

**ISAAC PETERKIN,  
ALYTH.**



*Isaac Peterkin*

**ORATOR,  
SOCIAL REFORMER.**

## XXI.

### ISAAC PETERKIN,

### ALYTH.

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That old man eloquent.—MILTON.

It is just eleven years ago since the Alyth orator passed away from the scene of his long life's activities, but things move quickly nowadays and, so far as his memory is concerned, it might be a generation ago. Old Isaac enjoyed a full measure of honour, appreciation, and prosperity in his own day, and Time is given to compensations: that seems all. He was born in Dundee sometime about 1810, but the exact date is uncertain. His father was a maker of "rin-shune" in the Overgate, and appears to have been what nowadays would be termed an "Agnostic," as well as an extremist in matters political. It is not strange, therefore, that young Isaac joined the great popular movement which resulted in the Reform Bill of 1832 and the "People's Charter" of 1838, which latter comprehended six items—(1) Manhood suffrage; (2) equal electoral districts; (3) vote by ballot; (4) annual Parliaments; (5) abolition of property qualification; and (6) payment of members of Parliament.

#### OUR YOUNG POLITICIAN

soon came to be looked up to as an eloquent leader in the movement; was present at the great

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## Blairgowrie and Strathmore Worthies:

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Chartist meeting in Dundee when Sheriffs L'Amey and Henderson had to read the Riot Act; was amongst those who made a march upon Forfar and got worsted at Powrie Brae; was at the meeting in connection with which Mr George Kinloch, grandfather of the present M.P. for East Perthshire, had to flee the country; and two years before he came to Alyth was Chartist delegate from Arbroath at the Scottish Convention at Glasgow, where he moved the adoption of the "Charter," and that it be sent to the House of Commons. One of his most interesting experiences whilst in Dundee was becoming acquainted with the poet Robert Nicoll, who was a member of the same Debating Society. Nicoll, it may be recalled, had been induced in 1834 to go to Dundee and start a circulating library there, and carried it on for some 16 months before leaving for England. Isaac had cherished recollections of hearing Nicoll recite some of his own productions, more particularly that stirring poem the "Bursting of the Chain." He used to lament quite seriously he had not cultivated the Muses himself under such favourable auspices; but, as an old friend of his remarked, "poetry was foreign to the head and heart of the Alyth orator, and had neither place nor power in his life or in his work." He rarely—hardly ever—quoted from the poets or any other standard writers. Outside politics everything else was to him a "leafless desert of the mind," in which he had no delight. Alyth first saw the perfervid Chartist in 1844, when he came out to manage the newly-started Co-Operative Boot and Shoe Society, known as the "Shoe Sosh" for short. It didn't thrive, and before a year was out the shareholders were glad to hand over the whole concern to the

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## Isaac Peterkin, Alyth.

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man in charge on the basis of 2s 6d per £1—greatly to the profit of that individual. Isaac remained in the same shop—in Commercial Street—till 1848, when he removed to the premises in Market Square, near the site of the bridge of

### EVER BLESSED MEMORY,

and with which his name will always be associated. But that is another story. There he remained till his death, which took place on the 15th April 1891. Dealing with municipal affairs, it may be noted here that he first entered the Police Commission in 1876, was returned again in 1879, was unsuccessful in 1882 and 1883, but got in, for the last time, in 1890, and, by a sort of fortuitous concurrence of events, was appointed Chief Magistrate right off, and held that position till his death. During the long period of over forty years, it may be said, he was the recognised mouthpiece of the community in every forward movement, and with voice and pen wrought manfully for the people's "lasting good;" but it cannot be disputed that his political opinions underwent important changes, cooling down from the red-hot Chartism of his youth, through Radicalism and Liberalism, to a somewhat frigid Liberal Unionism. There were not wanting those who declared that his political development and his business prosperity were coincident with and interdependent upon each other; but, let that be as it may, Liberal Unionist he was at the close, and, for the rest, liked nothing worse than to be reminded that he had been a Chartist at the beginning. For Gladstone he always entertained great admiration, although he broke away from him on the Home Rule question. When the G.O.M. spoke at Coupar Angus on a tour the

