AN

INTERESTING HISTORY

OF

ROBERT BURNS;

THE

AYRSHIRE BARD.

GLASGOW:

PRINTED FOR THE BOOKSELLERS.

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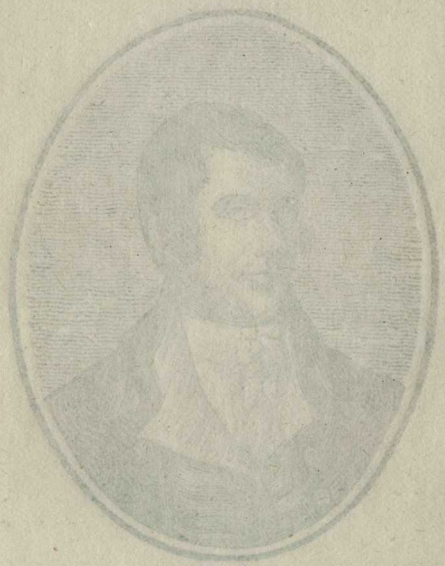

LIFE OF ROBERT BURNS.

ROBERT BURNS was born on the 25th of January, 1759, in a cottage about two miles south from Ayr, not far from the Kirk of Alloway and the "Auld Brig of Doon." His father, William Burns or Burness, married Agnes Brown in December, 1757, and the poet was their first born. William Burns was a man of great integrity, and of strictly religious principles, and is beautifully painted by the poet "As the saint, the father, and the husband," in the Cottar's Saturday Night. Agnes Brown, the wife of this good man, was a woman of great prudence and sagacity, and is said to have had a considerable resemblance in features to her celebrated son. She possessed a great store of ballads and traditionary tales, which no doubt nourished the imagination of the young poet. With all the economy and hard labour of this worthy pair, things did not turn out well and William Burns removed to the Farm of Mount Oliphant, in the parish of Ayr, on Whitsunday 1776, when Robert was about seven years old. Here from the soil being of the worst description, and other causes, he was glad to give up the bargain at the end of six years. He then removed to a better farm, that of Lochlea, in the parish of Tarbolton, where an-

other train of misfortunes overtook him; but a dispute about the lease, which had been referred to arbitration, resulted in his ruin. He lived to know of the decision, but death saved him from witnessing its consequences. He died of consumption on the 13th of February, 1784. In the midst of these struggles, William Burns used the utmost exertions to educate his children,—a duty which is seldom neglected by Scottish parents, however scanty their means. Robert, and Gilbert his next brother, attended school together. Their teacher, speaking of them, says, "Robert, and Gilbert were generally at the upper end of the class, even when ranged with boys by far their seniors. Gilbert always appeared to me to possess a more lively imagination, and to be more of the wit than Robert. I attempted to teach them a little church music. Here they were left far behind by all the rest of the school. Robert's ear, in particular, was remarkably dull, and his voice untunable. It was long before I could get them to distinguish one tune from another." "The two first books," says the poet himself, in 1787, "I ever read in private, and which gave me more pleasure than any two books I ever read since, were The Life of Hannibal, the History of Sir William Wallace. Hannibal gave my young ideas such a turn, that I used to strut in raptures up and down after the recruiting drum

and bagpipe, and wish myself tall enough to be a soldier; while the story of Wallace poured a tide of Scottish prejudice into my veins, which will boil there till the floodgates of life shut in eternal rest."

When they had been about two years at Mount Oliphant, their school-master left the country. "There being no school near us," says Gilbert Burns, "And our little services being already useful on the farm, my father undertook to teach us arithmetic in the winter evenings by candle-light,—and in this way my two elder sisters got all the education they ever received." When Burns was about thirteen or fourteen years old, he was sent, with his brother Gilbert, week about, during a summer quarter, to the parish school of Dalrymple, two miles distant, their father being unable to pay two fees, or they could not be both spared at once from the labours of the farm. "We lived very poorly," says the poet; "I was a dexterous ploughman for my age: and the next eldest to me was brother Gilbert, who could drive the plough very well, and help me to thrash the corn. A novel-writer might perhaps have viewed these scenes with some satisfaction, but so did not I. My indignation yet boils at the recollection of the scoundrel factor's insolent letters, which used to set us all in tears." "To the buffetings of misfor-

ne," says Gilbert, "We could only oppose hard labour, and the most rigid economy. We lived very sparingly. I doubt not but the hard labour and sorrow of this period of life, was in a great measure the cause of that depression of spirits, with which Robert was so often afflicted through his whole life afterwards.

