

ROBERT BURNS

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Robert Burns by John Campbell Shairp

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JOHN CAMPBELL SHAIRP

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Robert Burns

by

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"STUDIES IN POETRY AND PHILOSOPHY"

"CULTURE AND RELIGION"

English Men of Letters

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JOHN MORLEY



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ROBERT BURNS.

CHAPTER I.

YOUTH IN Ayrshire.

GREAT men, great events, great epochs, it has been said, grow as we recede from them; and the rate at which they grow in the estimation of men is in some sort a measure of their greatness. Tried by this standard, Burns must be great indeed; for, during the eighty years that have passed since his death, men's interest in the man himself and their estimate of his genius have been steadily increasing. Each decade since he died has produced at least two biographies of him. When Mr. Carlyle wrote his well-known essay on Burns in 1828, he could already number six biographies of the Poet, which had been given to the world during the previous thirty years; and the interval between 1828 and the present day has added, in at least the same proportion, to their number. What it was in the man and in his circumstances that has attracted so much of the world's interest to Burns, I must make one more attempt to describe.

If success were that which most secures men's sympathy, Burns would have won but little regard; for in all but his

poetry his was a defeated life—sad and heart-depressing to contemplate beyond the lives even of most poets.

Perhaps it may be the very fact that in him so much failure and shipwreck were combined with such splendid gifts, that has attracted to him so deep and compassionate interest. Let us review once more the facts of that life, and tell again its oft-told story.

—It was on the 25th of January, 1759, about two miles from the town of Ayr, in a clay-built cottage, reared by his father's own hands, that Robert Burns was born. The "auld clay bigging" which saw his birth still stands by the side of the road that leads from Ayr to the river and the bridge of Doon. Between the banks of that romantic stream and the cottage is seen the roofless ruin of "Allo-way's auld haunted kirk," which Tam o' Shanter has made famous. His first welcome to the world was a rough one. As he himself says—

"A blast o' Januar' win'
Blew hansel in on Robin."

A few days after his birth, a storm blew down the gable of the cottage, and the poet and his mother were carried in the dark morning to the shelter of a neighbour's roof, under which they remained till their own home was repaired. In after-years he would often say, "No wonder that one ushered into the world amid such a tempest should be the victim of stormy passions." "It is hard to be born in Scotland," says the brilliant Parisian. Burns had many hardships to endure, but he never reckoned this to be one of them.

His father, William Burness or Burnes, for so he spelt his name, was a native not of Ayrshire, but of Kincardineshire, where he had been reared on a farm belonging to the

forfeited estate of the noble but attainted house of Keith-Marischal. Forced to migrate thence at the age of nineteen, he had travelled to Edinburgh, and finally settled in Ayrshire, and at the time when Robert, his eldest child, was born, he rented seven acres of land, near the Brig o' Doon, which he cultivated as a nursery-garden. He was a man of strict, even stubborn integrity, and of strong temper—a combination which, as his son remarks, does not usually lead to worldly success. But his chief characteristic was his deep-seated and thoughtful piety. A peasant-saint of the old Scottish stamp, he yet tempered the stern Calvinism of the West with the milder Arminianism more common in his northern birthplace. Robert, who, amid all his after-errors, never ceased to revere his father's memory, has left an immortal portrait of him in *The Cotter's Saturday Night*, when he describes how

“The saint, the father, and the husband prays.”

William Burness was advanced in years before he married, and his wife, Agnes Brown, was much younger than himself. She is described as an Ayrshire lass, of humble birth, very sagacious, with bright eyes and intelligent looks, but not beautiful, of good manners and easy address. Like her husband, she was sincerely religious, but of a more equable temper, quick to perceive character, and with a memory stored with old traditions, songs, and ballads, which she told or sang to amuse her children. In his outer man the poet resembled his mother, but his great mental gifts, if inherited at all, must be traced to his father.

Three places in Ayrshire, besides his birthplace, will always be remembered as the successive homes of Burns. These were Mount Oliphant, Lochlea (pronounced Lochly), and Mossgiel.