

**IAN MACLAREN,
A STRATHMORE BOY.**



REV. J. WATSON
(IAN MACLAREN)

SCOTTISH IDYLLIST.

XX.

IAN MACLAREN, A STRATHMORE BOY.

It is my joy that Strathmore is in a sense my home. I spent a great deal of my boyhood and youth there, and the accent of Strathmore is dear to my heart.—Dr John Watson.

“A Strathmore boy”—that is all that is claimed in the gifted author of “Beside the Bonnie Brier Bush,” “Days of Auld Langsyne,” “Kate Carnegie,” and the many other grateful products of his pen. It would have been more to our mind, of course, to have been able to call him a native of the district out and out; but, seeing it is well established that he was born elsewhere, that probably would have been rather difficult of proof. There is some consolation for this disappointment in the fact, which we have on his own solemn assurance, that the place of his birth was “a matter on which he had no choice,” and it is reasonable to infer that had it been otherwise he would have chosen Strathmore. It is further consolation to know, much as the old woman during a great storm on board ship who exclaimed, “Thank the Lord, if we go to the bottom, we all go together!” that if Strathmore cannot claim the honour of his birth no other district in Scotland can, for he first saw light in England. The latter fact makes no difference, of course, to the man who is determined upon being a Scot, as Ian Mac-

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laren certainly is, and we have always the proverb of the man born in the stable to strengthen our case. The only question, therefore, is—With what particular locality does he appear to have been most intimately associated? To the folk of Strathmore there is but one answer, and they scout the idea that his

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accounts for everything that Ian Maclaren has done. Why, he was only some two years there altogether, and twenty-five years of age when he went, and if the “child is father of the man” there is a long boyhood to be accounted for before he wandered up Glen Urtach or waited the train at Kildrummie Junction as minister of Drumtochty. Then we have his own statements about Strathmore and its inhabitants, and we know for surety that his mother and some half-dozen uncles, several aunts and cousins, were natives of the district; that it was on his uncles’ farms of the Grange, near Coupar Angus; Gormack, Wester Kinloch, and Easter Caputh—not to mention others near Blairgowrie—that he luxuriated during his schoolboy and student days, taking a lusty interest in the “hairst” work, scampering over the country astride his favourite pony, roaming the Muir of Gormack and the Muir of Cochrage, and otherwise thoroughly enjoying himself. To begin with, Dr Watson was born at Manningtree, Essex, on the 3d November 1850, his father, the late John Watson, being then connected with the Excise, in which service he afterwards rose to a very high position. Shortly after his birth his parents removed to London, then to Perth and Stirling. At Perth he attended the Academy, and at Stirling the

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Grammar School, afterwards proceeding to Edinburgh University, where he finished his curriculum by taking his degree. Next came divinity at the new F.C. College, among the Professors at which was the late Dr Davidson, Professor of Hebrew, and at the start of his career missionary at Craigmill, near Blairgowrie. His course finished here, the young student went to Tübingen, Germany, where he was a pupil of the famous Beck. Returning home, he was licensed by the Free Church of Scotland in 1874, and found his first place as assistant to the Rev. Dr Wilson, Barclay Free Church, Edinburgh. The year following he was ordained minister of Logiealmond Free Church; in 1877 he accepted a call from Free St Matthew's, Glasgow (succeeding Dr Samuel Miller, a relative of the Geekie family, Rosemount, Blairgowrie); and finally, in 1880, became minister of

SEFTON PARK PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, LIVERPOOL.

He held the position of Moderator of the Synod of the Presbyterian Church of England in 1900, and has been honoured with the degree of D.D. from both St Andrews and Yale Universities—the latter as Lyman Beecher Lecturer there in 1896. Sefton Park Church, of which the Doctor was the first minister, and where he has laboured for the past twenty-two years, is a large, handsome building, seated for 1000, the congregation being one of the wealthiest and most influential in Liverpool. He is a great worker; two offshoot churches and a mission are the partial results of his never-ceasing activity. He preached in the "First Free" a number of times while on holiday during the late Dr Baxter's time. But there is a sweet little kirk and manse and a

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QUAINT OLD KIRKYARD

at Kinloch, just two short miles from Blairgowrie, Dunkeldward, which the great city minister knows well—has known ever since, as a boy on a visit to his uncles at Gormack, a mile or so at the back of the hill, he used to sit with them in the pews of Sundays, or galloped down the road to get his pony shod at the smithy close by of week-days. The kirkyard is in his heart of hearts, and round it our own interest circles, for here, within a few feet of each other, rest the mortal remains of his father and mother, his grandfather and grandmother, six uncles, and two aunts. Two monuments tell us something of the departed. This one records that “John Maclaren, farmer, Drumlochy, died on 19th June 1851, aged 84; and Margaret Carmichael, his wife, died on 6th December 1848, aged 69.” These were the parents of Dr Watson’s mother. Then follows:—“And their daughter Isabella, beloved wife of John Watson, died at Stirling, 26th October, 1871, aged 57; also, John Watson, Receiver of General Taxes for Scotland, died at Edinburgh, 1st January 1879.” These were his parents. “Sacred to the memory of Archibald Maclaren, farmer, Grange of Aberbothrie, died 4th November 1865, aged 60; also, Peter Maclaren, died at Grange of Aberbothrie, September 1876; also Jane Maclaren, died at Blairgowrie, 5th March 1884; sacred to the memory of John Maclaren, farmer, Easter Caputh, died 15th July 1870, aged 68; and William Maclaren, died at Gormack, 18th June 1883”—uncles and aunts. On the other stone we find:—“James Maclaren, Wester Kinloch, died 23d May 1876, aged 48; and Margaret Maclaren, his wife, died 14th

