

Among the contributors to Shirrefs's *Caledonian Magazine*, we have mentioned WILLIAM BEATTIE, who afterwards published his effusions as "Fruits of Time Parings: being a small collection of original poems, Scotch and English; composed to fill up a few of the author's blank hours, and respectfully offered to the public. By William Beattie, flaxdresser. Aberdeen: W. Rettie, 9 Longacre, 1801". His principal poems, "The Yule Feast", "The Winter's Night", and "The Ale-Wife Coaxing her Customers", have often been reprinted, some of them alone, and some of them with other Scotch poems: notably by Imlah and Keith, Longacre, 1813; T. Anderson, Portsoy, 1852; and James Mackay, Schoolhill, 1874. Many inquiries, especially within the last thirty years, have been made anent the author of these remarkable poems, but with small success. A grand-uncle of the present writer, who wrought for some years alongside Beattie as a heckler at the Gallowgate-head factory, about the beginning of this century (1801-5), said that he was then a man of about forty years of age; lived in one of the old wooden houses in the Gallowgate, opposite the Vennel, was one of those jolly blades who, believing that "a big-bellied bottle's a cure for all care", was a leading spirit among "the club of good fellows" whose headquarters was a celebrated tap-room in Luxemburg's Close. He is said at one time to have got a legacy of £100, but was not long ere he went through it. Our informant used to tell about his passing a company of wives standing round a well in the Gallowgate, when one of them remarked, "That's the man that drank the hunner pound". Beattie turned round with a laugh, saying, "Ay, wifie, an' nae slocken'd yet"! He died sometime about 1815. This is the sum and substance of all that is known of the life and habits of this obscure genius. A peculiar interest is associated with his poems from the fact that, in 1832, most of them were reproduced in a more or less mutilated form in a volume of "Poems by Alexander Beattie, A.M., of the Royal Academy, Tain". This worthy, whom we already noted as having pilfered Douglas' "Rural Love", and under the title of "Rural Felicity" inserted it in the above volume, was born near Inverurie about 1780, and educated at Marischal College, where he graduated in 1797; was teacher in an adventure school at Fortrose in 1809, and English master in

Tain Academy from 1812 till shortly before his death at Aberdeen, in 1840. It has been generally assumed that the heckler and schoolmaster were relatives—some plausible reasons for supposing them to have been cousins have been given—while, as a matter of fact, we know that Alexander Beattie had an elder brother who came into possession of his father's small property near Inverurie, but who died soon after. Very probably this was the heckler, and accounts for the so-called legacy which failed to "slocken" him.

At all events, William Beattie approached Shirrefs in July, 1789, when he sent, accompanied by a rhymed epistle, his poem "On Mortality", which he describes as his first production,—

. . . just as it fell from the Quarry,  
Without the polish of a Dictionary,  
Or yet the aid of Classic education,  
And only wrote in hours of relaxation.

Two songs, "The Royal Highland Laddie" and "The Answer to Johnie's Grey Breeks", followed in succeeding numbers, and in December, his well-known poem of "The Winter's Night", prefaced by the following epistle to the editor:—

Sir, please to scance my 'Winter-night',  
And tell me gin ye think it right;  
Bat troth I fear ye'll need day light  
Ere ye attempt it;  
Bat gin ye like it upon sight,  
Ye're free to print it.

My dorty Muse is e'en right noyt  
At me, an' says I'm daft or goyt;  
Sud ye pretend to be a Poet  
Wha has nae grammar?  
She says; but she's but young an' royt,  
Sae let her clamour.

Fan she begins to cut her capers,  
I'm ha'f resolv'd to burn my papers;  
Bat ere I twist them up for tapers,  
Try ye this sample;  
Ye're mair skill'd in poetic matters  
Nor me, a hantle.

Now, Mr. S——s, fare ye-well,  
Lang mat ye brook baith hae an' heal

I'm very sure nae ither chiel  
 Is mair deservin';  
 Sae wishin' ye a merry Yeel,  
 I rest your servan'.

On comparing the poem, as given in the *Magazine*, with that subsequently published in his works, we find that five verses have been added, one (between stanzas 1 and 2) dropped out, besides a number of minor expressions changed, though not always for the better. The suppressed verse runs:—

While you perhaps, to cure the spleen,  
 Are reading *Shirrefs' Magazine*,  
 Or wise as *Aristotle*,  
 Concertin' plans of air Balloons,  
 Or shootin' Statesmen by platoons,  
 O'er Bacchus' smilin' bottle.

