

NIEL GOW.



**SCOTLAND'S
FAVOURITE FIDDLER.**

XXXI.

NIEL GOW.

A fellow most musical.

—WOLCOT.

Between Burns and Niel Gow, as has been remarked before this, there is a strong affinity. What the one did for Scottish song, the other did for our dance music, and both were supreme in their respective lines. At least they were the day before yesterday, when "The Un-speakable Scot" settled poor Burns' fate—Niel having mercifully escaped somehow. Scotland—and Burns—stand where they did, however, all the same, and Sydney Smith's surgical operation is still as necessary as ever to see the English joke. That Burns and Niel actually met is one of the most interesting facts we have about them. This happened on the 31st August 1787, when the Inver fiddler was in his sixtieth year and the national bard in his twenty-eighth. The latter was on his Highland tour at the time, and has the following note of the event:—

Friday.—Walked with Mrs Stewart and Baird to Birnam top. Fine prospect down Tay—Craigieburns hill—Hermitage on the Braan Water, with a picture of Ossian—breakfast with Dr Stewart. Niel Gow plays—a short, stout-built, honest Highland figure, with his grayish hair shed on his honest, social brow; an interesting face, marking

Blairgowrie and Strathmore Worthies:

strong sense and kind open-heartedness mixed with un-mistrusting simplicity. Visit his cottage—Margaret Gow.

Tradition is still lively about Inver and Dunkeld regarding the remarkable occasion. Burns, it is said, accompanied by his friend William Nicoll—identified with “Willie brewed a peck o’ maut”—put up at Culloden House Inn, and breakfasted with Dr Stewart, a well-known fiddler of the district. During the “crack.” the Doctor happened to quote into immortality four lines from some local rhymster:—

Dunkeld it is a little town
An’ lies intil a howe,
An’ if ye want a fiddler loon,
Speir ye for Niel Gow!

Burns is said to have speired, and Niel duly appeared on the scene. We can easily imagine the honest, social grip and greeting these

TWO CONGENIAL SPIRITS

gave each other on entry. The old fiddler played a selection of his own compositions, Dr Stewart joining in, with one Peter Murray, another native of the district, at the bass. Niel’s “Loch Erroch-side” took the fancy of Burns so much that he asked a copy of it, and afterwards wrote his “Address to the Woodlark” for it. (The tune is best known, however, as that of the “Lass o’ Gowrie.”) At the poet’s request Niel gave his “Lament for Abercairney,” as well as “M’Intosh’s Lament.” The worthy Doctor followed with “We’ll Tak’ the Highway,” said to have been composed expressly for the march of Dunnock Mhor and his men to Bannockburn, where they arrived just in the nick of time to assist in making history. The writer of “Scots Wha Hae” is said to have

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shown strong emotions during the playing of the tune. After "Tullochgorum" and other favourites, the party adjourned to Inver Inn, where tradition has it that Burns wrote some lines, as was his wont, on one of the windows, the glass of which was afterwards broken in trying to get it out, but is believed to be in existence yet. Amongst other Burnsiana is that of the poet's borrowing—ahem!—one of Niel's Sunday "sarks" for a prospective call upon the Duke of Atholl the following day. There is pathos in the thought that although the Inver fiddler came into the world thirty-two years before the poet, he survived him by eleven years. As everyone knows—

Famous Niel,
The man wha played the fiddle weel,

WAS BORN AT INVER,

a pretty little clachan near the mouth of the Braan, about a mile from Dunkeld, on the 22d March 1727. Another home-grown stanza—it will read backwards almost as well as the orthodox way; surely some fiddler wrote it—bears witness that—

Niel Gow was as guid a fiddler
As ever drew a bow,
His dwelling-place was Inver,
And his name was Niel Gow.

His father, as an honest weaver, tried to make one of Niel also, but nothing is heard of his achievements in that line; whereas we learn that before he was 13 he was a fair player, and it was thought worth while to get John Cameron, a fiddler of local repute, to help the persevering self-learner on a stage or two farther. The pupil was so apt, apparently, that in 1745, he

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then being 18 years of age, he carried off first honours at a great fiddling bout with his own teacher and eight other dead-earnest players, including Daniel Dow, as his opponents. Johnnie M'Craw, a blind fiddler, who had been selected as judge for obvious reasons, gave himself away after the award by declaring that he could "tell Niel's bow amang a hunder players!" which shows how early Niel's style had developed, the most telling characteristic of which was his remarkable up-bow. Every one testifies that in later years the dancers seemed to be fairly lifted off their feet by its exhilarating effect; and when, on the change from the strathspey to the reel, he cocked his fiddle in the air, swept the strings with mighty arm, and gave a rousing Highland "Hooch!"—he made the dancers

BOUND FROM THE FLOOR

"like grasshoppers." He was very fond of "chords" and even discords at times; the former for power, the latter for brilliancy. Altogether his playing must have been a remarkable performance—one gentleman could liken it to nothing so much as "an organ at full gallop!" To Burns' notes regarding his appearance may be added that he was nearly six feet in height, "erect, firm, square-built, and lithe and active in his movements"—a perfect specimen of a Highlander. His frank, genial character, quite independent of his musical abilities, would have made him a favourite anywhere; but, with these in addition, he was one of the "primest sort" to be met with in a generation or a century. And the man who could stroll through the streets of Edinburgh in familiar converse with the Duke of Atholl, Lord Melville, and Lord Lynedoch; was a welcome guest in every mansion in Perthshire;