About a year after this period, their old schoolmaster, Mr Murdoch having established himself in the town of Ayr, Robert for some time attended him there, and learned a little of English grammar, Latin, and French, In the meantime, he read with great avidity every book chance threw in his way. The removal of the family to Lochlea took place when Burns was in his sixteenth year; a little before which period, according to his own account, he "First committed the sin of rhyme." In one of his epistles he says:—

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"I mind it weel, in early date,
When I was beardless, young, and blate—
E'er then a wish, I mind its power,
A wish that to my latest hour
Shall strongly heave my breast:
That I, for poor auld Scotland's sake,
Some useful plan or book could make.

While at Lochlea, Robert and his brother were employed by their father and received £7 each a-year. Robert was remarkable for his personal strength, and worked very hard at all the tasks of the farm. "In my seventeenth year," he says, "To give my manners a brush, I went to a country dancing-school;" and afterwards, "At the plough, scythe, or reap-hook, I feared no competitor, and thus I set want at defiance; and as I never cared farther for my labour than while I was in actual exercise, I spent my evenings in the way after my own heart. A country lad seldom carries on a love adventure without an assisting confidant. I possessed a curiosity, zeal, and intrepid dexterity, that recommended me as a proper second on these occasions, and I dare say I felt as much pleasure in being in the secret of half the loves in the parish of Tarbolton, as ever did statesman in knowing the intrigues of half the courts of Europe. While thus occupied, a number of his pieces were composed, chiefly those which relate to love, a passion of which Burns was extremely susceptible. A part of his nineteenth year was spent at Kirkoswald, whither he had gone to learn mensuration, geometry, &c. Kirkoswald, which lies on the sea coast, was at that time a great resort of smugglers, and Burns did not escape some contamination from the society he met with there. His brother Gilbert says, he observed from that period a change in his habits.

"About this time," says Gilbert, "he and I

had for some years taken land of our father, for the purpose of raising flax on our own account; and in the course of selling it Robert began to think of turning flax-dresser, both as being suitable to his grand view of settling in life, and as subservient to the flax-dressing." Burns, accordingly, in pursuance of this resolution, went to a relation of his mother's, a flax-dresser in Irvine, with the view of learning this trade, and for a time applied himself with great diligence. But on a new year's morning the shop caught fire, and was totally consumed, and he was left, in his own words, "like a true poet, not worth a sixpence." Three days before this unfortunate fire took place, he addressed a letter to his father, which contained much good sense and pious reflection. Among other things, he says, "I am more pleased with the 15th, 16th, and 17th verses of the seventh chapter of Revelations, than with any ten times as many verses in the whole Bible, and would not exchange the noble enthusiasm with which they inspire me for all that this world has to offer."

But some time, Burns had to undergo the penance then awarded by the discipline of the Church of Scotland for the birth of an illegitimate child. His conduct on this occasion was marked by a levity which cannot be justified, and is only to be accounted for on the supposition of his wishing to

brave out his shame in the eyes of his jovial associates—for the tenderness and manliness of Burns's general feeling will not permit us to think that such deportment was the deliberate expression of his mind.

