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ROBERT MACKAY—ROB DONN.

[BY REV. JOHN KENNEDY.]

ROBERT MACKAY, popularly known as Rob Donn, was born in the year 1714 at Alt-na-Caillich in the district called Strathmore in the county of Sutherland. He cannot be said to have inherited his poetic talent; but it may have been developed by his mother, who was remarkable for her knowledge and recital of Ossianic poems and the other ancient minstrelsy of the land.

Rob Donn was a born poet, and might apply to himself Pope's words, that "he lisped in numbers." Several of his infantile stanzas are still preserved, in one of which he reproaches the tailor for having buttoned his short frock behind, and thus prevented him from setting it on. About the age of six or seven years he was taken notice of by Mr. John Mackay of Musal, who brought him into his service and family. Here he remained till the time of his marriage, and had been treated with the greatest kindness and liberality, of which he ever retained the liveliest recollection. His principal avocations were those of grazier and cattle-dealer, and though a humble position needed no mean business talent. Frequent visits to the south of Scotland at market-time enabled the bard to gain knowledge of men and manners.

After his marriage, which proved a happy one, as Janet Mackay appears to have been of a kindred and sympathetic spirit, he first resided at Bad-na-h-achlais. By this time he had

become one of the most expert deer-stalkers in the country; for as yet this pastime might be said to be free to all. As the family of Reay desired to encourage him, they gave him some land on the eastern shore of Erribol, and engaged him to shoot as many deer as the household might require. This was congenial employment and afforded an opportunity to study and appreciate nature similar to that enjoyed by Duncan Ban.

Shortly after, the preservation of deer forests became common in the Highlands; but it was hard for the people to look on this in any other light than that of unwarrantable assumption of power, and hence the proverb—"Is ionraic a' mhèirle na féidh"—"Righteous theft is the (killing of) deer." Rob Donn was of a like opinion, and on several occasions narrowly escaped banishment to the Colonies. One characteristic story is told of him. He was summoned to attend court on a charge of this kind. Accompanied by his wife and a neighbour, he set out and forgot not to shoulder his favourite gun. Soon a herd of deer crossed the pathway, and the opportunity having so suddenly presented itself, he fired and shot two dead. This naturally alarmed his wife beyond measure. His reply was, "Go home and send for them; if I return not you shall have the more need for them"—and then saluting her he added—"Fear not, it shall go hard with me if I am not soon with you again to have my share."

On another occasion when a similar charge was preferred against him, he waited on Mr. Mackay, factor to Lord Reay, who seemed deaf to every promise of good conduct. The bard at last asked, "Will you not accept of your own son Hugh as sufficient security?" The reply being in the negative, Rob Donn, as he took his leave, exclaimed, "Thanks be to Him who refuses not his Son as surety even for the chief of sinners."

Soon after this Lord Reay hired Robert as cattle-keeper on the farm of Baile-na-cille in the parish of Durness, where he remained for the greater part of his after life. Either before or after this he enlisted as a private soldier in the first regiment of Sutherland Highlanders, which was raised in 1759. The bard being so well-known, he was permitted many privileges, and scarcely did any effective duty. In one of his rambles he was met by Major Ross, who abruptly demanded, "To what company

do you belong?" "To every company," was the characteristic reply. He resided a short time at Achmore, near Cape Wrath, and later on the small farm of Mybig. Here his excellent wife died, and a few months afterwards the bard himself on the 5th of August, 1778, in the sixty-fourth year of his age.

He was keenly alive to all that was beautiful and excellent in manners and conduct; and severely animadverted on the opposite defects. His stores of wit and humour are said to have been inexhaustible, and his social qualities were such as to render him a general favourite. His moral and religious character was of a high order, to which testimony is borne by his holding the office of ruling elder in the kirk-session of the parish of Durness.

Like Duncan Ban he was wholly illiterate and derived his inspiration from observation of the great world around him. A born poet, he continued without any extraneous aid to the end.