When the publication of Shirrefs's Magazine ceased, we find our author sending such occasional contributions as "Song for the King's Birthday", and verses "To the Ladies of Aberdeen", to Chalmers' *Aberdeen Magazine* in 1790-91. None of these small pieces, however, show signs of the same genius as the hand who wrote "The Winter's Night", "The Yule Feast", and "The Alewife", the three pillars on which his reputation as a poet rests. As pictures of contemporary life, these stand unrivalled among the products of our northern muse. Though much of their merit undoubtedly lies in the happy knack of the expression, yet it is not the mere raciness of the dialogue, nor the sharp, pithy, idiomatic doric in which these pictures are fixed, that give them their main value. Their truthfulness to nature, even to the very warts and pimples so to speak, with no tinge of exaggeration, no striving after effect, are qualities which cannot fail to strike those who know anything of the life they so vividly represent. He found, as everyone with the poetic endowment finds, in the common life of his generation, its routine, habits, and amusements, those elements of permanent human interest which ordinary mortals take to be commonplace, but which, passing through the alembic of his muse, became idealised and brimful of music. What, for instance, could surpass his description of the fussy, chatty, bustling welcome which the goodwife at Daviot gives to her "half-smooored" Yule

visitor—brimming, as its rough, rustic hospitality is, with native  
“hame-o’erness”?

“Come in! come in! my cauldri’f lown,  
I’m glad ye have not miss’d the town;  
For nae an hour syne Lawrie Brown  
Lair’d in the mire;—  
Cross-nook ye, bairns, and let him down  
Afore the fire.

“Troth, Lawrie wou’d ha’e ne’er been seen,  
Had it not been for Sandy Skene,  
Wha had been at Boghead for sheen,  
An’ heard him cry;  
An’ haul’d him out, him leefu’ lane  
As he came by.

“Cast aff yer sheen an’ warm yer feet,  
I’m sure they canna be but weet;  
Hae, set them up on this bit peat,  
Anent the cutchack;  
An’ Tibby, bring him ben some meat,  
Ye senseless smutchack!

“Make haste! an’ gie ‘m a glass o’ gin,  
An’ that will make a’ right within;  
Syne, Tib, I trow ye’ll need to rin  
Forth to the stack  
For peats—the roast will be ahin’;  
An’ haste ye back”.

Or again, where are we to find a more masterly grouping of rustics than is seen round the “blazing ingle” of the Aberdeenshire farmer in the poem “The Winter’s Night”?

The Shankers hamphise the fireside,  
The littleanes play at seek an’ hide  
Ahint the kists an’ tables;  
The Farmer he sits neist the light  
An’ reads a piece of Wallace Wight  
Or maybe Æsop’s Fables.

An’ little Pate sits i’ the nook,  
An’ but the house dare hardly look,  
Bat had, an’ snuff the fir;  
An’ fan the Farmer tines the line,  
He says, ‘I canno’ see a styme!  
Had in the candle, Sir’!

The Goodwife sits an' spins a thread,  
 And now and then, to red her head  
     She tak's a pickle snuff:  
 An' first she counts how mickle tow  
 And syn how mickle carded woo'  
     She'll need for apron stuff.

\* \* \* \* \*

The merry Merchant jokes the Lasses  
 An' gars them trow he kens fat passes  
     Atwish them and their lads;  
 An' reads their fortunes o' the cards  
 Weirds some to Farmers, some to Lairds,  
     To some he weirds cockades;

Bat wi' his cunnin' magic spell  
 He weirds the maiden to himsell;  
     An' gie's her twathree needles,  
 Or buttons for her Sunday's sleeves,  
 Delf set in tin, which she believes  
     Is silver set wi' peebles.

The Merchant kens fat he's about,  
 He has nae will to ly thereout,  
     Or yet to want his supper;  
 He's nae a stranger to his trade,  
 For this he gets the chamber bed,  
     And raff o' brose and butter.

\* \* \* \* \*

The gaudman sits an' toasts his nose,  
 Or awkwardly heel-caps his hose,  
     Or maks yoke-sticks o' rodden;  
 Auld luckydaddy winds at brutches  
 And granny tells them tales o' witches  
     Until the kail be sodden.