

**“OLD JOHN,”
BLAIRGOWRIE.**



JOHN MACLACHLAN

**BELLMAN
AND
TOWN-CRIER.**

III.

“OLD JOHN,”

BLAIRGOWRIE.

His hair just grizzled as in green old age.—DRYDEN.

Every one who has been present at the Blairgowrie Games on the Fair o' Blair Day will recognise an old favourite in the foregoing portrait. John steps into the ring, gives a few warning tinkles from that famous bell of his, then, in a clear sing-song tone of voice, and with a sudden drop at the end as if he had fallen off the rigging of a house, he announces the next “eetem” on the programme. The spectators listen and laugh, and cheer and chaff him; John gives back as good as he gets, and, with his “snooted” cap cocked to a side and a good-natured smile on his face, passes on to repeat his miscellaneous information for the benefit of other sections of the big gathering. John, in fact, is

THE ONE PERMANENT FEATURE—

and long may he remain so—at the games—the pivot on which the whole business of the day turns. The games, however, hold only a very subordinate place in John's career, for they are of comparatively recent origin, whereas our old friend has been clanging that bell about the streets of Blair and Rattray, and proclaiming lost dogs, auction sales, entertainments, and anything else wanted of him for over half a century—probably a record in its way. Blair is his native place, but when he first saw light in it is a doubtful point. His own idea is about

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73 years ago, and in the cottage at the corner of Upper Allan Street and James Street. He was one of a cluster of old Blair worthies who attended the Parish School on the other side of the road—the little whitewashed cottage just below the manse. The teacher at that time was Mr Thomas Soutar, father of Mr W. S. Soutar, for many years Procurator Fiscal, writer, and agent for the Union Bank. Mr Soutar was succeeded by a Mr Leckie, who afterwards became a Free Church minister at Arbroath. John “finished” his education at John Street Parish School, erected in 1840. At the building of it an accident occurred whereby a man lost his life, the last strange words he uttered as he lay with a big stone upon his crushed ribs being, “It’s a guid thing, lads, there’s nane o’ us hurt.” This old building is now used as St Stephen’s Roman Catholic School.

AS A SHOEMAKER.

John served his time as a boot and shoemaker with Mr Robert M’Gregor, whose place of business was where Messrs Scott & Son’s cutting-room and Miss Lauder’s shop are, at the Cross. He afterwards wrought some 3½ years in Dundee, and was for short periods in Perth, Aberdeen, Glasgow, Edinburgh, and again in Perth. It was while in the Fair City that he received a pressing invitation to return to his native place and take up the duties of beadle and town-crier. His grandfather, John, had been first bellman from 1798 till 1819; he was succeeded by his son, Alexander, our friend’s father, who died 32 years afterwards, in 1843; then came Francis Law, his son-in-law, who died within a year. John gave the matter some consideration, and ultimately bowed to destiny, set his face homeward, and took service in the double capacity on the 9th February

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1849, 53 years ago. When he began duties, old Mr Greig, the parish minister, whom John looks back upon as a “grand man,” prophesied of him in this comfortable fashion—

“John,” said he, “I see you are to be a very popular man in Blair; you are to be popular in the church, popular in the churchyard, and popular a’ way. My advice to you, John, is to keep from public-houses, and take care of yourself.”

“I saw he had hit the nail on the head exactly,” remarked John, “and I kept his words in mind.”

This Mr Greig was a very popular man himself, and on Sundays people would come “in droves” from Alyth and Coupar Angus to hear him.

REMINISCENCES.

One of his most intimate companions as a boy and young man was William Laird—afterwards Sir William—who was born at the Mains of Creuchie, near Blairgowrie, in 1830. He received the elements of education at the same school as John, but rather earlier—probably under a Mr Wilkie or Mr Johnstone—and started to learn the legal profession in Soutar or Whitson’s office, which is now in use as a dwelling-house and Mr Kirkwood’s tinsmith’s workshop.