About three months before the death of William Burns, Robert and Gilbert, who had for sometime foreseen the storm that was thickening round their father's dwelling, came to the resolution of taking the farm of Mossgiel, in the neighbouring parish of Mauchline, with the view of providing the family with a shelter. It was stocked with their joint property and savings, but notwithstanding all their exertions they could make little out of it. It was during their residence at Mossgiel, which continued four years, that Burns composed some of his most celebrated pieces. Among these were The Holy Tuilzie, or Twa Herds, Holy Willie's Prayer, the Epistle to Davie, Death and Doctor Hornbook, the verses to the Mouse and Mountain Daisy, the Cottar's Saturday Night, &c. Among these are some of those pieces so remarkable for the poignancy of their satire and the breadth of their humour. To explain the causes which gave rise to such of these productions as glance upon religion, or rather upon certain teachers of religion, occasioned by misunderstandings betwixt several of the leading clergy and the heritors,—among the lat-

ter of whom was Burns' landlord. As to these pieces various opinions have been held—some heaping upon Burns the charge of irreligion, &c, while others have praised him for so meritorious a task as the exposure of what they are pleased to call hypocrisy and fanaticism. To the presen generation it is not easy to convey an adequate notion of the height to which parties ran in the West Country at this period, nor of the acrimony that was ingrafted on the polemical controversies then raging. These considerations should go far in the eyes of even the most austere to exculpate Burns from the charges alluded to, and incline them rather to impute to the fiery vehemence of his temperament those sallies which overleap the bounds of decorum—for that Burns, in spite of the levity of certain passages to be found in his works, was embued, and deeply embued, with the solemn and contemplative thoughts which belong to religious feeling, and in the longrun generally issue in strict religious principle, cannot fairly be denied. But no one had, on the other hand, a keener perception of the ludicrous, and such peculiarities in his opponents as offered a tempting mark for the shafts of the satirist were sure to be taken advantage of; at all events, the humour of these pieces is confessedly unrivalled. Hallowеen, a descriptive poem, perhaps more exquisitely wrought than the Holy Fair, and containing

nothing that could offend the feelings of any body, was produced about the same period.

After residing some time at Mossgiel, he seems to have perceived that the farm would at best furnish no more than the bare means of subsistence to so large a family, and came at last to the resolution of trying his fortune in the West Indies.

Jamaica was now his mark; and, through the influence of a friend in Irvine, he procured a situation as assistant overseer on a plantation in that colony. To defray his outfit, and other expenses, it now occurred to him, for the first time, to publish his poems, though of their yielding him any thing he was extremely doubtful. They were at length printed at Kilmarnock, the edition consisting of 600 copies; and our poet, after paying all expenses, cleared about £20. In the meantime, his fame began to take a start, and copies of his volume having fallen into the hands of people of taste and judgment, a general inquiry about him began to prevail, and it became an object of desire with some of his friends to detain him in his native country. With this view, an appointment in the Excise, or some other public office, was suggested; and Burns, it would appear, was not averse to fall in with their wishes. Having been introduced about the same time also to the tables and acquaintance of several distinguished families, the originality and vigour of

his genius, which was displayed in his conversation no less than his poetry, began to be much talked of. Among the first to appreciate his powers may be named the celebrated Professor Dugald Stewart, Dr Hugh Blair, and above all, Mrs Dunlop of Dunlop, a lady of high birth and ample fortune, who was enthusiastically attached to every thing which concerned the honour and interest of her native country. The friendship of this lady continued unabated to the day of the poet's death, and to her a large part of his letters were addressed.

In the meantime, the appointment in the Excise, which he had reason to hope for, being as he thought rather slow in reaching him, Burns began once more to resume the idea of pushing his fortune in the West Indies, and made several preparations for that purpose. He even took fare-well of some of his friends, and proceeded, as he himself informs us, to convoy his trunk so far on the road to Greenock, where he was to embark in a few days for America. On this occasion he composed the farewell dirge to his native land, and which ends thus:—

"The bursting tears my heart declare,
Farewell, the bonny banks of Ayr."

