

**JOHN ROBERTSON,
COUPAR ANGUS.**



**RAILWAY PORTER
AND
ASTRONOMER.**

IX.

JOHN ROBERTSON, COUPAR ANGUS.

A man he seems of cheerful yesterdays
And confident to-morrows.—WORDSWORTH.

There is always something to be learned from the study of such a career as that of our friend John Robertson, and the fact that Dr Smiles' "Selp Help," "Men of Industry and Invention," &c., have still a wide vogue proves the fascination which such biography exerts over the reading public—more particularly the young. The subject of this sketch was born at Corston, Aberlemno, in 1830. His father, who belonged to Struan, was a contractor, and made nearly all the roads in the eastern district, including the turnpikes between Forfar and Kirriemuir and between Brechin and Friockheim, and the third part of the road between Montrose and Forfar. John began the business of life assisting his father in the pavement quarries of Aberlemno, and afterwards in making a portion of what is now the Caledonian Railway at Farnell Station, under Messrs M'Gregor & M'Queen; thence he went to Craigie and wrought under the late Mr Mitchell, of Montrose. It was while here that one of

THE MOST IMPORTANT EVENTS

in John's life took place—namely, the delivery of a series of lectures by Dr Dick, the Broughty

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Ferry astronomer, stirring the imagination of the young man to such an extent that he was bound for ever thereafter in the meshes of the celestial science. He was greatly indebted also to a Mr Cooper, teacher in the evening school which he attended. We next find him at work at Inverurie, on the Great North of Scotland Railway, and there he remained two years. In 1854 the Blairgowrie branch was being formed, and Mr Mitchell, Road Surveyor, Perth, who had the contract, having written John's employer asking him to send a competent and reliable "gaffer" for a squad of his men, our friend was promptly despatched to the spot. That was his first appearance in the Coupar district. His first section of the line was at Draffen, about half-way between Coupar and Blair, and John recalls with what keen interest the late Mr Macpherson of Blairgowrie, through whose estate the line passes, watched all the operations, visiting the work daily and noting every detail. Although disappointed at first at John's youthful appearance, his new employer soon discovered that John had received a superior training in road forming from his father, and but for the untimely death of this gentleman before the Blairgowrie line was finished the course of our friend's life would have been in another channel. After completing the work at the north end John was given the superintendence of the large rock-cutting near Coupar Angus, which he carried through successfully. The line was opened the following year, and John, who meantime had got married, became railway porter at Forfar. His "heart was elsewhere," however, and back

HE CAME TO COUPAR,

which was to become his permanent home, in

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1858—"the year," John notes, as becomes an astronomer, "of Donati's great comet." Meantime he had been plodding away at his favourite study. He admits, however, that the apparition of this comet was the means of deepening his interest in astronomical science, and he tackled everything bearing on the subject he could lay hands upon. Amongst other volumes, he owns indebtedness to Dick's "Solar System" and "Practical Astronomer," Chambers's "Information for the People," Cassell's "Popular Educator," and an interesting series of articles which appeared in "Leisure Hour" by the late Edwin Dunkin, of the Royal Observatory, Greenwich. It was not till 1875, however, that he managed to get a telescope of his own at an outlay of £5. Two years later he obtained his present instrument at a cost of nearly £40. It is a refractor by the celebrated firm of Cooke & Sons, York. The object glass is 3 inches in diameter, with a focal length of 43 inches. When extended, with pancreatic eyepiece attached, the telescope measures about 4 feet. Every spare moment now was devoted to his absorbing hobby. His hours were long—from six till six, with two hours for meals—but early in the morning, late at night, and with snippits off his meal hours, he was busy making observations and drawings of sunspots, variable stars, comets, eclipses, occultations, meteorological phenomena, &c.—checking off the affairs of the universe, in fact, in his humble little cottage and back garden in Causewayend with as much

METHOD AND REGULARITY

as he gave to his ordinary duties. That is one of the advantages, as Wendell Holmes points out, of having the hub of the universe in every village.

Blairgowrie and Strathmore Worthies:

Notes of our friend's work began to appear, over the familiar initials "J. R." in the "Evening Telegraph," the "Scotsman," "Blairgowrie Advertiser," the "Observatory," the "Astronomical Society's Journal," and other periodicals. The late Sheriff Barclay and Professor Grainger Stewart brought him under the notice of Dr Smiles, who visited him in 1883, and wrote a notice of him for his "Men of Industry and Invention," which appeared the following year. More than one astronomer of rank has acknowledged his indebtedness to the intelligent and painstaking labours of their humble fellow-worker, and among his correspondents may be mentioned Professor Herschell, Dr Alexander Brown, of Arbroath; Dr Ralph Copeland, now of Blackford Hill, Edinburgh; Mr W. H. M. Christie, Astronomer-Royal; Sir Robert Ball, the late R. A. Proctor, &c. Against all solicitations to accept a "rise in the world," John's modesty has been proof. He declared to Dr Smiles that he was "very comfortable," and

QUITE CONTENT

to remain a railway porter—a condition of mind, as the Doctor remarked, which was "one of the rarest things on earth." John retired from railway service, however, in 1899, when he was the recipient from his many well-wishers of a beautiful marble clock and a gold watch for himself, and a gold brooch for his esteemed partner in life. Since then he has been simply revelling among the stellar infinities, but is still the same frank, genial, and interesting "John" so long familiar to the travelling public. And of course there is that phase of his activities yet to touch upon. Who that has heard can ever forget that sonorous

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"COUPAR ANGUS—CHANGE HERE FOR BLAIR-GOWRIE!"

which John rang out with such telling effect for 40 long years? If such there be, "Go mark him well," &c. John's style was all his own; he had no competitor in his own day, and left no worthy successor behind him. There was such a satisfying quality about that announcement; there was no getting away from the solid fact that we were at

COUPAR ANGUS.

There was no ignoring that peremptory command to
"CHANGE HERE FOR BLAIRGOWRIE!"

Odzooks! some old wives would be half-way to Blairgowrie before they remembered their destination was Forfar, they were so accustomed to do what they were bidden, and John's orders were so compelling. "Ian Maclarens" declared that Coupar Angus was the best "cried" station in Britain, and the man who could hear John call out "Change here for Blairgowrie!" and not retain it in his memory ought to have no memory, and certainly had no ear. Another cleric asserted that he could not get "Change here for Blairgowrie!" out of his ears for a fortnight after his return home; and there is another story of a passenger who, becoming irritated at the want of distinctness in this respect on the Highland line, stuck his head out of the window at one station, and shouted to the dumfounded porter—"Man, if I only had ye at Coupar Angus I'd sune tell ye whaur we were!" John's call has come to be recognised as

A SORT OF SLOGAN

or rallying-cry for all the people of Strathmore. I have heard it on the streets of London; and

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once, at least, it was heard in Paris. Three gentlemen very well known in the district—Messrs B., G., and D.—were in a Paris restaurant, and Mr B. tendered a half-sovereign, expecting change. The waiter was making off, however, when Mr B. shouted after him in good honest Doric, “Hi, man, whaur are ye gaun wi’ that half-sovereign?” and immediately from a far corner of the room issued the inconsequent but familiar and welcome watchword,

“CHANGE HERE FOR BLAIRGOWRIE!”

The owner of the voice turned out to be a cattle-dealer from the North of Scotland, a total stranger to the others. It is hardly necessary to say that difficulty was got over immediately.

“John” enjoys the esteem and best wishes of the whole district and a much wider area in his retirement. A crack with him, more particularly in the evening, with the sky in favourable condition for a peep through his famous telescope, is always an educative pleasure.