Sir William never quite forgot his early days in Blair, and showed his warm side to it by giving £500 to the Cottage Hospital, and remembering the same institution handsomely in his will—his death taking place last August. Returning to John; both of the young fellows were great draughts players in their time. Many a tussle they had with each other, but both were so equally matched that odds could hardly ever be put on either of them. Laird, however, was a splendid quoit player—“The best I ever

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saw," John asserts; "put the 'kites' down as nice as you liked, and they would not be better placed than he'd play them." He held the quoit championship for Scotland for some years, winning it near Glasgow by 2 points. He was a tall, swank fellow, and nothing set him better than to handle the "kites." John is a dapper little man, and had no chance with him at that game.

JOHN'S BELL.

A good deal of interest attaches to the bell which John uses on his rounds. According to the tradition handed down in his family, it belonged originally to the Roman Catholic Church, which in pre-Reformation times stood near the site of the present Parish Church. According to calculation, the present church (built in 1824), is the second since that period; and according to John, said bell, having been found too heavy for present purposes, was "run down" at Blairgowrie Gas Works in 1835 by Mr Wm. M'Hardy, manager there—a remarkably clever man, adept at almost everything he tried. As architect, he planned the present Gas Works; he did joiner and blacksmith work; erected meal mills, &c. To crown all, he built the present Parish Church, laying every stone of the steeple with his own hands, Mr Leslie, C.E., declaring of the work that he never saw better.

IN THE EARLY PART OF THE LAST CENTURY

there was a plentiful supply of public-houses all over the district, and many rough scenes they witnessed, judging from the stories which float about even yet regarding them. One only, of an amusing character, may be told here. This is of an inn kept by one Geordie Barty, and located about the spot where Mr Grant, chemist, now is, in the High Street. Geordie was a

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brother of the famous snuff-maker who erected a snuff-mill on the Lornty, and afterwards went to Perth, where he amassed a handsome fortune, the Barty Mortification Bursaries now regularly competed for by scholars in the district being some of the good results thereof. In this inn of Geordie Barty's, Mr Thomas Graham of Newton Castle, who was afterwards to be known to the whole world as Sir Thomas Graham, Lord Lynedoch, and the “hero of Barossa,” used to collect his rents. On one occasion he found things rather mixed, and missed the care and attention he had been accustomed to. It was some time before Geordie himself put in an appearance. When he did so he was all apologies and regrets, and whispered to the laird that his “wife was in the strae.”

“Oh, I see,” remarked the laird, smiling; “that accounts for it. Boy or girl, George?”

“Boy, sir.”

“Very well, then, you must let me name him,” which he did, and the child was duly christened Thomas Graham Barty. He became a minister; and Sir Thomas Graham always took an interest in his career, in token of which he got him the living of Bendochy. His son, James, succeeded him as minister of the parish, and became D.D. Doctor Barty was one of the most popular men of Strathmore in his day, and was said to have been in the running for the Principalship of St Andrews, which was given to the Rev. John Tulloch, minister of the neighbouring parish of Kettins, in 1855. An amusing story is told of the latter in connection with this event. The Sunday following his last at Kettins he preached in Rattray in the forenoon and in Blairgowrie in the afternoon; on the latter occasion it is solemnly averred by those present that this absent-minded minister actually gave out the

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same text he had used in Rattray and preached his farewell sermon to his parishioners of the previous Sunday. John recalls the event himself; also other previous instances of this habit—such as standing in rapt meditation long after the bells had ceased ringing, and the congregation were waiting—requiring to have his attention called to these facts before he would awake with a start.

John does not look his age, and bids fair to see many pleasant years yet, which all his friends wish heartily. He boasts he is still able to make as good a pair of boots as ever he did, and certainly the last time we saw him in his snug little workshop he was busy on a pair which went far to prove his words.

Still, John, the time, I fear, must come,
To me, to you, to all,
When heart must stop and tongue be dumb,
And hands all helpless fall;
But keep you "lasting" every day,
And care behind you cast;
To last one's latest's all one may,
Till latest turns to last.