At this critical juncture of his life and fortunes, he was presented with a letter, addressed to a friend of his in the West, from the celebrated Dr

Blacklock of Edinburgh, himself a poet and man of fine genius, the subject of which was a most flattering descant on the merits and genius of Burns: and strongly advising that a second and more perfect edition of his poems should be immediately printed, and staking his reputation on their triumphant success. Under this encouragement Burns instantly came to the resolution of repairing to the capital, which at that time was the residence, as it is now, of many of the most distinguished names that adorn the annals of Scottish literature. He was immediately introduced by the kind Dr Blacklock, who received him with all the warmth of paternal affection, to the notice and acquaintance of the most eminent literati. It was arranged that his second edition should come out under the auspices of Mr Creech, then the first of the metropolitan booksellers; and the merits of the work were previously made known in a criticism from the pen of the celebrated Henry Mackenzie, author of The Man of Feeling, which appeared in The Lounger, a celebrated periodical of the day. The Earl of Glencairn, a nobleman of great affability and benevolence, whose kindness Burns acknowledges with grateful reverence, also made interest with the Caledonian Hunt, (an association of most of the Scottish nobility,) to accept the dedication

of the forthcoming edition, and to subscribe individually for copies.

On the 6th May 1787, after spending about six months in the capital, Burns departed from Edinburgh, in company with a friend, on a country excursion before he should return to Ayrshire His route was southward, and he visited in the course of his tour several distinguished families. He returned to Mauchline on the 8th July, where he remained but a few days, and undertook another tour through the north. In this excursion he was received with much courtesy at the houses of many eminent persons—among these were the noble family of Argyle. On these occasions he composed some of his most admired lyrics. After another visit to his family at Mossgiel he repaired, in March 1788, to Dalswinton, in Dumfries-shire, the residence of Mr Miller, with whom he was in treaty for the lease of a farm on his estate. During part of the intervening months he had been occasionally in Edinburgh, as he says, to adjust matters with his bookseller, although it is pretty clear that a visit to some of his old jovial companions was the true cause. After a good deal of time lost between the arranging of his lease at Dalswinton and settling with his bookseller, a period which from different causes he seems to have spent rather wearily, his affairs came at last to assume something like a definite shape.

The settlement of accounts with the bookseller put him in possession of £500 or £600, and the terms of agreement at Dalswinton being finally arranged, he left Edinburgh for his new possession, having also in his pocket an excise commission as a further resource should he come to need it, which he had procured through the friendship of Mr Graham of Fintry, one of the Commissioners.

At Whitsunday 1788, Burns entered upon his new farm, and in the following November brought home Jean Armour, now Mrs Burns, whom he had married some time previously, and for a time matters went on pretty smoothly. In several of his letters he speaks with much affection of his wife, and of her admirable qualities. Many of his best pieces were composed here: and, on the whole, the poet seemed in a fair way of obtaining competence and such reasonable share of happiness as man may look for. But the burning vehemence of his temperament, the keenness of his sensibility, and a constitutional melancholy to which he had through all his life been subject, were often to him the source of uneasiness and disquiet: This exhibiting to us how little to be coveted is the possession of lofty talents and high genius even with all the fame and distinction they confer, when accompanied with such painful drawbacks; and affording a lesson of contentment

to those who are denied, and may feel disposed to envy, such dangerous gifts. "The fate and characters of the rhyming tribe," thus writes the poet himself in 1793, "often employ my thoughts when I am disposed to be melancholy. There is not among all the martyrologies that ever were penned so rueful a narrative as the lives of the poets. In the comparative view of wretches, the criterion is not what they are doomed to suffer, but how they are formed to bear. Take a being of our kind, give him a stronger imagination and a more delicate sensibility, which between them will ever engender a more ungovernable set of passions than are the usual lot of man; implant in him an irresistible impulse to some idle vagary, such as arranging wild-flowers in fantastic nosegays, tracing the grasshopper to his haunt by his chirping song, watching the frisks of the little minnows in the sunny pool, or hunting after the intrigues of butterflies—in short, send him adrift after some pursuit which shall eternally mislead him from the paths of lucre, and yet curse him with a keener relish than any man living for the pleasures that lucre can purchase; lastly, fill up the measure of his woes by bestowing on him a spurning sense of his own dignity, and you have created a wight nearly as miserable as a poet." In these short sentences

Burns has traced his own character far better than any one else has done it since.

