

# **GLEANINGS OF THE GLOAMIN**

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Gleanings of the gloamin by John Ramsay

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**JOHN RAMSAY**

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THE GLOAMIN**



# GLEANINGS OF THE GLOAMIN.

BY

JOHN RAMSAY,

KILMARNOCK, Ayrshire,

AUTHOR OF "WOODNOTES OF A WANDERER."

THIRD THOUSAND.

By Druid's cairn, by martyr's stone,  
By ruin grey, through churchyard lane,  
By river fanned, o'er battle plain,  
The wild, the dread,  
The fair entwined with deathless strain,  
'Twas his to tread.

KILMARNOCK:

M'KIE & DRENNAN, 2 KING STREET.

MDCCLXXVI.

PR  
5205  
R84  
GL  
1876

SKETCH  
OF THE  
LIFE OF THE AUTHOR.

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JOHN RAMSAY, the subject of the following brief life-sketch, first drew the breath of life in "Auld Killie," in the year 1802.

Whether or not the "genius of misfortune" presided, as he himself says it did, at his birth, we do not pretend to say. Surely not. Misfortunes come to us much of our ownmaking, and not from the accident of our birth or anything connected therewith. And though John has passed through not a few misfortunes, probably were cause and effect traced thoroughly, in these the genius referred to, would be found to have had little share in them. His parents were in humble circumstances, yet possessed of those sterling qualities which make the Scotch peasantry take such a high position among the inhabitants of Britain, and those of Ayrshire so high among Scotchmen. His father especially, was a man of superior mental and moral powers, and exercised, by his industry, and sterling integrity, a great influence over John's mind and character. He was one of the shrewdest of business men, had great forethought in all trading matters, and could discern the signs of the times equally with any one. In the early part of his

married life he commenced dairyman, and subsequently went into the ryegrass seed trade, in which he was very successful, and in which he continued till his death, which took place in 1835.

The recollection of both parents, as our Author himself says, is yet as clear, fresh, and potent as when he was a youth. At five years of age he was sent to school, but the teacher was naught, and little progress was made during the two years he was under the care of his first "dominie." He was then removed to another where he remained just long enough to read the Bible and "Barrie," write a little, and cypher less. That the poetic feeling in our author was early brought into play may be gathered from the impressions made on his mind by reading and hearing read, some of the grand old prophets in the grand old Book, and the beautiful imagery and language of that exquisite pastoral work, the Book of Job. The fact also of living near Kilmarnock House, then differently situated from what it is now, helped to engender this poetic feeling. The influence of his mother with her store of ancient "Ballads" contributed its mite to the same end.

Possibly that which exercised the greatest power over his youthful intellect was the regular sojourn he made at all holiday seasons, and during school vacations, at the farm of Guiland, near Dundonald, occupied by his maternal grandfather. The natural beauty of the locality, heightened by the presence of that

"Ancient pile ! fast hastening to decay,"

once the residence, and a favourite one, of Royalty itself, made a deep and lasting impression on his youthful and plastic mind. It never was, and never will be effaced. There is a charm about the old castle on the hill, the lovely wood in the back ground, and the great ocean in the near distance, that makes itself felt



on any mind, and would more so on one in which the elements of poesy were lying dormant. Then, not far off was the ancient Roman Camp, from which a magnificent view of the entire valley of the Irvine could, any clear day, be had, and which of itself was enough to kindle into life and activity the nascent germs of the genius of poetry. There is little wonder that these scenes and their remembrance were to him :—

“A soothing vesper song of peace and rest,  
So sweet, so holy, that it seemed to bear  
A native burden to my grandsire's prayer.”

Besides, his residence there had other uses than merely to lay up a store of health for future use, and afford a dreamy sort of delight to the young mind. His grandfather had a vast stock of anecdote of “the days of old”—days when law was less powerful than now, and when, along nearly the whole of the Ayrshire coast, “Smuggling” was followed as a matter of course. These stories were the fruit of personal experience in the trade, as well as of the recollection of tales told him by his ancestors. By the “ingle neuk” on winter nights his grandfather used to repeat these old stories, and one ear at least drank them in greedily—that of young John. These were varied by tales of “Wallace Wight,” “the Covenanters,” “the year '45,” or as it was termed, the Highlandman's year, of “Burns, the Bard Ploughman,” and of “fairies and warlocks,” all told in “guid braid lalland,” and fixed themselves indelibly on his memory. Hence they became not only mental food on which to feed for the time being, but a store-house whence to draw thoughts and incidents to weave into melodious verse. These were to Ramsay the happy days of life ; pure and delicious as the days of youth brought up under such influences and charms must be. Their fragrance, he himself has often said

to us, comes yet floating down the stream of past time, filling his soul with peaceful quietness, and quiet peace. We believe that many of his finest pieces and most expressive lines drew their inspiration from these early scenes and days. To us they bear internal evidence of having done so.

But these palmy days could not "last for aye." At the age of ten he left school, having but scant store of book lore, and became draw-boy to his father, who was then a carpet weaver. In those days Thomas Merton had not invented the "barrel machine," and the jacquard was not thought to be applicable to carpet weaving. So the pattern was thrown up by pulling whorles which lifted certain threads. This was John's work for five years, when he was apprenticed to the same trade as his father. He thus, like many others, was early launched into the great "battle of life," a battle he has uncompromisingly fought, with more or less success, ever since. In those days he had little knowledge of and acquaintance with books, as his father's library was of the smallest, and of a peculiarly religious kind, as in fact were the libraries of all such of his class. After he began his trade he formed friendships with several young men of his own age, and with kindred likings. They and he began a course of self education, learned grammar, a smattering of Latin, and how to express their thoughts in writing. This was of the greatest use to Ramsay, and some of the friendships then made continue to the present day; others have been broken off by time, distance, and death.

When plying the shuttle as other poets before him had done, Ramsay's poetic powers began to develop themselves. His first published attempt at versification was in an Ayr periodical edited by Mr. Archibald Crawford, author of "Tales of my

Grandmother." This partook of the Epigrammatic character, and was on a sailor at a funeral. His next was of a more pretentious nature, and may yet be read in his works. It bears the title, "The Loudoun Campaign." This last piece established his fame locally, and several hundred copies of it were sold in "Auld Killie." Then followed a political effusion, caused by witnessing the drinking of the King's health on the balcony at the front of the Council-House, (and which has long ago been removed.) Next followed "Lines to Eliza," which appeared in the *Edinburgh Literary Gazette*, edited by Henry Glassford Bell, Esq., who highly recommended the piece, and pronounced the writer of it a poet. About the same time he wrote an impromptu couplet of verses on a Subscription Ball of his fellow-workmen. In consequence of the pawky humour running through the lines, they may be given here entire.—This little piece also appeared in the *Literary Gazette*, and was praised by the editor. For an introduction to this Journal, we believe that the Author was indebted to Mr. Robert Chambers. The following are the verses referred to:—

" Old Plato once met Father Jove,  
And asked the self-existent,  
'What was on earth, in heaven above,  
Of all most inconsistent.'

" Jove heard the question, gave a nod,  
To Heaven's high towers advancing,  
Unveiled this world—'Now,' says the god,  
'D'ye see yon weavers dancing.'"

So, gradually and more widely known did Ramsay become as a writer of clever, satirical, and humorous poetical Sketches, But he did not appear before the world as a full-fledged author and poet till years afterwards.