Crimean War and the Indian Mutiny, both of which bulked largely in the public mind during the fifties; but probably he was much more at home discussing homely subjects, such as a ploughing match, a cattle show, a soiree, some point on the temperance question, or the annual dinner to the St Martins tenantry. No matter what it was, however, he was always a good-natured, companionable fellow, every one's pleasure in his company being equal to his own.

Rob Gairns, St Martins.

THE ANNUAL DINNER

was always a notable affair in the parish, and usually made the occasion of much speechmaking and the interchange of social amenities between Colonel and Mrs Macdonald of St Martins and the residents on the estate. Rob, of course, was quite in his element at such gatherings, and at one of them—about 1850—suddenly startled and delighted his audience by bursting out into a rhymed address. As he declared afterwards, the discovery “that in the way of speech-making he could express anything he wanted to say with more point, and remember what he had to say more readily in rhyme than in prose” was as great a wonder to himself as to his auditors, although it is not to be assumed that he did not prepare himself for this particular occasion, as he did for every other he appeared at afterwards. That he awoke next morning to find himself famous goes *sans dire*; and from that date forward it was Rob Gairns o’ St Martins at every possible function first and the other items as they chanced. No one enjoyed his popularity as laureate of the parish more than himself, and as he sat at the loom with a slate at hand on which he would record line upon line the thoughts and fancies with which he was to delight his forthcoming audience, this

Canny, simple Scot,
Wi’ bonnet blue and fustian coat,

was, according to his own description, in his “ain clay-biggitt cot,” “unco happy.” Catch him, however, allowing a single individual to get a sight of his half-done work; he was too firm a believer in the Scots proverb for that. But at the soiree, dinner, or other function he would give

Blairgowrie and Strathmore Worthies:

“aff luif” close upon 200 lines, on occasion, as freely as though the spontaneous utterance of the moment.

ROB'S PERSONALITY

added much to the effect of his effusions, being tall and well built, with a good head, a frank, open countenance, a loud, sonorous voice, and a general breeziness of manner that put every one in good humour before he had uttered a word. But when he got fairly under way with one of his productions, full of dry humour and pawky observations on men and things every one of his audience was perfectly familiar with, there was no question as to who was the man of the hour; and if Matthew Arnold's definition of poetry as “at bottom a criticism of life” holds good, our friend was a poet of no mean order! By and by a demand arose for the publication of his pieces, and the wish was gratified by the issuing of a small collection in 1853, one of the outstanding features of which was his modesty. Here are a few instances:—

I'm nae a poet, nor a poet's son,
But to the rhymin' am begun,
An' sometimes try a verse for fun,
 To pass the time;
If little good, nae harm is done
 By my rough rhyme.

For me, my poetic mission is but sma',
I keep sae far doon I'm sure no to fa'!

My puir, simple muse has been almost asleep,
At best she's but weak and ne'er very deep.

Notwithstanding all that, his “bookie” ran out of print, and was succeeded by an enlarged edition in 1859, and a still further enlarged one in 1884. Here are a few specimens of his poetic wares:—

Rob Gairns, St Martins.

DESCRIPTION OF SPRING.

Our lang dreary winter is wearin' awa',
An' sune we'll get quit o' the drift an' the snaw;
The pairicks ha'e paired, the laverocks are singin',
The woods i' the gloamin' wi' blackbirds are ringin';
The peeweeps ha'e come, the craws they are biggin',
An' feuars an' cottars their kailyards are diggin';
The bee is impatient her work to begin,
She waits f r the bloom on the saughs an' the whin.
The bairns rin to play; puss to the housetap,
Reclined i' the sun, will there tak' a nap;
The pleughs which for months ha'e been a' frozen in,
Noo clear o' the snaw will straightway begin;
The farmers' work lately was near at a stand,
But noo they ha'e laid regular siege to the land;
My poor simple muse has been almost asleep,
At best she's but weak, and ne'er very deep!
But birds are a' singing, the flowers sweetly spring,
And nature is smiling—so, with them I'll sing.

ARNBATHY DAN.

Ye've heard o' Arnbathy Dan,
A weel-faured, hale, and powerfu' man;
Juist show's his marrow gin ye can
 In carse or brae—
His heicht is twa yards an' a span
 Frae tap to tae!

He rules his men wi' little din,
Kens weel that swearin' is a sin:
Ere to the leadin' they begin
 He warns them weel,
Tho' sweat should owre their haffits rin,
 To "ca' hale wheel."

There's no a man I ken ava'
Need ever try wi' him to saw;
With baith his hands he throws't awa'
 As fast's he can.
The bauldest wind that e'er could blaw
 Could ne'er stop Dan!

Ye may be sure he comes guid speed—
He'll forty auld Scotch acres seed:
Ilk kind o' land, an' what to gie't,
 Be it corn or bear,
He kens: when brier'd let judges see't—
 He doesna care!

Blairgowrie and Strathmore Worthies.

In winter, when the day's no lang,
He'll twice to Perth for manure gang;
His maister ne'er said, "Dan, ye're wrang"
 This twa-three year;
He keeps baith men and laddies thrang—
 There's no ane sweer.

But yet he has a wee bit faut,
I scarcely ken what name to ca't—
It may be but th' effects o' maut
 In cups an' glasses—
But whiles he likes to hug an' daut
 The bonnie lasses!

POPULAR PIECES.

Want of space forbids quoting more, but among the most popular of his long pieces may be mentioned "Willie's Hay Stack," "The Ploughing Match," "St Martins' Concert," "Plash Mill," and "Strong Drink." Six years after the last edition of his book—on the 14th May 1890—our worthy old friend, tended by the loving hands of his daughter, breathed his last in the very cottage in which he first saw light 86 years before. He was sincerely mourned over a wide district, and many kindly recollections still cluster around the memory of the homely Rhymer of St Martins.