The affairs of the farm did not long thrive, and, perceiving them going backwards, Burns resolved to enter upon the duties of the Excise. He was accordingly appointed to do duty in that capacity in the district where his own farm was situated. His income was at first only £35, but he still retained Elliesland. During the prosperity of his farm Burns conducted himself wisely, and like one anxious for his name as a man, and his fame as a poet. He went to Dunscore kirk on Sunday, and assisted in forming a reading club. He also paid particular attention to the education of his children, and assisted them greatly himself. Afterwards, however, on the failure of his farming projects, the gloom which preyed on his spirits made him too often not unwilling to become the companion of the thoughtless and the dissipated. Yet, in spite of these follies, Burns was never deserted by that deep feeling of honour and independence of spirit which led him always to detest whatever was mean or base; and none could condemn more severely, or feel deeper compunction and repentance for his errors, than he did himself.

It was unfortunate for Burns that he about this time got embroiled with the Excise, who had been informed of some rash expressions, and it is

believed rash actions, of which he was guilty in relation to political matters. The French Revolution was then beginning to break out, and the fascinating glare with which it was at first surrounded, misled, as every one knows, the minds of many men of virtue and understanding, and none more so, perhaps, than such as, like our poet, were embued with the largest portion of philanthropy. The sickening horrors of that sanguinary drama, as it came to unfold itself, of course soon dispelled the illusion; but at the early period we speak of, the Revolution came recommended to the wishes and sympathies of many. The interest of his friends at the head of the Excise saved Burns, but his indiscretions were remembered for a time, and were the cause of much uneasiness to him. He was also in the habit o indulging in jests on his new profession without much circumspection, but these were comparatively harmless. On one occasion, for instance, while glancing at what he considered the discreditable nature of his employ, he said, "I have the same consolation, however, which I once heard a recruting sergeant give to his auditors on one of the streets of Kilmarnock—"Gentlemen," said he, "I can assure you, for your further encouragement, that ours is the most blackguard corps under the crown, consequently honest man has the better chance of promo

But, in point of fact, Burns had too much discrimination and good sense to cherish deeply the absurd notions of equality and other trumpery, follies then prevalent, and he in many passages of his correspondence distinctly avows that his jacobinism, like the jacobitism of the present day, was more a thing of whim and fancy than anything else: It chimed in more with the romance of the poet than the judgment of the man.

The concluding and most mournful part of our sketch must necessarily be brief. After continuing to hold the farm for some time after entering on his new duties, he came to the resolution of abandoning Elliesland, and betaking himself altogether to the revenue. His salary was advanced to £70; and although, as we have seen, his company was a good deal broken in upon, it is well known Burns discharged his duties with faithfulness and accuracy. Towards the close of 1790 he was employed as acting supervisor. During part of that year his youngest child lingered through an illness, of which every week promised to be the last, and when she was in the end cut off, the nerves of the poet, who had unceasingly watched her with the fondest solicitude, were shattered to an unusual degree. A cold which he subsequently caught completed the measure of his ill health, and from this period may be dated the commencement of that gradual

decay which terminated in his death. Of this approaching event he was perfectly sensible, and many of his letters at this time breathe the tenderest strains of resignation and piety. One of these is as follows:—

"Are you deep in the language of consolation? I have exhausted in reflection every topic of comfort. A heart at ease would have been charmed with my sentiments and reasonings; but as to myself, I was like Judas Iscariot preaching the gospel; he might melt and mould the hearts of those around him, but his own kept its native incorrigibility.—Still there are two great pillars that bear us up, amid the wreck of misfortune and misery. The ONE is composed of the different modifications of a certain noble, stubborn something in man, known by the names of courage, fortitude, magnanimity. THE OTHER is made up of those feelings and sentiments, which, however the sceptic may deny, or the enthusiast disfigure them, are yet, I am convinced, original and component parts of the human soul; those senses of the mind, if I may be allowed the expression, which connect us with, and link us to those awful obscure realities—an all powerful and equally beneficent God—and a world to come, beyond death and the grave. The first gives the nerve of combat, while a ray of hope beams on

the field;—the last pours the balm of comfort into the wounds which time can never cure.

