

WE have already had occasion to remark that it is not what a man considers his life-work, or even what he thinks the most valuable part of his life-work, that helps to keep his name floating longest on the river of time. Numerous instances will occur of names which have become loved household words, not on account of the work which engrossed most of the faculties of their life-time, but solely on account of some secondary, and what was thought at the time even a trivial piece of bye-work. We are pretty sure that if John Skinner of Linshart ever dreamt of posthumous fame, ever thought of his name being remembered with love and pride by his countrymen, he would have attributed his lasting celebrity to his erudite theological scholarship, to his keen art as a controversialist, or to his labours as the painstaking historian of the Scottish Church. But the truth is these are all of "the things that perish with the using". His controversies are forgotten; his scholarship is now of no account; his "Dissertation on Job's Prophecy", which received the high approbation of the famous Bishop Sherlock, now claims neither approbation, nor courts censure; his *magnum opus*, "The Ecclesiastical History of Scotland", slumbers sweetly on dusty shelves; but the few songs he wrote down carelessly, for the amusement of his family or the gratification of a friend, have given him an honoured niche in a gallery of Scottish poets wider far than that consecrated to the "Bards of Bon-Accord."

The author of "Tullochgorum" first saw the light at Balfour, in the parish of Birse, in October, 1721. His father, who was parochial schoolmaster, removed shortly afterwards to Echt, where he ruled over the parish school for the long period of fifty years with an efficiency and success which is

even yet a tradition in the district. Losing his mother at an early age, the training and education of young Skinner fell entirely into the hands of his father. The many marks of talent he displayed in boyhood were so carefully cultivated that his superior scholarship obtained for him a considerable bursary at Marischal College when only in his thirteenth year. Leaving the University when seventeen years of age, he took to his father's profession, first at Kemnay and soon afterwards as assistant or "insett dominie" at Monymusk. Here we know he was in the practice of writing verses. A "Poem on a visit to Paradise"—not the Adamic locality near the banks of the Euphrates, but a well-known beautiful spot belonging to the Grants of Monymusk, on the banks of the Don—gained for him the friendship of the wife of Sir Archibald Grant, and the privilege of access to the extensive library at Monymusk, which afforded him much help in intellectual improvement. About this time his intercourse with the Episcopalian clergyman at Monymusk induced him to renounce the Presbyterian Establishment in which he was brought up, and to throw in his lot with the Scottish Episcopal Church. Whatever may have been the motives which led to this step, we are sure that worldly advancement had no place in his thoughts; for the Scottish Episcopal Church was in no position, at that time at anyrate, to bribe men into its ministry with the lavish promise of unlimited loaves and fishes. Political chivalry was not the cause of the change, for though the Episcopalian as a body were warm to the Jacobite cause, Skinner was, and remained to the end of his long life, well affected to the Government, and uncribbed by narrowness of creed or exclusiveness of political party. One of his biographers remarks that although the step which he now took may have disappointed his father and others, who naturally looked forward to his becoming an ornament in the Presbyterian Establishment, yet he evinced the depth and sincerity of his convictions by casting in his lot with a small, despised, and persecuted people, and the only sentiment which remained for them to cherish was a fervent wish that he might show himself sincere in his new profession, and do credit to the principles which he had adopted. That he did so his life abundantly testifies.

The "Christmas Ba'ing", the earliest of his poetical productions which have been preserved, dates from this period. It is a graphic description of the periodical game at football, formerly very common throughout Scotland, and still practised in some of the Border towns and in the far North. It was a wild rough-and-tumble play which would have made the modern players, of the Association or Rugby game, look on their contests as rather tame affairs. The rules of the game were simplicity itself, and have been summarised into a single line, which is yet proverbial in Perthshire—"A'thing's fair at the ba' o' Scone". It is modelled on that quaint old poem, "Christ's kirk on the Green"—the scene of which is said to have been the all-night fair formerly held at Kennethmont—a poem which Skinner was so fond of that he had it all by heart before he was twelve years old, and when he was well over in years he thought it worth his pains to turn it into spirited Latin verse. The various episodes and characters in the battle of the "ba'" are sketched as only a master of the expressive Buchan idiom could. Each hero as he makes his momentary appearance leaves his portrait, often in a single line, till in the end

Jock Jalop shouted like a gun,
 As something had him ail'd;
 Fy, sirs, co' he, the ba' spel's won,
 And we the ba' ha'e hail'd.
 Some green'd for hauf an hour's mair fun,
 'Cause fresh and nae sair fail'd;
 Ithers did Sanny gryte thanks cunn,
 And thro' their haffats trail'd
 Their nails that day.

