

VIII.

JAMES SANDY, ALYTH,

INVENTIVE GENIUS, MUSICIAN, &c.



A man so various that he seemed to be
Not one, but all mankind's epitome.—DRYDEN.

Of all the notables connected with the Alyth district whose achievements in one sphere or another may be considered worthy of record, there is no one who has such an all-round claim to recognition as this wonderful genius, who for the long space of over 50 years was a confirmed invalid, fast bedridden and decrepit, and who yet managed to turn out a variety of articles which for number, ingenuity, and beauty of workmanship have made his name a synonym for everything clever and marvellous ever since. "Jeemie Sandy" was undoubtedly a genius *sui generis*. He was born in Alyth in 1766, and died there in 1819. Between these dates there is not a single event which to ordinary minds could be considered outstanding; nothing but the monotonous daily iteration of a sick man's bed. But everything is relative after all, and even "Jeemie" had red-letter days all his own, amongst the most painfully memorable of which was doubtless that on which he sustained the accident which was to make him cripple for life. This, it is generally understood, was a fall on the ice, which injured his spine, when he was a mere child, and resulted in his confinement

Blairgowrie and Strathmore Worthies:

TO BED FOR OVER FIFTY YEARS,

never leaving it night or day, except on three occasions—and then carried out by neighbours—when his house was threatened with fire or flood. Being endowed with a preternaturally active and ingenious turn of mind, even as a boy he began to produce a variety of articles in wood and iron, which displayed much originality and invention. He was encouraged in his efforts not only by commendation but something more substantial. As he grew older and it became a clear certainty that he was never to regain the use of his legs he settled down to make the most of the inevitable. He accordingly planned a specially constructed work table of circular form, rising some 18 inches or so above the bed, on which he fixed his turning-lathe, circular saw, table vice, cases for tools, &c., and found accommodation for the planes, drills, and other tools he required for his varied work. The table, revolving on its centre, enabled him to get at anything he wanted simply by a turn of the hand. He had also a small forge in his room, with which he

MANAGED TO WORK

in iron and brass, reaching the fire by means of long tongs. Neighbours were constantly dropping in for a crack—or a dram, for he had always a smuggled “drappie”—and from these he would get an occasional hand at the bellows, or “ca’in” the turning-lathe; but “Jeemie” had everything contrived to enable him to be as independent as possible of any such help. There he sat—in the southmost room of the present Commercial Hotel, with looking-glasses so contrived that he could see round the corners!—day after day, dressed in a loose sort of gown, in which he

James Sandy, Alyth.

is said to have slept as well, turning out with keen, active head and deft fingers the most curious collection of articles ever heard of, and always ready to respond to the multifarious demands made upon him from all quarters. The gentry round about were his best customers, but it was all the same to "Jeemie" whether an auld wife's cruise wanted mending or a set of bagpipes had to be made for the young laird, a neighbour's "spartackles" wanted a glass, or some great astronomer from London wanted a reflecting telescope. He was equal to all demands, and nothing came amiss to his nimble hand. He was a capital worker at the lathe, and among other things constructed numerous spinning wheels, any number of "pirns" and spindles, flutes, chanters, and complete sets of bagpipes. He also made a number of turning-lathes themselves, of special construction; clocks, watches, and musical boxes—the last being remarkable for their sweetness of tone and beauty of workmanship. He even constructed a number of astronomical reflecting telescopes, the specula of which were compared by experts to those of the best London makers. There is a tradition that he made one, at least,

OF EXCEPTIONAL QUALITY

for some observatory in England. He was equally at home among machinery of every description, and contrived a number of improvements on lint-spinning machinery, building the old lint mill (now Illingworth & Co.'s Wool Mill) with his savings, and assisting his brother Gilbert to start in business there. He made fishing rods and reels, looking-glasses, dirks and swords, guns and pistols, rat-traps and birds' cages, pocket-knives, horn spoons, brose caups, beescares,

Blairgowrie and Strathmore Worthies:

candlesticks—and a host of other things, not forgetting his famous snuff-boxes, which afterwards came to be known as “Laurencekirk,” where some one started making them on a large scale. Regarding these, the story goes that some gentlemen in the district sent several of the ingeniously constructed boxes with their concealed hinge to George the Third, snuffing being greatly in vogue at the time. As no one at Court could open them, however, they had to be returned to Alyth. They were forwarded a second time, open—only to be returned once more, as nobody appeared able to shut them! His *chefs d’œuvre*, however, were his

VIOLINS AND VIOLONCELLOS,

specimens of which are to be found in Alyth, Blairgowrie, Dundee, and elsewhere. I know of one Sandy violin and ’cello, at least, in Australia. It is many years since the writer first handled Sandy’s work, and only the other day he had the pleasure of renewing his acquaintance with it. Sandy’s violins are usually Guarnerius in build, of choice wood and neat workmanship, purfled; as to colour, usually dull yellow, and covered with good spirit varnish. Above all, the tone has that satisfying firmness and “grittiness” which is the guarantee of any amount of tone to the expert player, and is “clear as a bell.” A very fine specimen of his work is in the possession of Mrs Pattullo, Commercial Hotel; Mr John Smith (“Auld C.”) has another, and thereon hangs a tale. He was at a roup, when a waste-paper basket full of rubbish was put up. Our esteemed friend could not resist the temptation, and in an instant “bang gaed saxpence,” and the basket was knocked down to him. Imagine his jubilation on discovering a splendid “Sandy” reposing com-