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March 1864; and Duncan Maclaren, late of Gormack, died at Blairgowrie 1884"—two other uncles and an aunt. It was at the Grange of Aberbothrie (tenanted at present by Mr James Fleming) that, as already indicated, the Doctor spent many of his holidays, and readers of "Beside the Bonnie Brier Bush" familiar with the district have more than an impression that the dangerous ford on the Tochtly, so dramatically described in the chapter "Crossing the Flood," is indebted much more to the author's recollections of Bardmony Ford on the Isla, which was no distance from his uncle's farm, than to anything on the Almond. It was at Bardmony Ford that he

NEARLY LOST HIS LIFE

on two occasions. "I know that ford well," said he at the opening of the Bardmony Bridge Bazaar on the 14th August 1899, "and I am bound to say that it is one of the wickedest fords that ever was. When I crossed it yesterday it was smooth and quiet, and a boy could drive across it; but when a spate comes down no ford is more dangerous, and twice I nearly lost my life in it. . . . I see myself crossing, the water coming up higher and higher, the conveyance beginning to shake from side to side, and my worthy uncle crying to me to jump to the offside to keep clear of the conveyance in case it went over!" That graphic little picture reads like a transcript of the crossing of the Tochtly by Dr MacLure and the grand London doctor, with Hillocks directing operations on the opposite bank. "Dr Davidson," again is recognised by every one who knew the late Dr Barty, ex-Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland,

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as a very faithful portrait. Dr Watson himself, on the same occasion, referred to Dr Barty in these terms:—"I want to pay a tribute to one who seemed to me to be the very ideal of a country minister—your neighbour, the late respected Dr Barty, of Bendochy. He was the father of the parish. His very appearance carried authority and kindness with it. I see him standing in the pulpit on the Sacrament day, moving about the parish, speaking with the farmers, and wherever he went always a Christian gentleman, bringing to bear the principles of our religion on daily life in a kindly and wise fashion. Long may Scotland have ministers in parishes like Dr Barty!" That was Dr Davidson or Dr Barty, as the reader chooses; it is all the same. Touching Dr Watson's parents, old residents have it that it was while John Watson was acting as supervisor over the distillery at Pitcarmick, Strathardle, that he became acquainted with Elizabeth Maclaren, who kept house for her brother, Peter, at Cochrage, in the vicinity. No wonder therefore that the Doctor, while enjoying

A MUCH-NEEDED HOLIDAY

in 1901 at Kinloch as the guest of the Rev. T. Milne and his esteemed lady, showed particular interest in the little kirkyard and its brief records. James Maclaren, beadle, will always retain pleasant memories of the visit, seeing he was made the recipient on the Doctor's return home of several of his works, inscribed to his "brother clansman, with best wishes from Ian Maclaren." No other character of his is so much beloved, either in Britain or abroad, as Dr MacLure, that heroic old man, who was "an honour to his profession." When the

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“Bonnie Brier Bush” appeared Blairgowrie people recognised at once the late Dr Lunan in all essential particulars of character, habit, speech, devotion, manner—everything, in fact, except mere physical features and apparel. That there might be no doubt about the matter, however, the author was written to by the present writer, and the following is an extract from Dr Watson’s letter:—“With regard to your inquiry, I say without hesitation that among three or four devoted country doctors who, as it were, sat for the portrait of Dr MacLure, Dr Lunan was one. I knew something of his hard and priceless work; something also of the honesty and reality of his character.” “Jamie Soutar,” also, “cynic-in-ordinary to Drumtochty,” had his original in a wag of the same name in Blairgowrie. It is observed, too, that nearly all the place-names are from the district—Pittendreich, Burnhead, Gormack, Hillocks, Milton, Nether-ton, Netheraird, &c. Even “MacLure” seems a corruption of “Meikleour,” and “Drumtochty” has no plausible connection with the place of the same name in Kincardineshire, but suggests rather “Drumlochty,” where the author’s mother was born. An old student of Perth Academy, which the Doctor attended for a time as a boy, declared he could identify almost every one of the “Young Barbarians” as fellow-scholars. But Pittendreich is associated with a memorable event in the Doctor’s career. Just about two miles south from Kinloch is the United Free Church of Lethendy, the senior minister of which (the Rev. A. Gordon) and Dr Watson are old friends. (In passing, the present writer may be pardoned for mentioning that it was through him, from information supplied by Mr Gordon, that the identity

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of Ian Maclaren was first made public.) Well, it was here that on a certain Sunday in 1874 Dr Watson, then a young man of 24,

PREACHED HIS FIRST SERMON.

It is a coincidence that the "Rev. Mr Carmichael," in "His Mother's Sermon," goes through the same experience, is exactly of the same age, and bears the same Christian name! Pittendreich (Mr W. Maclaren) well remembers that red-letter day himself, and how he and his father, the late John Maclaren (a great friend of Dr Watson's grandfather, Drumlochy, another John Maclaren) together with the young preacher, walked over the hill to Pittendreich, about half a mile away, to get dinner; and how, further, said young man seemed in thoughtful mood, and our esteemed friend asked him how he felt now. "I don't know how I am feeling, Mr Maclaren," was his reply, "but I am just considering whether I am to be a successful preacher or not." "No fear of that," replied Pittendreich; "you are a grand scholar, and have had a fine education every way." "That's all very well, Mr Maclaren," said he, "but there's much more than that wanted, and I am making up my mind that if I am not to be an acceptable preacher of the Word I shall give up the ministry yet." The world has not lost its acceptable preacher through any such decision, however, but his gracious message has gone out into all the ends of the earth, bringing comfort and solace to countless human hearts, and deepening the faith of us all in the spiritual brotherhood of the great human race.

Dr Watson opened the new St Andrew's U.F. Church, Blairgowrie, on the 21st June 1902. It was a great day.