Syne a' consented to be frien's,
 And lap like sucking fillies;
 Some red their hair, some maen'd their banes,
 Some bann'd the bensome billies.
 The pensy blades doss'd down on stanes,
 Whipt out their snishin millies;
 And a' were blyth to tak' their einds,
 And club a pint o' Lillie's
 Best ale that day.

From Monymusk to Scalloway, in Shetland, is a far cry, but here the young poet next turns up as tutor to the son of a Mr.

Sinclair. The death of his patron throws him idle—he must be doing something, so he makes love to Grissel, the eldest daughter of Mr. Hunter, the only Episcopalian minister in the islands, and with the usual imprudence of the poetic clan, having no home, no position, no money, and few friends, he marries the damsel in November, 1741. His pluck evidently recommended itself to his superiors, and he is advised to read up for deacon's orders. For this purpose he goes south by himself, takes lodgings in a single room in Meldrum, where he studies hard, his whole worldly possessions at that time being "a fir-lot of meal and a barrowful of peats which he had wheeled home himself". Having completed his studies for the ministry, he was ordained by Bishop Dunbar at Peterhead, and shortly afterwards he accepted the invitation of the Longside congregation to become their pastor; and, being joined by his wife, settled down in the lowly cottage at Linshart, where, from 1742 till 1806, he lived that beautiful life which, in spite of trouble and persecution, shed loving light on all he came in contact with, and the aroma of which penetrates even to these hard, matter-of-fact days. The story of his poverty and his sufferings under the cruel persecution which the poor "chapel folk" had to undergo after "the forty-five"—his house plundered—his chapel burnt—his imprisonment in Aberdeen—is well known. Yet the sturdy, eager, earnest, loving soul of the man rose buoyantly, and he was in time enabled to worship God in the form so dear to him, and to look on those who had caused so much suffering with an almost angelic charity.

Somewhere about the year 1758 he began to feel that his small stipend, with all possible economy, was inadequate to the growing needs of the small responsibilities which were increasing round his fireside. Holding very conservative opinions on the subject of agriculture, he imagined that farming in all its pristine simplicity would just be the thing to add something to his income. To plow, to sow, and to reap were all he would have to do, and that would not interfere with his clerical duties! Accordingly he secured a lease of Mains of Ludquharn, near Longside, belonging to the Earl of Errol, with the result which might have been expected, and which he has so humorously described in his "Letter to a Friend". After

several years' struggle the farm was relinquished, and he once more breathed freely. His hardships are sketched in the above mentioned letter with a humour that goes a long way to take the sting from his misfortunes:—

The half year's stipend makes a pretty show,
 But twenty ways poor fifteen pounds must go:
 Scarce one night does it in my coffers stay,
 Like Jonah's gourd that wither'd in a day;
 First come, first served with me, is still the way;
 Then for my Lord, whatever comes to pass,
 My Lord must even wait till Martinmas:
 Well, Martinmas a few weeks hence comes on,
 As certainly it will: what's to be done?
 Shoemakers, tailors, butchers, to be paid,
 For shoes, and clothes, and meat, must all be had:
 There's servants' fees, and forty things beside:
 How then can fifteen pounds so far divide?

* * * * *

The event, be what it will, prepar'd am I,
 And now resolv'd another course to try:
 Sell corn and cattle off; pay every man;
 Get free of debt and duns as fast's I can;
 Give up the farm with all its wants, and then,
 Why even take me to the book and pen,
 The fittest trade I find, for clergymen.

No one enjoyed the social aspects of life more than Skinner, and no one's company was more enjoyed. He loved his creed and his Church much, but he loved mankind more. Although he belonged to a sect, his soul, perhaps unconsciously, looked forward to a time when true Christianity would so fill the souls of mankind that it would raise the spiritual and moral temperature of the world's atmosphere to a heat that would dissolve to its very elements every sect on the face of the earth. With the parish minister he lived on the best of terms, and, though he could give him a sly dig at times—as for example on one occasion when meeting the minister, who extended a gloved hand with the apology, “Excuse my gloves, Mr. Skinner”, Skinner replied, with a sly twinkle of the eye, “Never mind, never mind, it's maybe the honest leather o' the twa”—yet when life was drawing to a close, on being consulted as to where he would prefer to be buried, his reply was—“Lay me down beside Mr. Brown [the parish

minister], he and I got on very well together during life." Loving his human brethren with such largeness of heart, it may easily be supposed that his home circle was a most happy one. Indeed he was the life and soul in all the amusements of his family ; writing songs for his daughters, who delighted in the old native music of the country side, romping with his boys or puzzling them with poetical riddles, and all the time the happiest of the group himself. Hear how he paints his own portrait :—

How happy a life does the parson possess,
 Who would be no greater, nor fears to be less ;
 Who depends on his book and his gown for support,
 And derives no preferment from conclave or court.