In another respect he resembled his two great contemporaries—Macdonald and Macintyre—for he was attached to the Stewart cause, even when serving in a Hanoverian Regiment. One explanation of this is that every branch of the Clan Mackay could at that time trace affinity with the Scottish Kings. "The Earl of Lennox, Darnley's father, was great-grandfather to Donald, the first Lord Reay, who was thus second cousin to King James the Sixth."

Unlike the fate of many poets whose last resting place is not even marked by a stone, a fine monumeent with inscriptions in Gaelic, Greek, Latin, and English has been raised by his countrymen to the memory of Robert Mackay, in the burying ground of Durness.

It is somewhat difficult to classify the songs of Rob Donn, as they are found to refer to a great variety of subjects, and cannot conveniently come under a few specified heads. There are few if any poems properly so called. There is no attempt at lengthened or sustained effort. All the efusions seem spontaneous, and the result mainly of the inspiration of the hour. There were few subjects or topics within the sphere of the poet's observation and knowledge, that did not find place in his songs or satires. In regard to the latter he is frequently neither so chaste in thought nor so choice in language as might have been desired.

Without attempting an accurate division, we may take a cursory view of—

- I. The Elegies.
- II. The Love Songs.
- III. The Satirical Pieces.

I. The Elegies—Rob Donn excels in delicate and pathetic touches when dealing with the character of his friends, or of those who by upright and honourable conduct had won his admiration. But this characteristic of his muse is specially emphasised in his Elegies. This is well seen in the "Marbhrann do Mhorair Mac Aoidh," and strikingly so in the last stanzas.

After indicating how Lord Reay followed in the footsteps of Abraham, and drew his inspiration for doing worthy deeds from the example left by worthy men of past generations, he goes on to show that true manhood is the main possession. Lord Reay might easily have accumulated wealth from his estates and by his pension, but instead of doing so he distributed liberally to the poor "on whose open faces he preferred to behold the image of God to seeing the stamp of the king on gold." He excelled all his ancestors in kindness to the needy, and it is far easier to wish than to believe that a better man will succeed him; though the poet would fain hope such should be the case, and his gloomy foreboding remain unrealised.

Songs to the dead are apt to be strained and exaggerated to produce effect, and to that extent are not expressive of the genuine feeling of the heart; but there are noble exceptions in every age and language, *e.g.*, Tennyson's "In Memoriam." There is a deep vein of melancholy prevailing the productions of the Celtic muse, and these elegies illustrate this throughout.

The ode to the memory of Kenneth Sutherland is a good example of intense feeling and keen sense of loss. Not only men and women—all who ever knew this generous man—but the fields mourn for and miss him. Though they have consigned him with sorrow to the Hall of Oblivion, yet, as his body moulders into dust, his many good deeds come into view and abide. Though his kindred are still in his halls, to the poet all is a wilderness, every fellowship is broken in private and public;

and though the dead cannot be touched by praise or blame, it is some alleviation of grief to recall and relate the valour and virtue that were.

Like Macdonald and Macintyre, Mackay was a strong and patriotic, if mistaken, Jacobite, and in his ode to Prince Charlie this feeling finds expression. The Prince is compared to David in the hope that he may accomplish for Highlanders what David achieved for Israel. To him is due the benignity of the weather and the glory of the forest, field, and sea. He has somewhat in common with Abraham, Samson, and Solomon, would that George's crown were on his head, and the Highest reinstate him in his rightful inheritance!

In the ode to the memory of Mrs. Gray occur the words—

Though death descended with a cruel stroke,
Thy worth he only did enhance the more,
A few years of thee brought greater peace
Than any hundred living could restore.

In the elegy on Rev. J. Munro of Eadarachaolais, and Mr. D. Mackay, teacher, many fine passages occur, and the poet's power of versifying—of making sense and sound flow on harmoniously is seen to great advantage. For example take—

“ Glacaidh tu chloinn
A mach o na bhroinn,
Mu's faic iad ach soills' air éigin ;

Glacaidh tu 'n òigh,
Dol an coinnimh an òig,
Mu'm feudar am pòsadh eigheachd.

