

**'HUCHOWN OF THE AWLE RYALE' THE  
ALLITERATIVE POET: A HISTORICAL  
CRITICISM OF FOURTEENTH CENTURY  
POEMS ASCRIBED TO SIR HEW OF  
EGLINTOUN**

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'Huchown of the Awle Ryale' the Alliterative Poet: A Historical Criticism of Fourteenth Century Poems Ascribed to Sir Hew of Eglintoun by George Neilson

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**GEORGE NEILSON**

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By  
**George Neilson**  
Author of "Trial by Combat," etc.



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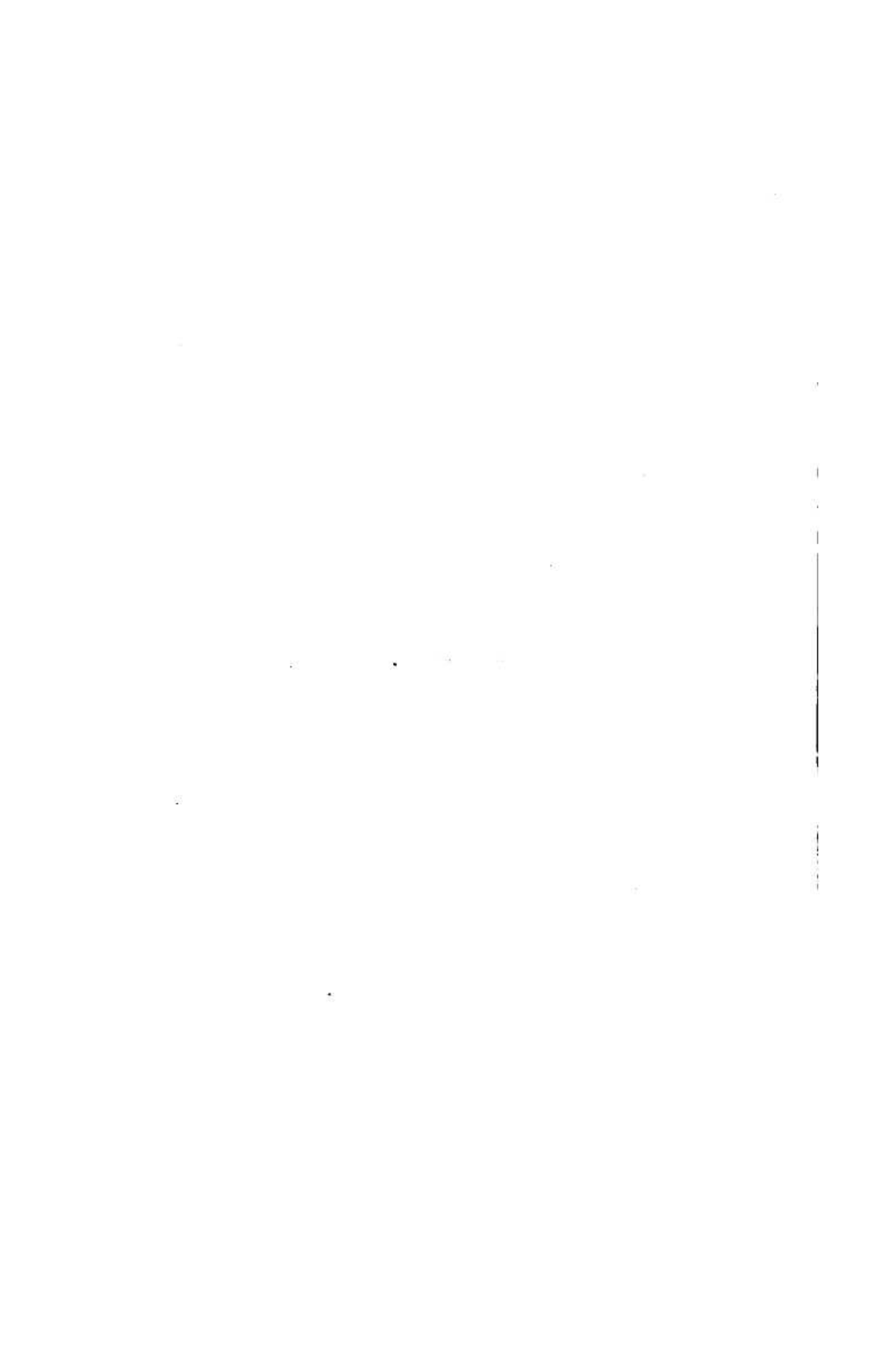
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HOMAGE AND FEALTY  
TO  
FREDERIC WILLIAM MAITLAND,  
LL.D., D.C.L.

