ROBERT BURNS, A SUMMARY OF HIS CAREER AND GENIUS

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Robert Burns, a summary of his career and genius by John Nichol

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"They say best men are moulded out of faults,
And, for the most, become much more the better
For being a little bad."
—*Measure for Measure*, Act v. Scene 1.

"Salve vetustæ vitæ imago
Et specimen venientis Ævi."—G. Buchanan.

I.—INTRODUCTORY.

In a bibliography, scarcely inferior in variety to that which has gathered around Shakespeare, there is a tract with the heading, "Men who have failed." Its purpose is apparent; we can construct the sermon from the text, as Cuvier reconstructed a monster from the inspection of a bone: but the title, as applied, is false. Whatever Burns's merits or demerits as a man, the vital part of his career was a swift success, and, what is of more moment, a lasting. Every decade in which his presence recedes his power grows: his passionate strength has overleapt the barriers of his dialect. Almost every British critic, during the last half century, has pelted or hailed him: everything that should be said of him, and everything that should not, has been said, often clumsily, often disconnectedly, yet on the whole exhaustively; so that little remains but to correct conflicting exaggerations. Burns has suffered from two sets of assailants. The "unco guid," who "compound for" social meanness and religious malice, by

damning other things "they have no mind to," had a score against him, which, during his life and after, they did their best to pay: and they believed him to be worse than he was because they wished it. The "unco" bad were keen to exaggerate his weakness, that they might throw over their own vulgar vices the shield of his great name. On the other hand, the idolatry of a nation, prone to canonise its illustrious dead, has oppositely erred. "No poet, from the blind singer of Troy downwards, is his peer;" "What would become of the civilised world were his writings obliterated:"—such are the common-places of festival speeches, of journalists patriotically inspired. He has been worshipped, shouted about, preached at, pointed to as a warning, held forth as an example. "The roar of his drunkards" has proclaimed him a saint; the grim moralist, to the zealot's joy, has denounced him as the chief of sinners. It is as natural as harmless that a recent accomplished biographer, selected on the Heraclitean principle of contrasts, should sigh over his "Socinian tendencies," and daintily regret the publication of his quenchless satires: it is inevitable that a literary censor, whose writings are sometimes models of style always mirrors of complacency, should label his wood-notes as hardly superfine. He has had plenty of praise, plenty of blame, enough of "allowances," far more than enough of patronage: he has rarely had—what few men have often—simple justice.

"The work of Burns," says his first editor, "may be considered as a monument not to his own name only but to the expiring genius of an ancient and independent nation." The antithesis of our chief latinist better represents the attitude of our chief poet, who was at once the last of the old and the first of the new. He came in the autumn or evening of our northern literature, but around him was the freshness of the morning and the May. Like Chaucer, he stood on the edge of two eras, and was a prophet as well as a recorder, embalming and exalting legend and song, affronting and rending inveterate superstitions; the satirist as well as the lyrist of his race. A Jacobite and a Jacobin, holding

out hands to Charlie over the straits and to Washington across the Atlantic, the monument of his verse "vetustæ vitæ imago" bears a beacon "venientis ævi." Pupil of Ramsay, master of Tannahill, it is natural that Chloris and Damon should linger in his pages beside Jean and Gavin and Davie, and the beggars at Nanse's splore. Everyone of judgment sees that his most underived and passionate work was his best, that his fame rests most firmly on the records of his wildest or freest moods; more on the Songs and the Satires and Tam O'Shanter and the Cantata than on the "Cottar's Saturday Night." But to realise his relation to the thought and music of his country requires a study of his antecedents. Our space confines us to a brief statement of his historical position and an exhibition of his character in a summary of his life.

