

WILLIAM INGRAM.

AMONG the many improvements which the Cumines of Auchry instituted in the parish of Monquhitter, not the least was the establishment of Cuminestown village in 1763. The nucleus then formed soon developed into a small industrial centre, where various handicraftsmen exercised their callings, particularly weavers in linen, cotton, and woollen. Here WILLIAM INGRAM was born in 1765, and though for a time his early years were occupied in doing whatever bits of farm work he was fit for, he ultimately took to the loom, but like most country weavers of that period, frequently turned his hand to agricultural work, as the busy season of the one calling was usually the dull season of the other. Time passed on, and though now involved in the cares of domestic life, with wife and bairns at his side, the fire of an early ambition to raise himself above the lowly position he was born into, had not died out, but was quietly shaping him, as night after night he pored over his books in the quiet corner of his humble home. The mettle that was in this man had, before this, begun to command attention, first from the parish minister, then from the laird; and they, noting the intelligence and decorum which at all times marked his sayings and doings, now resolved to lend a helping hand towards the realisation of his aims. The education which his father's humble circumstances in life had allowed him to get, though little, had been made more, by diligent application in the by-hours of his working life. At length, when verging on his fortieth year, he resolved, with the stock of knowledge now in his possession, and the help of the kind friends he had been able to gather around him, to exchange the shuttle and mattock for the ferule and quill.

In every large country parish, the school was certain to be inconveniently situated for a certain number of families, and gradually, dominies, of a less pretentious order than "the clerk", squatted down on the outlying districts. The convenience of these side schools was at once apparent to the surrounding crofters, who were usually quite ready to grant a house, peats, and other perquisites, as a basis of operation to the adventurous

dominie who might settle amongst them. Though the fees were in general much the same as those charged at the parish school for similar instruction, the total income was nevertheless very small; yet, what with the gratuities of neighbours, and the produce of his own kail-yard, the necessities of life were fairly well provided for if the luxuries were *nil*. To fill such a humble situation as this, as a prior step to further advancement, was suggested to William Ingram by his friend, the Rev. Alexander Johnston, of Monquhitter. This gentleman, who continued throughout his long life to be a sympathetic and kindly friend and adviser of the dominie, had been translated from Gilcomston Chapel of Ease to Monquhitter in 1775, and remained there till his death in 1829. Partly through his influence, aided no doubt by the spreading opinion of Ingram's fitness to be a teacher of youth, the whilom cotton-weaver opened a school at Annochy in 1805, being guaranteed by certain leaseholders, Messrs. Henderson, Wilson, and Findlay, as managers of the school, the munificent salary of £2 10s. per annum. For a long time prior to his settlement here, he was well known to have quietly been courting the muses, but he now began to develop a vein of satire which, though its products never became public, were much enjoyed by his intimate friends, and was to him throughout his career the main safety-valve which kept his temper fairly balanced. If—as in the case of a farmer who took his servant from school and grumbled at having to pay sixpence, the pupil's share in the price of a water-bucket—he returned the money with the pupil, he also duly recorded in his "Metrical Miscellany" his opinion of the greed and stinginess of such a patron of learning. From Annochy he removed to Burnside of Schivas, but it was not till he went to a similar school at Cairnbanno that his reputation as a poet became pretty generally known. Shortly after his settlement there in 1809 his more intimate friends began to press upon him the desirability of having his poems printed; but it was some time before the natural diffidence of the man would allow him to think seriously about such a project. His manuscripts were sent to his friend, Mr. Johnston, who undertook to look over them, with a view to selecting the most suitable pieces, but on condition that

