

“ DUNDONACHIE : ”



**DEMOLISHER OF PONTAGES
AND METAPHYSICAL SYSTEMS.**

XXXII.

“DUNDONACHIE.”

He knew what's what, and that's as high
As metaphysic wit can fly;
Whatever sceptic could inquire for,
For every why he had a wherefore.

—HUDIBRAS.

“Dundonachie!” What a host of stirring memories is associated with that name to those who can recall its owner's tall, swank figure as he used to stride through the streets of Perth and Dunkeld in the early sixties! He was in his prime then, and a splendid-looking Highlander; no one ever became the kilt better; the broad-brimmed, well-cocked, well-feathered “Balmoral” better; looked more to the manner born “Chief” of the proud Clan Donnachaidh that he claimed to be. He never failed to attract notice, and when, later on, he became identified with the Dunkeld pontage agitation he was the cynosure of all eyes wherever he went.

POOR DUNDONACHIE!

That is how one feels, remembering the change which less than a decade of years wrought upon his fortunes, and even his appearance—a change which, let his motives have been as mixed as his worst enemies allege they were, was the direct outcome, it can never be forgot, of efforts which resulted in lasting good to the whole community in the form of the Roads

Blairgowrie and Strathmore Worthies:

and Bridges Act of 1878. The present writer's purpose is to give a brief history of this interesting struggle as clearly and as comprehensively as circumstances will allow, together with some account of the literary side of Dundonachie's character, which is not so generally known. Alexander Robertson was born at Dunkeld on the 25th January 1825. His father, Alexander also, and native of the same place, carried on an extensive business as joiner and contractor for over 50 years, doing the joiner work of a large number of gentlemen's houses all over the countryside, dying in 1857 highly esteemed by the whole district. Young Alexander was educated at Dunkeld, and afterwards at Perth Academy; served his time to the banking business in the Dunkeld branch of the Commercial Bank; and in 1845 proceeded as accountant to the Cromarty branch—an illustrious predecessor of his there being none other than Hugh Miller, who had gone to Edinburgh in 1839 to undertake the editorship of the "Witness." It is a coincidence, to say the least, that the young and

AMBITIOUS DUNKELD ACCOUNTANT

suddenly developed a fierce enthusiasm for geology, and was to be seen smashing away at the rocks in the district on every possible occasion. If neither name nor fame resulted therefrom, no harm was done—unless it happened to be a disagreement which is said to have arisen between our friend and the bank agent, and which led to the former tendering his resignation and coming on to Perth, where he started as coal and potato merchant. After six or seven years of this, he removed to Strathord, and finally returned to his native place, where he set up at Birnam as coal, lime, and wood merchant, and gaining the patronage of the Duke

“Dundonachie.”

of Atholl, who was his best customer for several years, established a splendid business for himself—one result of which was the erection of the villa up Strathbraan from which he derived his popular cognomen, and probably another, that he assumed the headship of the Clan Robertson. But “Dundonachie” or the “Chief”—his spirit was one of those which would

Eat into itself for lack
Of somebody to hew or hack!

and, long before the destruction of toll-bars and the abolition of pontages became the absorbing business of his life, it is something of the nature of a surprise to find him preparing to wage “grim-visaged war” in such a totally different sphere of activity as metaphysics—intent, no less, upon a *Novum Organum* of his own which was to

KNOCK THE BOTTOM OUT OF

all the great philosophical systems of the world, and make the solution of the problems of the ages as easy for the man in the street as pressing the button—the “new principles” doing the rest. The first tangible indication of this great design was in the publication, in 1864, of a small volume entitled “The Laws of Thought.” It was well received by the press, and went through several impressions. Encouraged thereby, his next step was to apply for the Chair of Moral Philosophy, which happened to be vacant, in the University of Glasgow; and that the Highland metaphysician did not lack faith in his own abilities is evident from the terms of his application, which ran as follows:—

To the Secretary of the University of Glasgow.

Sir,—I beg to request the favour of your placing my name on the list of applicants for the Chair of Moral Philosophy now vacant.

Blairgowrie and Strathmore Worthies:

I feel justified in taking this step, because—

(1) I am able to show that atheism and scepticism involve contradictions, and may therefore be negated.