Burns was an educated, but not a learned man, and he drew next to nothing from our early literature. Of the old Ballads, despite his residence in the border land, he made comparatively little use. The seventeenth century had little to give him; when the strife of Covenanter and Cavalier held the hearts and threatened the lives of men, the northern Muses were dumb. Poetry was shrivelled under the frown of Presbyteries. The stream of native song had been flowing, under black weeds, till it came to light again in the Jacobite minstrelsy,—where the spirit of the hills first makes itself felt in the voices of the plain,—in the pastorals of Ramsay, the fresh canvass of Thomson and Beattie, and the sketches of native life by Fergusson. From these, his generously acknowledged masters, Burns inherited much; most from the ill-starred genius of the last. The loves, animosities, and temptations of the two poets were akin; they were both, almost to boasting, devotees of independence; both keen patriots, they were alike inspired with a livid hate of their country's besetting sin, hypocrisy; but there is, on a smaller scale, the same difference between them that there is between Chaucer and Shakespeare. "The Farmer's Ingle" is a quaint picture of a rustic fireside north of the Tweed, but "The Cottar" is a store of household words

for every Scottish home in the nineteenth century; "Plainstaines and Causey" prattle, with playful humour, of the freaks and follies of the society that moves over them; but about the bridges that span the Doon there is thrown the moonlight of the fairies of the "Midsummer Night." In greater measure, Burns was the heir of the nameless minstrels, on whose ungraven tombs he throws a wreath of laurels wet with grateful tears. But he likewise exalts them, idealising their plain-spoken pathos or laughter, making their local interests universal and abiding.

He was enabled to do so by the fact of his being inspired by the spirit of the Future as well as of the Past. He lived when the so-called "Romantic" literary movement had been initiated by the publication of Percy's Reliques, Macpherson's Ossian, and the immortal forgeries of the most precocious genius in our tongue. Burns never names Chatterton,—probably because he could not read his masterpieces,—but they have many points of contact. Both were emphatically Bards, as opposed to the poets of culture by whom they were, in the eighteenth century, almost exclusively preceded; both were "sleepless souls," but their themes lay far apart. The mysteriously stranded child to whose dingy garret there came visions of armies in the air, the flapping of ravens' wings, the sound of seas in a tumult like that of Kubla Khan, is the ancestor of Coleridge on his magic side; Burns, of Wordsworth, to whom he bequeathed his pathetic interpretation of nature; and of Byron, the inheritor of his "passions wild and strong." They are together petrels of the storm that, shaking "thrones, princedoms, powers, dominions," converted Versailles into a moral Pompeii, and drove the classic canons of art into a museum of antiquities. The "Freedom dreste in blodde steyned veste" of the one is like the "stalwart ghaist" with the "sacred-poesie-Libertie" of the other. But if the Rowley poems had any influence on Burns, it came indirectly through Cowper, who may have borrowed the Olney Hymn, "God moves in a mysterious way," from Chatterton's, beginning "O God, whose thunder shakes the

sky," and handed on the same devotional mood to the author of the prayer—

> "O thou Great Being what Thou art
> Surpasses me to know."

The same breath blows through diverse instruments that have, as regards religion, the same note of scorn for insincerity, and beneath it one major key of perplexity, awe, and resignation. The defiance that rises in Queen Mab and the Revolt of Islam, almost to the shrillness of a shriek, the lurid light of the red star of Cain, belong to a later age.

William Cowper—a reed shaken with the wind, and yet a prophet—a terror-stricken "castaway," and yet the most conspicuous leader of a revolt, found in Scotland a vicegerent greater than himself,—a mighty mass of manhood, who, free from the intellectual fetters that bound, the ghastly clouds that obscured his elder contemporary, struck more ringing blows, and soared into a higher heaven.

Finally—*pacé* Mr Carlyle to the contrary—the condition of our literature at the time was, on the whole, favourable to the appearance of our greatest interpreter. It has been the fashion to talk contemptuously of the men who, though with different ideas of finish, reared many of the foundations upon which we build; but, if we except Poetry and Physical Science, the eighteenth century produced most of what the nineteenth is content to criticise. "In its latter half," says Mr Charles Scott in a paper displaying rare insight and sympathy, "Scotland was at the culmination of its intellectual glory. It never stood higher relatively to the rest of Europe." After supporting his assertion by the names of Hume, Robertson, Reid, Stewart, and Adam Smith, he proceeds, "The Bench, the Bar, and the Pulpit were adorned by men who, sometimes rough and quaint, were always vigorous and original. We had in those days the greatest statesmen Britain has seen . . . the approach of the French Revolution had stirred the blood of the people . . . their great poet alone was wanting. The hour struck and the man appeared."