Ma's beag, no ma's mòr,
Ma's sean, no ma's óg,
Ma's cleachdamh dhuinn còir no eucoir ;

Ma tha sinn 'n ar bèd,
Is anail 'n ar sròn
Cuirear uile sinn fo na feich ud.”

The above is addressed to Death as he snatches away children newly born, maidens on the eve of marriage, old and young, just and unjust—all fall a prey.

The bard pays a touching tribute to the memory of Rev. Murdoch Macdonald, Durness, who seems to have had some appreciation for poetic talent, and to have been capable of

sympathising with this somewhat erratic son of song at a time when the religious and the poetical thought of the time had very little in common. The parson who wrote the words of Tullochgorm felt the divergence keenly. While complimenting the minister on being deeply religious and at the same time appreciative of the "makers of verses," he cuttingly satirises, somewhat in the vein of Burns, "the unco guid," whom he compares to owls and birds that cannot bear the shining of the sun.

We can only refer to one other ode to the dead—that to the old bachelor brothers, who though moneyed, lived miserly and miserably. It illustrates the exception to the well known hospitality of the Highlands, and also throws a side-light on the belief, that when the poor are refused and summarily dismissed, their cry is heard and their curse falls upon the hard-hearted who drive them from their doors. Sir Walter Scott embodies this in the poem on the beggar. To him is attributed the making of the Highlands so popular and so much sought after by pleasure and health-seekers; but the beauty and grandeur of vales and woods, of streams and torrents, of bens and glens were long before observed and immortalised by native poets and not least of all by Rob Donn—and also customs and traditions. In this case a remarkable similarity is noted in the series of events that make up the life of these brothers. They were born the same year, they were comrades from youth, they partook of the same food, they were dressed alike, they dwelt together, they died the same week, they were borne on the same shoulders to burial, and they were laid side by side in one grave.

Similar note has been taken of others—not relatives, who were born the same year, baptised the same year, married the same year, and died the same year.

The poet beautifully points the moral of insisting on the duty and privilege of those who are in want; but fears his appeal may fall on deaf ears, as the beggar's voice fell on the ears of the brothers seven days before they died.

II. The Love Lyrics—And along with these may be put the descriptive pieces, as they are frequently suggested by phase of sentiment—personal or patriotic. When he was threatened with banishment from his beloved country on account of his occasional

visits to the forest in quest of deer, he found consolation in describing the beauty and splendour of hills, heather and woods, in giving very freely his opinion of those who interfered with his liberty, and in predicting a time when oppression and tyranny would cease. The closing verse of the "Song of Donald of the Ears" reminds one of the "Exegi monumentum aere perennius" of Horace; for both poets foresee the permanence of their work—

"Nuair theid an t-oran cluasach so
 A suas air feadh na tìr,
 Bidh e aig na buachaillean
 A' cuairteachadh 'n cuid nì;
 Bidh e 'm beul nam buanaichean,
 A' gearradh suas gach raoin;
 Cha 'n eil guth nach bì fuaimneach dha,
 'S cha chluinn e cluas nach claon."

The "Lover's Song" is full of tender pathos and treats the past as the golden age of love, when women were more constant and not so fastidious. Wealth is more looked after than worth in the age the bard criticises. The oft repeated refrain of disappointed parents is heard—"Better she were laid in the grave than married to such a man." Who then may expect to succeed? Of course the man with broad acres and numerous herds, however inferior he may be in every other respect. And yet after all truth to tell, there are a few fair, constant and modest maidens whom nothing can corrupt.

The "Song to a Sweetheart" opens with a verse which reminds one of Leander crossing the Hellespont to meet his Hero. "I see thee sit on the further shore, pretty maiden, clothed in yellow, and though the stream were in foaming flood, I should soon be by thy side." Then the lover proceeds to prove to his own satisfaction, doubtless, that the company of his loved one can sustain him in being, quite apart from more mundane fare.