* * * * *

With a neat little cottage and furniture plain,
 And a spare room to welcome a friend now and then,
 With a good humour'd wife in his fortune to share,
 And ease him at all times of family care.

With a few of the Fathers, the oldest and best,
 And some modern Extracts pick'd out from the rest,
 With a Bible in Latin, and Hebrew, and Greek,
 To afford him instruction each day of the week.

* * * * *

With labour below, and with help from above,
 He cares for his flock, and is blest with their love :
 Tho' his living perhaps in the main may be scant,
 He is sure, while they have, that he'll ne'er be in want.

With no worldly projects nor hurries perplex,
 He sits in his closet and studies his text ;
 And while he converses with Moses or Paul,
 He envies not bishop nor dean in his stall.

* * * * *

Thus calmly he steps thro' the valley of life,
 Unencumbered with wealth, and a stranger to strife ;
 On the bustlings around him unmov'd he can look,
 And at home always pleased with his wife and his book.

And when in old age he drops into the grave,
 This humble remembrance he wishes to have—
 " By good men respected, by the evil oft tried,
 Contented he liv'd, and lamented he died !"

The last two lines contain a summary of his character which will be universally endorsed.

With Skinner as the Churchman we have no concern in this place; it is Skinner as the poet and the man that is now remembered, and we must confess that the man stands immeasurably above either the poet or the Churchman. His son speaks of the productions of his fancy as "simple verse", but almost all true poetry demands a fearless simplicity of style. Skinner was not like many of our poeticules, who imagine that by twisting and distorting their sentences out of all shape they are writing like Milton or Browning. But there is more than simplicity about Skinner's poetry. Although his poems were almost all thrown off in the mere impulse of the moment—the suggestion of a friend, at the request of some of his family, or such like occasions—yet there is ample evidence of the "true gift". Immortal "Tullochgorum", which was composed at the request of a Mrs. Montgomery, at Ellon, who was annoyed at a political dispute which arose among a number of "black coats" at her dinner table, is the work of true poetic genius. The lines have a kind of onomatopoetic effect which is almost magical. The very words dance:—

What needs their be sae great a fraise
 Wi' dringing dull Italian lays,
 I wadna gie our ain Strathspeys
 For half a hunder score o' them;
 They're dowf and dowie at the best,
 Dowf and dowie, dowf and dowie,
 Dowf and dowie at the best,
 Wi' a' their variorum;
 They're dowf and dowie at the best,
 Their allegros and a' the rest,
 They canna' please a Scottish taste
 Compar'd wi' Tullochgorum.

The vigorous vowels and gutturals of the above are delightful to a northern ear. Fergusson expresses the same idea, but much more tamely:—

Fiddlers! your pins in temper fix,
 And roset weel your fiddlesticks;
 But vanish vile Italian tricks,
 Frae oot your quorum;
 Nor fortes with pianos mix:
 Gie's Tullochgorum.

For nought can cheer the heart sae weel
 As can a canty Highland reel;
 It even vivifies the heel
 To skip and dance;
 Lifeless is he who canna feel
 Its influence.

Burns always spoke of "Tullochgorum" with the greatest enthusiasm, at one time describing it as "the first of songs", and at another "the best Scotch song ever Scotland saw", while Robert Chambers, with his cooler criticism, claims for it "a national as well as a patriotic character". Perhaps the best song he ever wrote, though it has not attained the celebrity of "Tullochgorum", is the exquisite "Ewie wi' the Crookit Horn". Some critical genius, with the perverted ingenuity of a Shakspearian commentator, started a theory that the "Ewie" was a metaphor for a "whisky still", but there is no doubt that the unfortunate heroine of the song had a much more innocent identity—was, in fact, a *bona-fide* piece of live mutton. It is said to have been suggested by Dr. Beattie, who had been requested by some one to write a pastoral song, but got no farther than the three lines—