II.—SURVEY OF BURNS' LIFE.

I.—*First Period, Alloway*, 1759—1766. (*Æt.* 1-7.)

Burns was qualified to be a national poet by his start from the meeting of all the waters of his country's literature, no less so by the circumstances of his birth and the grasp of his genius. Scion of a family on the North-East, members of which, by his own account, had shared the fortunes of the Earl of Mar, he was born and lived in the South-West among the descendants of the Covenanters. He was a peasant more in virtue of his prevailing themes than by his actual rank. Addressing every grade from the Prince of Wales to roadside tramps, the "annals of the poor" are dearest to the heart of one who was often by painful experience familiar with their sorrows. But Burns himself, save latterly as a government official, never did a day's work for others than himself and his family. His father's status as a tenant farmer in the Lowlands was equivalent to that of an English yeoman. His own position in society, in the lower section of the middle class, went with his education and his free spirit to make him as much at ease in the reception rooms of the aristocracy as in the lanes of Mauchline. Everything conspired to make him what he was, a national rather than a peasant poet. In one of the passages in which he almost petulantly resents the claims of rank, he speaks of his "ancient but ignoble blood." In the same spirit Beranger, answering those who "criticise the paltry de" before his name, rejoices in being "a very scamp of common stamp." But both were only half in earnest, and neither without some pride in their ancestors. Those of Burns can be traced at least to the later years of the seventeenth century, when they are found well settled in the Mearns. It is worthy of note that the poet's grandfather, inspired by a zeal which characterised his descendants, built the first schoolhouse in the district of his farm. His third son, William, born in 1721, continued to reside in Kincardineshire till 1748, when he migrated southwards as a gardener; in 1749 laying

out the Edinburgh meadows, and from 1750 onwards similarly engaged in Ayrshire, till, having taken a lease of seven acres in Alloway, he built on them, largely with his own hands, the "auld clay biggin" of two rooms, to which, in 1757, at the age of thirty-six, he brought home his bride, Agnes Brown of Maybole. In this house—now almost a Mecca to northern patriots—Robert, the first offspring of the marriage, was born on the 25th January 1759.

For the little record left of the cottage life at Alloway, we are indebted to three sometimes conflicting authorities:—Burns' letter (vol. iv. 4-20) to Dr Moore (Aug. 1787); that addressed to Mrs Dunlop by his brother Gilbert; and the reminiscences of his tutor, Mr John Murdoch, a young man of rare accomplishments and sagacity, to whom during their childhood, and much to their profit, the education of the family was in large measure committed. The autobiographic sketch is a strange chequer of fancy, philosophy, and recklessness, written in the sunshine of success, crossed by the shade of afflictions and of follies, which the writer was simultaneously deploring and recommitting. It is written with great apparent candour, and with the author's constant force of style; the facts, often lighted up by brilliancies of setting, are sometimes, it may be, magnified in the haze of imagination. From the blessing or bane of the excess of this faculty, Gilbert—the only other junior member of the family who in a rapid sketch calls for comment—was, in his maturity at least, singularly free. An intelligent and canny Scot of enlarged mind, he is studiously proper, respectable, and orthodox, speaking in one strain of "an atheist, a demagogue, or any vile thing." He is a more or less sympathetic apologist for his brother's weaknesses; but, in the interests of truth or of popular feeling, he more than once attempts to disenchant Robert's narrative of an element of romance. *E.g.* The poet attributes the family migration southward to political causes, describing his ancestors as "renting lands of the noble Keiths of Marischal," as having had "the honour of sharing their fate" and "shaking hands with ruin for what they