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## Blairgowrie and Strathmore Worthies:

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Alyth reformer was there, and gave a sample of his oratory, and it was amusing to observe the interest with which the

### VETERAN STATESMAN FOLLOWED

the little man's harangue. There was considerable resemblance between the two politicians—in stature (Peterkin the smaller of the two, however), voice, and flow of language. It was in connection with this occasion that an old woman in the crowd was asked whether she had heard Gladstone, and replied with great content, “Na, but I saw his chaps gaein’.” In Alyth district, it need hardly be stated, the eloquent little man was in perpetual evidence, and a power to be reckoned with by both parties. To the Tories, more particularly in his earlier days, he was *anathema maranatha*, and all their powers of ridicule were turned upon him, but without effect. He was generally the central figure at Liberal gatherings, and always one of the most interesting—to no one more so, let it be hinted, than to the orator himself, for he dearly loved the sound of his own voice. One of his most memorable appearances was at Dunkeld in 1868, when C. S. Parker opposed Sir William Stirling Maxwell. He was once at a great Tory gathering in the City Hall, Perth, and rose in the body of the hall to speak. Cries of “Platform!” however, soon found him there, and going for the respectabilities about him—including Sir William himself—in most approved skittle-alley fashion. At another meeting of Sir William's, in the Free Church, Alyth, he moved an amendment to the vote of confidence in the old member with

### SUCH MAGNIFICENT EFFECT

that Keir rose up and shook hands with him, ex-

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## Isaac Peterkin, Alyth.

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claiming—"Mr Peterkin, I wish to God I could speak like you!" No two men's styles could have been in greater contrast: Sir William's quiet, deliberate, and scholarly; Peterkin's impassioned, impetuous, and certainly not remarkable for culture or scholarship. The Alyth orator was a self-educated man, but that never could account for the really curious obtuseness he always displayed to his own shortcomings. There is a thoroughly authentic case of his proposing at a social function the health of a certain lady, who was then a grandmother, as one who in her youth had been "the greatest belly (belle) in the place." The inextinguishable laughter which followed would have put any ordinary mortal on his guard; but Isaac was a superior being, and proceeded to air his French again with more painful precision than ever. Another amusing incident in his career, although not arising from the same cause, is connected with the common saying in Alyth "Pay Lily." A certain Lily Jack sued the shoemaker for payment of a sum of money which she alleged was due her, but which he disputed. The case was tried before Bailie Hill, who first heard Lily's story, then Isaac's, the latter exerting all his eloquence and forensic skill to convince the worthy "Bench" of the righteousness of his cause. The Bailie sat beaming through it all, and at the conclusion thus delivered himself—"That's a very good speech of yours, sir, a very able speech indeed, sir; but ye

MAUN JUIST PEY LILY!"

Isaac never married, and his "domestic" arrangements were of the most primitive sort. He accumulated wealth, but lived very meanly, and

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## Blairgowrie and Strathmore Worthies.

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was always "close." In appearance he was under medium height, with a remarkably high forehead and keen, active eyes—bearing a strong likeness to John Morley, in fact. His usual dress included a peaked cap, shooting coat, and brown leather apron. On Sundays he was always seen in the regulation "tile," and black was his only wear. His workshop was generally in "admired disorder," and his dress in keeping with his surroundings, but he never forgot his dignity wherever he was, and would address the small boy who had come for his "grannie's bauchles" in the same high strain as that adopted for an audience of a thousand. There is a good story told of Sir James Ramsay of Bamff and the Marquis of Breadalbane (a Director of the Caledonian Railway Company) calling upon him at his shop in connection with a proposed extension of Alyth Railway Station. He was busy with his paste-horn, and in the course of his harangue gave it such a "skite" with his tattered sleeve as sent it right into the immaculate shirt-front of the Marquis. The extension was granted!

The end of the old reformer was pathetic. He caught cold attending a reunion of Alyth natives in Dundee. For several months thereafter he gradually grew worse, but still held on to business. On the very day of his death he was behind the counter in a "carried" condition, busy with imaginary "pars" and letters which were never written, and every now and then asking whether they had been sent off. He was coaxed to bed, and an hour later "liffe's poor play was o'er."