The ewie wi' the crookit horn,
 Sic a ewe was never born,
 Hereabout nor far awa',

when the Scotch muse deserted him, and he handed the opening over to Skinner, as "the best qualified person in Scotland", with a request that he would finish it. The result is the masterpiece, some of the stanzas of which are unrivalled:—

Yet last ouk, for a' my keeping,
 (Wha can speak it without greeting?)
 A villain cam when I was sleepin,
 Sta' my ewie, horn and a';
 I sought her sair upo' the morn,
 An' down aneath a buss o' thorn
 I got my ewie's crookit horn,
 But my ewie was awa'.

O! gin I had the loun that did it,
 Sworn I have as well as said it,
 Tho' a' the warld should forbid it,
 I wad gie his neck a thra';

I never met wi' sic a turn,
 As this sin ever I was born,
 My ewie wi' the crookit horn,
 Silly ewie stown awa'.

O! had she died o' crook or cauld,
 As ewies do when they grow auld,
 It wad na been, by mony fauld,
 Sae sair a heart to nane o's a'.
 For a' the claith that we hae worn,
 Frae her and her's sae aften shorn,
 The loss o' her we cou'd hae born,
 Had fair strae-death ta'en her awa'.

The similarity, especially in the last verses, of the "Ewie" and Burns' "Elegy" to poor Mailie, has occasioned the remark that Skinner's song suggested the Elegy. We know of no direct proof of this, unless a complimentary phrase addressed by Burns to Skinner's son be taken as an admission, but it is very probable, considering the high opinion Burns has expressed concerning the song. We must pass over his other songs, "John o' Badenyon", "Tune your Fiddles", "Lizzy Liberty", and "The Old Man's Song", merely remarking that the last is a perfect picture of the Linshart home. It is curious to note that natural scenery finds no place in Skinner's poetry. This does not imply that he had no eye for the beautiful in nature, but may be explained by the fact that his poems were all produced either "by request", or as some pleasing or beautiful picture of humanity attracted his attention. There was nothing in the natural scenery which surrounded him during his long life at Linshart which the most ardent imagination could call poetical. One of his biographers, Mr. Reid, describes the district round Linshart as "perhaps one of the most barren and desolate in Scotland. A plain of almost two miles square was unbroken by either house or tree or stone or shrub; in her gayest moods, it was observed, Nature never wore a pleasing aspect in Long-gate (the appropriate name of one part of the uninhabited waste), nor did the distant prospect compensate for the dreary gloominess of the surrounding landscape." But Skinner carried plenty of sunshine along with him to compensate for the dreariness of his surroundings. It is a beautiful picture his son draws of him surrounded by

his grand-children in their early years, adapting himself to their humble but rising capacities, and making them verses by the hour ; puzzling them with riddles and little arithmetical problems of his own invention. "Although in themselves simple, and easy of solution, yet he had such art in quaintly arranging, and in enigmatically expressing his questions, as conveyed the idea of extreme difficulty ; while at the same time, no sooner did he himself proceed to unravel the seeming mystery, than even the children blushed to find themselves duped and outwitted by means so completely within the reach of their own detection." Among his clerical fellow-workers, among whom in course of time was his son John, he was held in the highest esteem ; but when the desire was expressed that one whom they honoured so highly should become Bishop of the Diocese, he declined, but suggested that the office should be conferred on his son, adding that "if John was elected, he would be bishop all the same". John was elected, and it was through him that Burns and Skinner began to correspond. In the year 1787, Burns, during his northern tour, wrote to his brother Gilbert that "he returned from Inverness through Nairn, Forres, and so on to Aberdeen". Had he known he was passing so close to the domicile of the author of *Tullochgorum*, we have his own words expressing the rapture with which he would have greeted his brother bard. On his arrival at Aberdeen he called on Chalmers, the printer, and there accidentally met Skinner's son, the bishop, whom he describes as "a man whose mild, venerable manner is the most marked of any in so young a man". On learning he had got hold of a son of "*Tullochgorum*", nothing less than "a dram o'er such a meeting" would satisfy Burns ; and surely never did such a trio sit down within the bounds of *Bon-Accord* over a social glass—Chalmers, the printer, Skinner, the prelate, and Burns, the immortal ploughman-poet ! The bishop describes the scene to his father :—"Our time was short ; but we had fifty 'auld sangs' through hand, and spent an hour or so mōst agreeably. 'Did not your father write the "Ewie wi' the crookit horn"?' 'Yes'. 'O, an I had the loun that did it' ! said he, in a rapture of praise ; 'but tell him how I love and esteem and venerate his truly Scottish muse'. . . . He had been at