The "Cattle-dealer's Song" contains some fine imagery—He addresses his absent love—stating that his thoughts wing northward on the wind; then he recounts and revisits in imagination their various trysting places among the hills, and addresses other young men not to disturb the love of his troth-plighted maiden. A very comic piece is that addressed to a young man who forsook

his love because her parents refused to give, by way of dowry, a certain stirk on which the poor lover fixed his eye. The beauty and worth of the maiden are dwelt upon to show the baseness of the churl that preferred "the dusky stirk."

The Old Maid song is full of humour — She who rejected nine and would not look but at a learned man now moralizes on the utter improbability of getting any. She has lost a third of all her charms, a third of her age is gone, a third part of her beauty has disappeared, and two-thirds if not more of her pride. Let other fair maids beware, for soon they will not be worth a groat.

"The Dream" is a very fine and finished piece of composition. Providence is represented as on a high hill-top receiving complaints from the sons of men—and specially from two hen-pecked husbands. There is a curious and striking similarity between this conception and the graphic picture of discontent with one's lot and position drawn by Addison; and the conclusion or moral is the same. A different arrangement or re-adjustment of conditions would only make matters worse—so that the right frame of mind is to learn in whatsoever state one is, therewith to be content. The sorrows of the unequally yoked husbands are vividly portrayed. Their wives cross their purposes at every point, and compel them to pass truly miserable lives. Providence reasons with the complainers and proves the folly of fretting, when the hardship might be alleviated by adhering more rigidly to duty, the more the crook in the lot afflicts. A wife more learned and lively than the rest replies and endeavours to vindicate the sex and lay blame on the lords of creation. The concluding observation is—"Complaints were numerous, but thankfulness was very rare."

III. The Satirical Pieces. No illustration of Rob Donn's vein as Satirist can easily surpass his satire on the Clergy. They are described as excelling in everything, save the one they are sworn to advance—merchant or mariner, dealer or factor, merry broker, or miserly steward. Though it is not right to follow a bad

II. *ple, yet who would with zest partake of the food the cook descriptive piece. How unlike the Saviour who, to prove sentiment—personified the feet of his servants! They deck them-banishment from his lthers but cleave close to the earth; they can-*

not be compared to a bird or a mouse, but to the hybrid bat. Many-coloured lies are fitly compared with the fleeting aurora borealis race.

The depreciative elegy on Robert Gray, of Rogart, is very felicitous and reminds one very forcibly of Burns' "Death and Dr Hornbrook." Satan is sad, as the dead man was so bad, he knows none fit to occupy his place. In Sutherland and Caithness, the people feel they cannot be too thankful to Death for being the first to outwit a man who had full five hundred times outwitted others. Death has stolen a march on the prince of rogues; and the old judge of evil has selected him because, on account of his long experience in dark and deadly deeds, he had the best right to this bad eminence.

A retort was composed by John, the Clever, at the instigation of the Laird of Creich, and this afforded Rob Donn the desired opportunity for attacking the rival poet with all the violence and virulence of which he was capable. He begins by pouring contempt on his person — nor is the soul within but a fit tenant of such a wretched tabernacle. No one would believe the Laird of Creich but this fawning fool, and none would praise the fool but the laird. All will agree that the fame of the bard will be heightened by the fact that he has been traduced by a man so lost and low as to flatter the Laird of Creich; a man—nay, not worthy the name, but fit to be priest for a man void of faith, to be clerk to a deceiver, to be steward to a merciless family, to be instructor to children that do not exist.

When John, the Clever, was a schoolmaster and a precentor, Rob Donn happened to appear unexpectedly in church one day, and his presence utterly upset the precentor. Then followed a satirical song, in which the poet gives full scope to his pique and animus against John, whose Christianity is said to consist in love of silver and bread, and whose Sabbath-singing was a noise that old and young abhorred.