nobody should know that he had any hand in the concern. The parson no doubt suspected, from the snatches of some of the rollicking verses generally attributed to Willie, that his muse was not always so strait-laced as she would need be, for him to have a known hand in ushering her into public notice. He, however, did his work in a frank, friendly way, and having awakened the interest of some gentlemen in Aberdeen towards the contemplated publication, there appeared in the *Aberdeen Journal*, 28th November, 1810, the poem of "The Poor Tutor", with this prefatory note:—"The following beautiful lines have just come into our hands, under circumstances which irresistibly lead us to make them public. They appear in the prospectus as a specimen of a small volume of poems about to be published by William Ingram, schoolmaster, Cairnbanno; they are feelingly and beautifully descriptive of the author's humble lot, and their poetic merit is such as cannot fail to interest every lover of genius in his behalf". This had an excellent effect. It brought him friends from all quarters, and as time went on his list of subscribers swelled till it reached the handsome total of 1152 names. Some friends in London and others in Edinburgh wrought untiringly on his behalf, notably a Mr. Daniel, with whom he exchanged many interesting communications. Writing to that gentleman in 1811, while his volume was still hanging fire, he speaks with great diffidence of himself and his poetry. "At the same time", he says "I am sensible that my friends have conceived too high an opinion of my abilities. On a nearer acquaintance they must feel disappointed. When I observe the word genius so often applied to me, a secret blush crimsons my cheek. Early attached to poetry, I was soon tempted to try my rash and untutored hand at the lyre, but I had not the most distant idea of publishing, nor did I wish the world to know what happened between the muse and me. Till lately my poetical attempts were only known to a few confidential friends, who at last, anxious to introduce me to notice, requested my permission to announce this publication. I have been patronised beyond my most sanguine expectations, yet I am still afraid of the result. My walk in life has been very unpropitious to literary pursuits: yet I have attempted nothing of much consequence in the poetical way, though I have written

a good many little pieces, mostly for my own amusement, or to beguile a heavy hour". Again, writing to the same gentleman and speaking of himself, he says—"Whatever you have conceived the author of 'The Tutor' to be, you will find that he has no claim either to brilliancy of wit or fertility of imagination; but you will find that he is steady in his attachment, that his disposition is of a peaceful kind, and that, although one of the rhyming race, he is not one of the *genus irritabile*". After no small delay his volume appeared in January, 1812—"Poems in the English and Scottish dialects, by William Ingram—Aberdeen: printed for the Author by D. Chalmers & Co." It is dedicated to Mrs. Wilson of Cairnbanno, whose husband was patron of the school, and a kind friend to the schoolmaster. The book commanded considerable attention, and helped to bring him into closer contact with men of literary tastes in Aberdeen and the surrounding district. Ingram's intercourse with Mr. Balfour,* as well as with Bishop Skinner, John Ewen, and others of a literary turn, was of the most pleasant description, all the time that his book was under weigh, and of the many friendships then formed the genial dominie never lost one. It was his misfortune to outlive the most of them—but we must not anticipate.

The little volume of 1812, extending to some 126 pages, is decidedly ahead of any volume of local verse, from the publication of Beattie's "Fruits of Time Parings" to that of Imlay's "May Blossoms"; and although we smile now at the brother

* This was the poet, Alexander Balfour, of Arbroath, who, under the *nom-de-plume* "Palemon", contributed regularly to the Aberdeen Magazines, particularly to the one issued by Burnett & Rettie. The ballads and other pieces he contributed to that miscellany are of high literary merit, and are a standing contrast to the mediocrity of magazine poetry generally. Mr. Balfour was originally a handloom weaver, but in time became a manufacturer of considerable standing in Arbroath, realising a fortune through navy contracts for the supply of sailcloth; but in the commercial panic which set in after the peace of 1815 he, through the fall of others, got so involved that he was completely ruined. He went to Edinburgh where he found employment with Blackwood, the publisher, as a clerk, but shortly afterwards was struck with paralysis, and left a complete physical wreck. His head was clear however, and though unable to move about, he managed by his literary talents to keep the wolf from the door for many years. He was the author of "Campbell, or the Scottish Probationer", "The Farmer's Three Daughters", "The Foundling of Glenthorn", and other novels; while, in poetry, he published "Contemplation and other poems", and "Characters omitted from Crabbe's Parish Register", &c., and died at Lauriston, Edinburgh, on 12th September, 1829.

bard who, in inscribing a sonnet to our author, began with "Spirit of Burns"! we are none the less certain, that much of the quiet thoughtfulness and homely wisdom, which his verses contain, is the outcome of a spirit which, if limited and circumscribed in its sweep, is still the spirit which animates all genuine poetry. His "Ode to Cheerfulness", probably his highest achievement, will stand alongside the best items of most minor poets; indeed it struck one of his friends, who perused some of his earlier manuscripts, as so much superior to any other in the collection, that he was surprised how Mr. Ingram, if he wrote the ode, should in general write so very far below its standard, both in thought and expression. The ode, however, underwent considerable alteration between that time and its ultimate publication. Many verses were omitted, while others were pruned down to the standard of respectability which seems to have been so much desired by his friends. Here it is, as published, with a slight return here and there to the author's manuscript spelling:—

How thick the shades of ev'ning close,
 How dim the sky wi' weight of snaws,
 How keen the biting north wind blows
 Along the plains;
 The cowrin' birdies breathe their woes
 In mournfu' strains!