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and had his portrait painted at least four times by Raeburn, was something very different from the fictitious character evolved from the "Farewell to Whisky" myth. Amongst other social qualities, he possessed a great fund of excellent humour. The stories about him are legion, and can only be sampled. One of the best relates to a professional engagement of a week or more at Abercairney, where a brilliant company had assembled. One morning there was a regular downpour of rain, and everybody looked the picture of misery. That did not suit Niel at all, so, seizing the skeleton of an old umbrella—without a shred of cloth on it—which happened to be in the servants' hall, he sallied forth, and, with the bare ribs tilted above his head at the correct angle to meet the pelting rain, he strolled past the windows of the breakfast-room, where the party was gathered. There was

MUCH LAUGHTER

as he appeared, and Abercairney, throwing up the window, shouted to him, "Hillo, Niel, what's wrong?" "Oh, naething wrang at a', Abercairney," was the reply; "but it's an awfu' mornin'. an' I'm sae gled I brocht my umbrella!" From the same genial host Niel borrowed £5 on one occasion, to be repaid when he was "flusher" of cash. Years rolled on and off again without any word of repayment, when one night, just as Niel was about to start playing, Abercairney, wishing to get fun out of him, called out in a loud voice, "Niel, when are you going to pay that £5 you owe me?" "I would be the last man to mention it, sir," was the quick response, and the dance was dashed into instanter. The Duke of Atholl and he had many a bout together of one kind and another. There

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is a good story of his Lordship's taking Niel to see a grand room in Dunkeld House, which had just cost over £100 for varnishing. Niel invited him over to Inver, and he would show him a room in his own humble dwelling which had cost much more. The Duke smiled, but, "unbeguiled, he saw the snare," and duly appeared at Inver, only to be shown

THE OLD FIDDLER'S KITCHEN,

black and glossy with the "smeek" of many hundred loads of peats which the owner calculated came to more than the sum named. These two had a wrestling match one day, when the Duke threw Niel rather heavily, and the Duchess, who was looking on, expressed the hope that he was not much hurt. "Naething to speak o'," replied he; "but it was my ain faut for being sic an eedit as to wrassle wi' sic a big fule!" Said "fule" caught two salmon one day while Niel was by. "What shall I do with these, Niel?" asked he. "Weel, gin I had caught them, I had offered the Duke ane." The Duke laughed, and turning to his keeper, told him to "throw the beggar one of them!" Niel's cottage and his favourite oak near the river, where he liked to sit musing and fiddling in the summer evenings, are still to be seen. His drinking cup, with his initials carved on it, is at Blair Castle; the late Queen had her first sip of "Atholl brose" out of it on the occasion of her visit with Prince Albert in 1842. Like the man of St Martin's, Niel was "sair ta'en oot," and played at gatherings not only all over Perthshire, but in neighbouring counties, in Edinburgh and elsewhere. One morning in Edinburgh, having played at the Caledonian Hunt Ball the previous evening, he strolled into

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a music-seller's place in Princes Street in order to purchase a new bow. The shopkeeper, poor man, mistook the heavy-bonneted, loud-voiced, stalwart Highlander for some simple country bumpkin, and offered him a number of cheap things. These our friend pushed aside contemptuously, and

ASKED FOR SOMETHING BETTER.

The shopkeeper, sniffing at this presumptuous fellow as something come "between the wind and his nobility," handed him one of the dearest bows in the shop, priced at 25s. The ignorant countryman gave a smile of satisfaction, took hold of a fiddle with some rosin on the strings, and, looking about for something to try over espied one of his own tunes—never properly identified—which had just been published, and asked the music-seller to hand it to him. He did so with a smile, remarking that if the fiddler would only play over the piece without halt or mistake he would make him a present of the bow. "Done!" exclaimed Niel, and done it was, in a style that fairly "floored" the rash shopkeeper. "Surely you saw that piece before!" gasped he at last. "To be sure I did," was the reply; "I saw it fifty times when I was makin' it!" Our fiddler had certainly a very "guid conceit" of himself. The late Dr Muir, of St James', Glasgow, used to tell how, when a young man, he was once in Dunkeld Parish Church, and observed an "old Highlander, with broad forehead and thin hair," staring at him harder than "might be thought well-bred." When the minister came out, the old man came to him, and after some blunt but kindly questions, said, "Ye come frae Glesco, dae ye?" "Yes."

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“Then,” answered the interrogator, with a look of importance which no language could describe, “I am

THE FAMOUS NIEL GOW,

weel kent in these pairts!” On another occasion he was having a night’s fiddling at Meikleour with Sampson Duncan, a good player also. Turn about they went at it. Then Niel, appealing to Charlie Thomson (grandfather of Mr Dewar, Cleaves), asked—“Wha’s best, Charlie?” “Deed, ye’re baith guid!” was the cautious reply. “Ay,” said Niel, “weel ye ken that Sampson’s as guid’s me; only, ye see”—and here he drew himself up—“he hasna the fame!” The father of Scottish dance music

WAS MARRIED TWICE,

and had a family of five sons and three daughters. Niel himself composed about ninety tunes; Nathaniel about two hundred; John and William a considerable number, and Niel, the grandson, a few—including that gem, “Cam’ Ye by Athole,” the words being by James Hogg. From Niel’s birth in 1727 till Nathaniel’s death in 1831 a period of over a hundred years was covered by the whole family, all the succeeding members of which worthily upheld the reputation of its founder. In all, over three hundred dance and other tunes are the legacy they left for an everlasting delight to blithe-hearted and light-footed Scots all over the world. The old man passed quietly away on the 1st March 1807, aged 80 years, and now rests in Little Dunkeld Kirkyard, where a stone was erected to his memory by his sons, Nathaniel and John. And it comes about that

Time and Gow are even now;
Gow beat Time and Time beat Gow.