Gordon Castle, and come by Peterhead. ‘Then’ said I, ‘you were within four Scottish miles of “Tullochgorum’s” dwelling’. Had you seen the look he gave, and how expressive of vexation; had he been your own son, you could not have wished a better proof of affection. ‘Well’, said he at parting, ‘I am happy in having seen you, and thereby conveying my long-harboured sentiments of regard for your worthy sire; assure him of it in the heartiest manner, and that never did a devotee of the Virgin Mary go to Loretto with more fervour than I would have approached his dwelling and worshipped at his shrine’”. This incident was highly gratifying to the venerable poet, and produced the “Familiar Epistle to Robie Burns, the ploughman-poet”, and the resulting correspondence so well-known to readers of Burns.

Any sketch of Skinner as a poet would be incomplete were no reference made to his Latin poems. These compositions, the beauties of which are apparent to a much smaller circle than that which enjoys his Scottish poems, are nevertheless among the most ingenious performances of the kind that ever Scotland produced. His more important pieces in this class are “Ode Horatiana, metro Tullochgormiano”, in which the stately language is made to adapt itself to the Tullochgorum measure in the most wonderful manner; “Homeri Batrachomyomachia Latine reddita”; a Latin version of his favourite “Christ’s Kirk on the Green”; an elegant epitaph, intended for the monument *yet* to be erected to William Meston, &c., &c. David Irving, with a supercilious hypercriticism which he was sometimes guilty of, sneers at Skinner’s Latin poetry, but perhaps the opinions of the erudite Lord Woodhouselee and Dr. Wordsworth, Bishop of St. Andrews, may be worth as much as that of the learned librarian. Lord Woodhouselee, in a letter communicated to Skinner a few months before his death, speaks of the translation of “Christ’s Kirk” as “one which he had long admired and valued”, and adds, “You are among the very few Scotsmen now existing who possess that elegant talent (the Latin muse), and employ it, as is fit, only as a relaxation from more serious and important occupations”. Bishop Wordsworth, referring to the translation of Homer’s *Batrachomyomachia*, says—“It deserves to be classed amongst

the most elegant specimens of that kind of composition which have appeared in Scotland since the days of Buchanan and Andrew Melville”.

Old age as it crept on Skinner brought him nothing but happiness and content, until about the end of the year 1799, when he lost his life-long companion, who had shared all his joys and sorrows from the day when, with the audacity of youthful trusting hearts, they had pledged their troth under the bleak skies of *Ultima Thule*. She had had the proud satisfaction of seeing within the humble walls of the Longside Chapel her honoured husband assisted in the service by his son, a bishop, and his grandson, the future Dean of Dunkeld. Proud day for a wife and a mother! The following verses were written by him about two years after his bereavement:—

Lodged in a canty cell of nine feet square,
Bare bread and sowans and milk my daily fare;
Shoes for my feet, soft clothing for my back—
If warm, no matter whether blue or black;
In such a sober, low, contented state,
What comfort now need I from rich or great?

Now in my eightieth year, my thread near spun,
My race through poverty and labour run,
Wishing to be by all my flock beloved,
And for long service by my Judge approved;
Death at my door, and heaven in my eye,
From rich or great what comfort now need I?

Let but our sacred edifice go on
With cheerfulness until the work be done;
Let but my flock be faithfully supplied,
My friends all with their lot well satisfied;
Then, oh, with joy and comfort from on high,
Let me in Christian quiet calmly die,
And lay my ashes in my Grizel's grave,
'Tis all I wish upon the earth to have!

The time was now come when he was to leave the poor cottage at Linshart which he had ennobled by his presence. He at last accepted the pressing invitation of his son to spend his last days with him in Aberdeen, where every attention could be shown to his weakness and his wants. He left the scene of his sixty-five years' labours on the 4th June, 1807, and twelve days

later he fell asleep in the arms of his son, gratified in almost his last wish of once more seeing his children's grand-children, and peace upon Israel. And we look across the silent years at that life of sweetness, courage, and moral purity, in which peace on earth, goodwill to man recurs again and again like a dominant chord, and thank God for a humanity capable of producing a John Skinner.