Thick blaws the drift, the hailstanes rattle,
 The herds pen in the owrie cattle;
 Aroun' the fire we're blythe to saddle,
 An' tell our tale,
 Aft pitying those wha bide the brattle
 O' wind an' hail.

When surly Winter, fell an' doure,
 Cleathes wi' his snaws the leafless bow'r,
 Maun I sit lanely an' demure
 Within my room?
 Has nature; then, nae kindly power
 To chase the gloom,

To gi'e the sinking heart a heeze;
 To blunt the pangs o' fell disease;
 To teach the wint'ry shades to please
 And never cloy;
 Yes, Cheerfulness my heart can ease,
 And crown with joy.

Thou mak'st the countenance to shine ;
 Each pleasing, lovely thought is thine ;
 Companion of the tuneful nine,
 Do thou inspire
 My feeble powers, then thoughts divine
 My fancy fire.

When the dull shades of night prevail,
 Enliven thou the social tale ;
 Preside o'er ev'ry temp'rate meal,
 Wi' modest grace ;
 To pay my thanks I sanna fail,
 Wi' smiling face.

By thee, the bards of deathless name
 Are crowned with poetic fame :
 Look on poor Willie ; grant his claim,
 As yet unkent ;
 His dwelling visit, lovely dame,
 And shed content.

On friendship's consecrated hour
 Thy soul-reviving spirit pour ;
 Let melancholy sad and sour
 Nae mair annoy,
 Avaunt, thou cynic, fell, demure,
 Nor blast my joy.

Beloved fair! accept my sang ;
 Attend my steps where'er I gang.
 Though distant frae the sportive thrang,
 An' poor my lot,
 Blest wi' thy love I'll no think lang,
 In my thatch't cot.

When gentle Flora decks the ground,
 When Summer sends her smiles around,
 When yellow Autumn's fruits abound,
 To crown the year,
 When surly Winter's tempests sound ;
 My bosom cheer.

Of the general contents of the volume it may be said that almost all the pieces selected for publication are of a quiet, meditative, moralising order, "The One Thing Needful", "The Poor Tutor", "The Evening Lay", and all the more prominent of his productions, being simply variations of the same mental

mood, and exhibit the author in a very inadequate light to those who desire to know what manner of man he was. For Willie was intensely human, with a strong vein of humour in him, a keen eye for character, a hearty appreciation of sociability, and could rhyme a rollicking story, or depict phases of domestic life, with a relish and a tang which, fortunately or unfortunately, do not belong to the present generation of rhymsters. Hardly a trace of these characteristics are to be found in his published volumes. Through the kindness, however, of his great-grandson, himself a bard of considerable promise, we have the whole of Ingram's manuscripts lying before us, with other matter pertinent thereto. A perusal of these has convinced us that Willie's weakness lay, in a too ready acquiescence in the judgment of those, who, by social position or otherwise, could assume the air of patronage towards him. The selection which his clerical and other admirers made, while it embraced, no doubt, the ablest of his serious productions, was determined too much by the "goody-good" or "eminently respectable" view of things. They seemed to have a horror of "guid braid Scots", and exercised their powers very freely in toning down into a kind of English the more homely expressions of the author, or, if this was not possible, in cutting them out altogether. Any reference to the cheering effects of "a wee drappie o't" seems to have been as rigorously suppressed as if his volume had been issued under the patronage of a Blue Ribbon Army. Nevertheless, Willie knew, as every old Scottish dominie knew, something of its inspiring power, and sang lustily and with much gusto, many countryside stories of the "weels and waes" that spring out of indulgence. His views on religion, too, were somewhat in advance of his time, but they also got squared down to the standard orthodoxy in passing through the critical mill of his advisers. We have no doubt our author learned by a wide experience the truth, stated in his "Epistle to a friend on the Scottish Dialect", that

To suit our fashionable times,
 A bard maun now compose his rhymes
 In what is ca'd a pompous style,
 Or else they're nae thought worth the while.