(2) That I can produce a mathematical demonstration of the existence of God. (The solution of this problem, *which has hitherto baffled metaphysicians*, will revolutionise philosophy.)

(3) That I can treat philosophy as an exact science. (At present it is taught merely as a rule of thumb, or according to the whim of each Professor.)

Should the Patrons desire evidence in support of these qualifications—*which no other candidate will pretend to*—I shall gladly afford satisfactory proof of their validity.

I am, sir,

Your very obedient servant,

ALEX. ROBERTSON,

Author of the "Laws of Thought."

Well, the Senatus Academicus did not see their way to accept the offer, and Dundonachie was not made Professor of Moral Philosophy, while the spiteful fates went on with the weaving of the Bridge entanglement for their coming victim. Nothing daunted by this rebuff, our metaphysician of revolution struck out again in a second and still more ambitious effort (published in 1866), entitled "The Philosophy of the Unconditioned," in which he expounded at length the "new principles" upon which all sensible metaphysicians would see that they conducted their operations in future if they hoped for any success in business at all. Here we are informed that the proposition "There is a God" "may now form the predicate of any syllogism as scientifically as that the four sides of a square are equal." One wonders how the would-be Professor could have filled up his time with such a short cut to everything he was supposed to teach. His method was simplicity itself. Every one had either to agree to the proposition "There *is* a God," or make the direct

“Dundonachie.”

negative, “There is *not* a God.” The man of “honest doubt” had

NO PLACE IN HIS SYSTEM,

so that if you, most practical of readers, should feel uncertain as to the exact amount in your purse, and can't swear either that it is 2½d or that it is not, but proceed to investigate—you, too, most unfortunate being, are likewise outside the pale of metaphysical salvation according to the Robertsonian gospel. As for the atheist, his plan was amazingly easy. “The truth that there is a God has *never been openly denied*, and until this is done it appears unnecessary to substantiate the position by any demonstration.” He ventured to challenge Gillespie as one who had tried to prove this proposition by a wrong method; but that gentleman fought shy of the proposal. He next invited that warrior of debate, Charles Bradlaugh, to a written discussion, which was promptly agreed to; but how the Dunkeld metaphysician must have rubbed his eyes when the notorious iconoclast started the ball in this brisk manner:—“*I deny the existence of a Great First Cause*”—the very thing which, according to the “new principles,” had never happened since the world began! The controversy was brevity itself. Dundonachie's reply was of such an irrelevant character that Bradlaugh's impatient retort was—“If you mean to discuss the existence of God, do so; if you mean to amuse yourself, I have not the time.” Then came

HIS GREAT ENCOUNTER

with the Rev. James Morison, D.D., founder of the Evangelical Union, and one of the foremost theologians of his day. This gentleman reviewed the “Philosophy of the Unconditioned” in the

Blairgowrie and Strathmore Worthies.

Evangelical Repository, of which he was editor, and had the temerity to question the author's fundamental principle that "no proposition can be doubted," upon which the irate philosopher insinuated that the reviewer was thus nothing short of an infidel! Dr Morison's reply was one of the most scathing bits of literary vivisection ever performed, in the course of which he declared that "when Mr Robertson can think of anything else that can be doubted except a proposition, he will immortalise himself and really become the founder of a new era in philosophy." Dundonachie for once was brought to his knees, and confessed his discomfiture in these words:—"It may be thought by my friends that I have been worsted in this encounter, but if so I am not the first who has been beaten and has lived to fight another day!" and bowed himself off the metaphysical stage. It must be admitted that the philosopher shows great familiarity with ancient and modern writers, possesses an ample vocabulary, in which military figures of speech predominate, and has a faculty of expressing himself in a style the lucidity of which is equalled only by the innocent simplicity of the "system" it elucidates. But,

Books can't always please, however good,

and it is somewhat of a shock to one's sense of the proprieties to know that this "bright particular star" in the philosophical firmament received its final illuminative touches in the back parlour of the Black Bull Inn, Kirkgate, Perth, where the author used to proceed on Fridays from the printing office (Mr Robert Whittet's, Old Ship Close), and assisted by a well-known pressman revise the "proofs" over a mutchkin of usquebaugh!