"I do not remember, my dear Cunningham, that you and I ever talked on the subject of religion at all. I know some who laugh at it, as the trick of the crafty FEW, to lead the undiscerning MANY; or at most as an uncertain obscurity, which mankind can never know anything of, and with which they are fools if they give themselves much to do. Nor would I quarrel with a man for his irreligion, any more than I would for his want of a musical ear. I would regret that he was shut out from what, to me and to others, were such superlative sources of enjoyment. It is in this point of view, and for this reason, that I will deeply imbue the mind of every child of mine with religion. If my son should happen to be a man of feeling, sentiment, and taste, I shall thus add largely to his enjoyments. Let me flatter myself that this sweet little fellow who is just now running about my desk, will be a man of a melting, ardent, glowing heart: and an imagination, delighted with the painter, and rapt with the poet. Let me figure him, wandering out in a sweet evening, to inhale the balmy gales, and enjoy the growing luxuriance of the spring; himself the while in the blooming youth of life. He looks abroad on all nature, and through nature up to nature's

God. His soul, by swif delighted degrees, is rapt above this sublunary sphere, until he can be silent no longer, and bursts out into the glorious enthusiasm of Thomson,

'These, as the change, Almighty Father, these
Are but the varied God.—The rolling year
Is full of thee;'

and so on, in all the spirit and ardour of that charming hymn.—These are no ideal pleasures; they are real delights; and I ask what of the delights among the sons of men are superior, not to say, equal to them? And they have this precious, vast addition, that conscious virtue stamps them for her own; and lays hold on them to bring herself into the presence of a witnessing, judging, and approving God."

Alluding one day to his expected dissolution, he said, he was well aware that his death would occasion some noise, and that every scrap of his writing would be revived against him to the injury of his future reputation; that letters and verses written with unguarded, and improper freedom, and which he earnestly wished to have buried in oblivion, would be handed about by idle vanity or malevolence, when no dread of his resentment would restrain them, or prevent the censures of shrill-tongued malice, or the insidious sarcasms of envy from pouring forth all their venom to blast his fame.

From a village on the coast, where he had gone for the benefit of sea-bathing, he returned to Dumfries, the place of his residence, on the 18th of July 1796, with his constitution fast wearing out. In the words of an eye-witness, "Dumfries was like a besieged place. It was known he was dying, and the anxiety, not of the rich and the learned only, but of the mechanies and peasants, exceeded all belief. Wherever two or three people stood together, their talk was of Burns, and of him alone. They spoke of his history—of his person—of his works—of his family—of his fame—and of his untimely and approaching fate, with a warmth and an enthusiasm which will ever endear Dumfries to my remembrance."

When approaching his last hour, says one of his biographers, on the authority of the physician who attended him, "a tremour pervaded his frame, his tongue was parched, and his mind sunk into delirium when not roused by conversation. On the second and third day the fever increased, and his strength diminished.' On the fourth day, July 21st 1796, Robert Burns died.

On the 25th, the remains of the poet were removed to the Trades' Hall, where they lay in state till morning, and next day were interred with military honours, attended by a processio of the chief persons in the town and

hood, and many from great distances. The multitude," says an eye-witness who accompanied Burns to the grave, " went step by step with the chief mourners. They might amount to ten or twelve thousand. Not a word was heard, It was an impressive and mournful sight to see men of all ranks, and persuasions, and opinions, mingling as brothers, and stepping side by side down the streets of Dumfries with the remains of him who had sung of their loves and joys, and domestic endearments, with a truth and a tenderness which none perhaps have since equalled.—I found myself at the brink of the poet's grave. The earth was heaped up, the green sod laid over him, and the multitude stood gazing on the grave for some minutes' space, and then melted silently away."

A costly mausoleum has since been erected to the memory of the poet, on the highest point of ground in the church yard, and thither the remains of Burns were solemnly transferred on the 5th June 1815.