Wi' foreign phrases now we're loaded,
 The plain braid Scots is maist exploded,
 An' unco little's said or sung
 In honour o' our mither tongue,—

for the margins of his manuscript of "first copies unamended" bear ample proof of the sentimental criticism his homely muse underwent. We will now, however, note a few of the more important Scottish items which, rejected then, we deem worthy of notice now. "The Dream"—a longish poem, in the manner of "The Twa Brigs", in which an "auld man" and "young man" discuss the respective merits of the times they represent—comes first. It contains some good lines, especially those put into the mouth of the "auld man", for Ingram's sympathies lay in the past. After a short prelude, it opens thus:—

When a' was hush'd within the spence,
 An' sleep had seal'd up ev'ry sense,
 Up gat the door fair to the wa',
 An' instantly I thocht I saw
 Twa strangers enter; soon they spak,
 An' pleas'd, I listened to their crack.

The foremost was a primpit spark,
 Wi' ruffles dwablin' at his sark;
 Just in his prime—wow, he was bra',
 But something rakish like, an sma';
 The ither an auld-fashioned man.
 Busk'd on a vera diff'rent plan;
 An' yet his claes became him fine,
 Nae clypit duds like yours an' mine.

The youngster e'ed him wi' disdain
 (For youngsters monie times are vain),
 An' syne wi' a sarcastic smile,
 Says "Honest man! ye've lived a while",

and goes on to say how much polish and refinement are exhibited in the dress, manners, and the whole air of the present compared with past generations.

Old Man.

Refin'd, ay! much refin'd indeed!
 Gin braw claes an' a powder'd head
 Be certain signs o' wit an' sense,
 To baith ye hae a just pretence.
 But pardon, sir, this ae remark,
 The tree is nae sae gweed's the bark.

* * * * *

Whare now the modest, simple maid,
 In hamely, decent weeds arrayed ;
 Wi' bashfu' look, reserved and meek.
 An' locks, loose waving on her rosy cheek ?
 A gigglet wi' a lofty crown,
 A silken cloak an' muslin' gown,
 Struts by me now, wi' saucy air—
 Tho' deevilish braw, not half so fair.

* * * * *

How alter'd sin' the days o' yore,
 When Ramsay's pithy muse skanc'd o'er
 The pas'tral life in hamely style,
 Enough to gar the gravest smile.
 Nae Paties now, nae Rogers sweet,
 Nae auld Sir Williams sae discreet,
 Nae Peggys o' sic sterling sense,
 Sic glowin' love without offence.
 Contented wi' their native plains,
 Ambition never fash'd their brains ;
 The loves they felt were strong and pure,
 Nae the wild transports o' an hour :
 The lowan' flame o' lustfu' passion
 'Thae happy days was not in fashion.

* * * * *

See now the farmer's stately ha',
 Where everything is jink and braw,
 Tho' it presents a fair outside,
 What is it but the house o' pride ?

Young Man.

Whyles poverty makes moderation,
 Where it is not the inclination ;
 As when the sporting season's lost,
 Old maids makes chastity their boast.
 A but-an'-ben, nae sair in trim,
 A wee bit window, foul an' dim,
 No decent thing within the biggin'
 The soot draps pinkin frae the riggin' ;
 Just twa-three steps frae the door-post,
 An' plump ! your shoe was maistly lost ;
 For there the middin had its station,
 'Twixt door and dirt no separation !
 Lodgings like these no doubt you've seen,
 And deem'd it luxury to be clean !