James Sandy, Alyth.

fortably at the bottom of the basket! Mr Smith has also the mould—an “inside” one—on which Sandy fashioned all his violins. Our universal genius was also a good draughtsman and engraver; some fine samples of his designs in stone work are still to be seen in the gardens and elsewhere about Alyth. He was a skilful performer on the violin and bagpipes. To crown everything,

THE IRREPRESSIBLE CURIOSITY

and deeply speculative character of the man led him to pry into the mysteries of life itself, and to anticipate the modern incubator by hatching chickens, canaries, mavises, and other birds by the natural heat of his body! It was no uncommon sight to find him surrounded with a chorus of singing birds, some perched on his head and shoulders, everyone of which owed to him in this way their very existence—some even the very notes which they warbled and which he had taught them! As might be surmised, he was of a social disposition, although his temper was by no means angelic—as some of the boys knew to their cost when they offended him and came within reach of his long arm—and stick. His workshop was the chief rendezvous of the village, and amongst those who met there at one period or another were Stewart Jack (latterly of Meikleour), James Gibb (of Kettins), William Duff (of Clunie), and Willie Cruickshanks (of Coupar Angus)—worthies, too, each of them. Willie was blind, and like most blind people, was in the habit of speaking about “seeing” this, that, and the other thing. On bidding Willie good-bye one day, after a visit, the Alyth wag hoped he would soon be back again to “see” him. Willie “saw” the point and had his revenge immediately by

Blairgowrie and Strathmore Worthies :

replying—"Oh, ay, Jamie, and then we'll hae a fine *walk* thegither!" Burns, while at Forfar on his tour of 1787, is said to have meditated visiting Sandy, but could not find time.

"Jeemie" was so well patronised that he built not only the Lint Mill but Hillhead also—dying, however, before it was finished, on the 3d April 1819, aged 53. About three weeks before his end, this strange mortal married. He was buried in Alyth Kirkyard, and the following is the inscription from his tombstone—copied by Mr John Smith, whose hearty assistance in ferreting out all that could be learned about this wonderful man, as well as otherwise, we gladly acknowledge :—

To the Memory of

JAMES SANDY, Feuar, Alyth,

A self-taught artist of distinguished eminence,

A few of the friends of genius have erected
this monument in testimony of their admiration
of the endowments which he possessed,

Uniting an intimate knowledge of the principles of
natural science with great powers of invention,
and singular skill and elegance
in executing the most ingenious pieces of
mechanism.

He died 3d April 1819, aged 53,

having from an early period of his life been
closely confined to his couch by bodily infirmity.

In the goodness of a wise and compensating
Providence, he triumphed over the disadvantages of
an apparently helpless and calamitous condition,
being blessed with a social and happy temper,
and preserving to the last
the faculties of his intelligent mind active and
unimpaired.

Materiam Superabat Opus.

AR. CRICHTON, Sculptor.

James Sandy, Alyth.

There is a general belief in Alyth district that poor Jeemie's skull was obtained by some covetous phrenologists, and that it is deposited in some museum in Edinburgh; but all our inquiries in this direction have hitherto proved fruitless. The authorities of the Anatomical Museum in connection with the University, and in which the contents of the old Phrenological Museum were deposited sometime about 1888, know nothing about the relic.

JAMES SANDY, THE ALYTH GENIUS.

Come, Alyth muse, fresh lustre shed
Upon your ancient artist's head;
A long lifetime he spent in bed,
 Yet money made;
In arts and science—ilka trade,
 He skill displayed.

Wi' slicht o' hand he used the knife,
Made fiddles, pipes, an' flutes, and fife;
Roon' a' the country-side they're rife
 Still tae this day;
In tone an' tune true tae the life
 He weel could play.

His music-boxes, wheels and keys,
Would play a dozen tunes wi' ease;
Nane o' your German slim whee-gees,
 Wi' whusslin' cranks,
But powerfu' notes the ear tae seize
 An' fire the shanks.

Rods an' reels, an' clocks an' watches,
Shears an' shuttles, spunks an' matches.
Oily crusies, veneerin' patches,
 An' spectacles,
Guns an' pistols, snecks and latches,
 An' retic'les.

Dirks an' sowards, bows an' arrows,
Magic mirrors, wheels for barrows.
Traps an' cages, singin' sparrows,
 Scapes for bees,
Model cairts, an' pleughs, an' harrows
 He made wi' ease.

Blairgowrie and Strathmore Worthies.

Fu' lang he wrocht, an' planned wi' care,
Tae mak' or mould, improve, repair,
An' ilka science received a share
 O' his rare skill;
His snuff-boxes, wi' hinges rare,
 Are in use still.

Phrenologists were tickled sore
As o'er his cranium they'd pore;
And Reekie billies were sent o'er
 Tae beg his skull—
They howked it up an' aff it bore,
 The fowk tae gull.

'Tis there an' labelled tae this day,
Varnished tae keep it frae decay;
The auld kirk-yaird contains his clay—
 Sweet be his rest,
Wi' tablet-stane o' hoary gray
 Aboon his breast.

Alyth.

AULD C.