Rob Donn is particularly happy in his short and extempore effusions. When asked by a gentleman who had the reputation of tyrannising over the poor, to make a stanza to a new dress he had just put on, Rob replied: "It fits thee well behind, and better round the chest; I should like it broad and heavy, if it would

make no loss or harm ; but there is not a button or a hole in it, for which the poor man has not paid."

One of the best known, most popular and keenly satiric essays of Rob, is "Briogais Mhic Ruaridh," composed on the way to a marriage, at which, on second thoughts, it was deemed prudent to have the presence of the bard. The incident that suggested this comic song occurred before Rob Donn arrived :—it was the inadvertent mislaying of the "son of little Rory's breeches,"—a theme that gave scope to the poet's humour. On arrival, and whenever he got seated, he started singing this song, to the great amusement of all the guests.

Perhaps this notice of Rob Donn cannot be better concluded, than by mentioning what he possesses in common with the two poets previously discussed—admirable descriptive power, which appears to best advantage in the poem on "Winter." He touches and adorns mountain, stream, and plain, with their various dwellers, and throws the gleam and glamour of his genius over the most untoward circumstances :—

" Mhios chaiseannch, ghreannach
 Chianail, chainneanach, gheartt',
 'Si gu clachanach, currach,
 Chruaidhteach, sgealpanach, phuinneach,
 Shneachdach, chaochlaideach, shrasach,
 Reotach, rasgach, gu sar ;
 'S e na chaoirmeinean craidhneach
 Fad na h-oidhche air iar.

An t-samhuinn bhagarach fhiadhaich,
 Dhubharach, chlar-dhubh, gun bhilathas.
 Ghuineach, ana-bhliochdach, fhuachdaidh,
 Shruthach, steallanach, fhuaimneach,
 Thuilteach, an-shocrach, uisgeach.
 Gun dad measaich ach cal,
 Bithidh gach deat is gach miseach,
 Glacadh aogais a' bhais."

A LEGEND OF MULL.*

The sun rose fair on distant Mull,
Where ocean heaves its billows high,
And o'er Lochbuy the white sea gull
Winged its way 'tween wave and sky ;
The wild pipes uttered their pibroch shrill
And clansmen came from hut and heather,
With belted kilt and waving feather
To chase the deer on the misty hill.

Maclean was there with his haughty bride
And his only boy in his nurse's arms,
And the chieftain looked with love and pride
On his infant hope and his lady's charms.
" And now," he cried, " thou'lt see what cheer
Maclean's dark hills can yield thee here.
We'll touch not now the timorous hare
That croucheth low in the shady glen,
Nor whistling plover nor bonny moor hen,
But stir the fawn from its dewy lair
And drive in herds the antlered deer."

And straight his clansmen round him were spread,
Or fleet like winds of winter sped
The ground to beat both far and near,
And drive together the startled deer,
Where the chieftain's lady with ease might trace
The gathering herds and head-long chase.

Young Ian, the pride of his native glen,
The love of maids and boast of men,
Was placed alone to guard with care
A pass that op'd a refuge where
The deer might scape the waiting fare.

They came and swept the youth away,
As a tempest scatters the foaming spray ;

* This poem, and the one following, "The Harper o' Mull," with three others, were sent us by Mr J. P. Maclean, Urbana, Champaign County, Illinois, U.S.A., accompanied by the following note :— "I enclose four poems, I find at the end of the Pennycross History (MS.) of the Macleans. I have never seen them in print. "The Harper o' Mull" has poetic merit. No. 4, "A Legend of Mull" seems to be a favourite, theme for poets. Charles Mackay has a poem on same subject, entitled "Maclaine's Child." Thomas Nimmo entitles his, "Wild Revenge." The Marquis of Lorn simply entitles his, "Lochbuie." Of all the four, the one I send you is decidedly the best. The Pennycross MS. was written by Alexander, 3rd Maclean of Pennycross."