* * * * *

Merely mentioning in the meantime such tales as "The Oiling

o' the Whistle", illustrative of the "waes o' drink" and bearing a distant resemblance here and there to "Tam o' Shanter"; "The Auld Man and his Budget", a fairy tale touching the obnoxious Malt Tax; "Auld Yule Day", a kind of "Dominie Depos'd", but noted as not fit for print, mainly because it is founded on a circumstance which his neighbours might not like to see published; "The Muse i' the Bible", a theme which he tried his hand at again and again, but in which he never could be said to have been even fairly successful; "The Wakenin' o' the Howdie" (Mrs. Ingram was a midwife); and one or two other highly-flavoured tales, done to the life,—we come to an "Address to the Subscribers". Why this piece was rejected we are at a loss to determine. Some of the above pieces, his critics deemed expedient to pass over because "hell was not delicately enough introduced"! or because they contained "scotticisms used only by the vulgar and not allowable in writing", and such like reasons; but no reason is assigned for withholding the "Address", which is throughout as quaint and pawkie a bit of Scottish verse as might have been written by a Ross of Lochlee. It opens:—

In norlan' climes, whar tempests bla'
 Wi' blatterin' hail and driftit sna,
 An stridlin's ovr the divot riggin'
 O' ilka poor man's auld clay biggin',
 Grim Winter glow'rs—the gruesome carl!
 Wi' frosty breath to chill the warl'.
 Frae 'neath the scug o' Highland braes
 A rustic minstrel seeks to please,
 An' fidgin' fain, amidst his honours,
 Wi' bonnet aff, he thanks his donors:—
 My generous friends, baith gryte an' sma',
 Now i' your lugs a word or twa.

An' first wi' you, nice, spankin' lasses,
 Wha smirle in your keekin'-glasses,
 Wi' dimpled cheeks an' mirky mou',
 That seems to say, "Come, kiss me now"—
 Gude bless you a', my winsome dames,
 Wi' canty joes, an' cozy hames;
 May ne'er the canker'd face o' Care,
 Glow'r ovr your ha's wi' angry stare,
 Nor bluther'd Wae wi' tearfu' een
 Aside your ingle cheeks be seen.

* * * * *

Altho' I write nae amorous strains
 O' happy nymphs an' cruel swains,
 To touch your hearts wi' sorrow keen,
 An' fetch the saut tears to your een,
 Yet ne'er I'd wis a fulsome sang
 Should 'scape my pen to do you wrang.
 Nae doubt, sweet birds! till ye be tauld,
 Ye'll maybe think my heart's but cauld
 To drivel on, an' tak' na care
 To win the favour o' the fair.
 But, gentle dames! my hame-spun lays
 War only meant to court your praise;
 To seek aught mair war toil in vain,
 For I've a cummer o' mine ain,
 An' sax gude healthfu' bairns forbye—
 Gude save them a'! what mair need I?

After making his bow, in the second place, to the young gentlemen, the beaux, or, as he calls them, "the demi-female band"—

Whase grytest wisdom is to know
 The acme o' external show,
 An' count a man a fool or not
 Just by the fashion of his coat—

he turns to the critics:—

For you, ye gleg-e'ed critic race!
 Wi' fouth o' wit, but scant o' grace,
 Wha seenil shaw your weight o' mettle,
 Unless there's mischief i' your ettle;
 Tho' you hae characters to keep
 For taste refin'd an' learnin' deep,
 Let be my buik, seek nobler game,
 An' spare for ance a poet's name.
 Nae eagle pounces on a wren,
 An' sportive roun' the lion's den
 The nibblin' mouse may jump an' splatter,
 He never tents sic triflin' matter.
 What tho' ye gie Divines a whippin'?
 They've consolation in their stipen';
 Or turn your pens on politics;
 To Court intrigues or statemen's tricks?
 What signifies your reprehension?
 The lads can laugh—an' count their pension!
 If, staunch supporters o' the State,
 Ye pelt the Whigs baith ear' an' late;
 They winna mind your straiks a snishen,
 But glory still in opposition.

Had I sic prospects to delight me,
 Your nine-tail'd tawse wud fail to fright me ;
 But, willawins ! I needna tell,
 For ablins you've a guess yoursell—
 A country dominie at best
 Has little fog about his nest.
 The chiel wha kens nae lack o' clink
 Can just sough on, an' seenil think ;
 An' if his soul be sometimes vex'd,
 Or e'en his brains a wee perplex'd
 He sets him down, an' o'er a drappy,
 Forgets his cares, an' soon grows happy.
 But ah ! wi' me when bowls row wrang,
 My only comfort's in a sang ;
 An' tho' I afftimes tine the tune,
 It helps to haud my heart aboon :
 Or ablins now may gain a dinner,
 If ye can spare a scribblin' sinner.