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## PREFACE

WHEN, more than a couple of years ago, my previous general interest in the alliterative problems was suddenly roused to an acute pitch by the discovery of the importance of a manuscript in the Hunterian Library, a condition of nescience and chaos prevailed among the critics. That very many lines were common to certain of the poems had of course all along been seen, though the tendency had grown to account for this very lamely by contradictory processes. The great lead given by Sir Frederick Madden in the recognition of a group as the work of 'Huchown of the Awle Ryale, had been for the most part set aside on grounds of dialect and grammar, on which the doctors themselves were at sixes and sevens. Methods of analysis had gained currency founded on the false notion that a poet's vocabulary must be constant whether his theme is of war or of love, whether he is singing free or is translating, whether he narrates or moralizes. Too large allowance had been made for scribal variation to prove changes in the dialect of scribes; too little when to discuss unity. The terrible uncertainty of inferences merely philological had been forgotten, and overweening Philology had betrayed its trust. The more the objections to a great poetic unity were considered on a re-approach to the question, the less did they satisfy the logic of a broad and rational historical criticism, especially as they were found to embody so much argument on discrepancies in style and subject, which would assuredly make it difficult to accept the common authorship of such works as 'Hamlet' and 'Midsummer Night's Dream,' as the 'Cottar's Saturday Night' and 'Holy Willie's Prayer,' or as 'In Memoriam' and the 'Charge of the Light Brigade.'

At an early stage of my own special studies it became apparent that there existed a mass of clear fact, internal and external, far weightier than any argument previously urged, establishing a cross relationship and interpenetration of the poems, which on any other hypothesis than that of a single author would be a downright miracle. One has heard vague talk of a 'school.' A school of poets of this splendid calibre were indeed worth having; but it has never been produced, and we have waited long, with unrewarded patience, for any suggestion of the constitution and *personnel* of such a joint-stock company of genius. Critics who have opposed the proposition of a lofty poetic unity, comparable only with Chaucer, have now forfeited any claim to authority; for, if authority rests upon fulness of knowledge, little indeed can remain to certain of my recent predecessors in alliterative criticism when confronted with the many central facts now revealed, which were completely beyond their ken, and in ignorance of which their judgments were pronounced.

Besides, the unique and far-reaching evidences, brought to light by two Hunterian MSS. when compared with the poems, must totally alter the complexion of the earlier discussions. We approach the poet from a new base—a base of surprising intimacy with his sources and modes of composition, and even in some degree of his thought. The mystery is lifted, and not only may we discern who and what he was, but we may at the same time see Arthurian romance in the act of growth, and watch, as it were from within, the movement of a glorious intellect in the fourteenth century. For a mystery of chaos about the person and the work, we have now a definite personality and a series of related poems, with which his own life is bound up, and in which he demonstrates himself as one of the dramatic figures, while yet there remains the fascinating psychological problem, to show how the radiant centre of a Scottish poet's inspiration in so many pieces should have been found in English chivalry, refulgent in the fame of the Round Table and Crecy and Poitiers.

Speaking as a historical student, it may be allowed me to say that nothing in these researches has occasioned such lively satisfaction to myself as the unexpected emergence of the train of allusions to contemporary historical episodes, which so vastly deepen the sense and add

to the marvel of these poems. It will surprise many to find so much of brilliant English chronicle in *Morte Arthure*, and other pieces, as to challenge for them, in virtue of their historical realism, a place of oddly romantic authority as secondary documents for the French wars of Edward III. and his gallant son. And there is still more of *Morte Arthure* to explain by the same processes in history and heraldry as have made the disclosures recorded within.

The life of Sir Hew of Eglintoun will have to be written some day. Those who desire to have a preliminary collection of charter references and the like to his career will find it in *Sir Hew of Eglintoun*, a calendar of events in which he was concerned, compiled from original sources by me some months ago, and contributed to the transactions of the Philosophical Society of Glasgow. Having a few reprints, I have placed them in the hands of my Publishers, so as to be available for any who may seek to check or supplement the sources of the biographical sketch given in the second chapter of the present book.

My preface must close in grateful expressions to many friends, particularly to Professor John Young, M.D., Keeper of the Hunterian Museum, whose constant helpfulness alone made possible to me the MS. discoveries now recorded. Monsieur E. J. Amours also has been (alike where we agree and where we differ) the most courteous and obliging of fellow-students in the alliterative literature. To Mr. J. T. T. Brown, and his sympathetic attitude towards what I may call my 'plot,' as it developed under my hands, I owe almost as much as I do for his fruitful suggestions, offered to me long ago, of the need for work on present lines for the vindication of the disputed poet.

The present essay has arisen out of two papers read to the Glasgow Archaeological Society on 19th April and 15th December, 1900, recast and united and extended. The whole is now reprinted from the *Proceedings* of the Society, with a few alterations and additions, including an index, in an edition of 300 copies, whereof 250 are for sale.

G. N.