["The Harper o' Mull," here mentioned, is by Tannahill, not by Mr Maclean.
—Ed. C. M.]

An angry man Maclean was then
 As he saw the fleet herd pass the glen,
 And the youth came on with head hung low,
 With shame but not with fear I trow.
 "Go, seize the dog," the chieftain said,
 "And tear the plume from his dastard head ;
 Strip his coward shoulders bare,
 Why should the tartan flutter there ?
 Go quickly, bind and scourge the wretch,
 We'll see what blood the rod can fetch ;
 Or whether his mother's milk in part
 Still lingers about his childish heart,"
 No words they spoke, but stifled sighs
 Might tell what dimm'd the clansman's eyes,
 And why a shudder went round and round
 As fell the lash on the deepening wound.

No shriek nor groan nor stifled sigh
 Was heard to come from Ian's breast,
 Nor tear was seen in his fiery eye,
 But pale his cheek with the chill of death.
 His eye balls strained and his lips compressed,
 And his nostrils bled with his labouring breath.
 At length the scourge away is cast,
 The thongs are cut that bound him fast,
 And Ian started bleeding there
 And wildly seized the chieftain's heir,
 And fast away to a cliff he sped,
 That far o'er the boiling billows hung ;
 And he waved the infant high overhead,
 And laughed till the rocks around him rung.

Oh wildly looked the chieftain then
 As shriek and shout filled all the glen ;
 And with clasped hands and bended knee,
 He cried, " Oh save my only child."
 While Ian danced and shrieking wild
 Answered thus with fiendish glee,
 " Come strip thy back and let me see
 The wolfish blood that flows in thee,
 And then thy gory arms may hold
 This infant chief that crows so bold."
 The chieftain stripped and the red drops fell,
 For the clansmen urged the strokes full well ;
 " And now," he cried, " my infant give,
 And thou, I swear in peace shalt live,"
 " Aha," he shrieked, " go get thee now
 And see in every clouded brow,

A blushing friend or a biting foe,
Or follow thy boy to hide thy name,
And wash thy back and brow from shame
In the boiling waves where now we go."

They rushed to the brink of the rocky steep,
But the sea had covered its bosom deep,
And they heard but the sound of the billows sweep
As they seemed to lull their charge asleep.
And the sailors still as they pass the shore
With shuddering look on cliff and sea,
And tell how oft when the wild winds roar,
And their boats on the foaming billows flee,
An infant's wail they seem to hear ;
Or loud and shrill on the startled sea
The clansman's shriek and tiendish glee.

THE HARPER O' MULL.

[The last Harper in West Argyllshire was the Harper of Coll.]

When Rosie was faithfu' how happy was I,
Still gladsome as simmer the time glided by.
I played my harp cheery, while fondly I sang
O' the charms o' my Rosie the winter nichts lang ;
But now I'm as wae fu' as wae fu' can be,
Come simmer, come winter, it's a' ane tae me ;
For the dark gloom o' falsehood sae clouds my sad soul,
That cheerless for aye is the Harper o' Mull.

I wander the glens and the wild woods alone,
In their deepest recesses I make my sad moan :
My harp's mournfu' melody joins in the strain,
While sadly I sing o' the days that are gane.
Tho' Rosie is faithless she's no' the less fair,
And the thocht o' her beauty but feeds my despair.
Wi' painfu' remembrance my bosom is full,
An' weary o' life is the Harper o' Mull.

As slumbering I lay, by the dark mountain-stream,
My lovely young Rosie appeared in my dream ;
I thocht her still kind, and I ne'er was sae blest
As in fancy I clasped the dear nymph to my breast.
Thou fause fleetin' vision, too soon thou wert o'er ;
Thou wak'd'st me tae tortures, unequalled before.
But death's silent slumbers my grief soon shall lull,
An' the green grass wave o'er the Harper o' Mull.