About 1817 Ingram removed from Cairnbanno and opened a school at Woodhead of Fyvie, where the parishioners were so desirous that he should be encouraged to settle, that a subscription was raised among them so that a house might be immediately built for him. This was rendered more easy of attainment, by Mr. Wilson of Fetterletter generously granting a site, along with almost an acre of land, rent free. The liberal hand of this gentleman did not stop there—for in the most handsome manner he gave substantial assistance in the erection of the building, as well as in the trenching of the land, for the dominie's use. In 1818 Willie entered his new abode, and what between his own earnings as schoolmaster, and the ever-extending practice of Mrs. Ingram as a midwife, he for many years, had a share of worldly comfort which compensated considerably for the penury of his former lot. Years, however, were beginning to tell upon him, and an affection of the eyes from time to time threatened to lay him aside from active duty. He still courted the muses, but the buoyancy of spirits, so visible in all his earlier efforts, was sinking fast, and he was getting more and more prosaic, as most of the pieces composed from then till 1829 show. He appears, however, to have from time to time set himself to retouch some of his earlier unpublished Scottish pieces ; but it is quite apparent, from the way that he went about it, and the changes he sought to introduce, that he

seems to have been one of his earliest attempts, when his motto in rhyming the loves, joys, and mishaps of the rural life was

To follow Nature fits the simple bard
Who sings for fun an' looks for nae reward ;

and though crude and imperfect in many respects, it might nevertheless have been made an excellent tale, had he persisted in striking the iron while it was hot. Like many of his other pieces, however, it was left in the unfledged state for a long time, and none of the subsequent retouchings did it any good. It opens thus:—

When days were dreary, short, and cloudy,
When wasting care, an' fruitless study
Had made my spirits douf and muddy,
I took the gate,
Design'd to pree a drap o' toddy
Afor't was late.

What means, said I, this ceaseless toiling ?
My whistle's dry an' needing oiling,
There is nae merriment, nae smiling,
Nae wit within—
For me to drink an orra shilling
Can be nae sin.

So taking the road

When mirk November's cauld win's whistle
An' bla' the beard frae aff the thistle,

he landed at Meggie Annan's ale-house, receives a very hearty welcome from that hostess, and is soon warmly ensconced in the snug ben-end of her biggin', happy with a few kindred spirits o'er his "cappie o' auld man's milk".

Nae thoughts o' hame, ye needna doubt,
Nae care o' what dang on without,
The reaming bicker wheels about
Wi' mirth and glee.
It never cam' in Willie's snout
'Twas time to jee.

John Barleycorn ! great is thy power,
Thou garst a night scud like an hour,
E'n whyles gars parsons grave and sour,
An' unco holy,
The wrang side o' the leaf turn o'er,
An' shaw their folly.

for him under this calamity. When Mr. Wilson's lease of Fetterletter expired, Lord Aberdeen (Byron's "travelled Thane! Athenian Aberdeen", and the future Premier), learning the footing upon which the dominie held his house, kindly continued it to him for life. Mr. Wilson used to tell how one day while out hunting with his lordship they came in sight of Ingram's cottage. "See, your lordship", said he, "yonder's our poet's house". "Indeed", quoth his lordship; "well, I have often heard of the man, I have also seen a few of his pieces, and now that I am so near his abode, I must also see himself. Stay you here till I return". So saying he cleared the fence, and in a moment was at the dominie's door. He returned in a short time highly delighted with his visit. Mr. Wilson afterwards learned that his lordship had given the old man a five-pound note, and if it was the first, it was certainly not the last which he received from the same hand, for many a five-pound note afterwards found its way to him from the same quarter. Another kind benefactor in his declining years was Mrs. Forbes of Schivas, who, through Mr. Frost, shopkeeper to Baillie Brown, of Aberdeen, was frequently enquiring about him, and as frequently sending substantial evidence of her interest in his welfare. On the death of his wife, the duty of looking after the old poet, now completely blind, was faithfully discharged by his youngest daughter; and in comparative ease and comfort he spent the closing years of a long and honourable life. He died at the advanced age of 84, and on the 21st March, 1849, was laid in the churchyard of Fyvie, having outlived all his early and devoted friends. It is curious to note that he, who, out of his first scanty savings, raised a tablet in St. Nicholas Churchyard to the memory of his mother and sister, lies unmarked in the churchyard of the parish which he served so faithfully and long.