

**THE LIFE OF ROBERT
NICOLL, POET.
WITH SOME HITHERTO
UNCOLLECTED PIECES**

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The Life of Robert Nicoll, Poet. With Some Hitherto Uncollected Pieces by P. R. Drummond

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OF
ROBERT NICOLL,

POET.

With some hitherto Uncollected Pieces.

BY

P. R. DRUMMOND,

AUTHOR OF "PERTHSHIRE IN BYGONE DAYS."

"I ought to give my testimony about this my friend whom I have known so well, and record clearly what my knowledge of him was. This has ever since seemed a kind of duty I had to do in the world before leaving it."—CARLYLE'S "Life of John Sterling."

ALEX. GARDNER,
PAISLEY, AND 12 PATERNOSTER ROW, LONDON.

1884.

2796. e. 8.



P R E F A C E .

A FEW remarks by way of preface to this Memoir seem necessary, or at least desirable, in part to explain the long delay in its reaching the hands of the public, and, further, to show in how far it has been possible to carry out the original plans of the author with regard to it.

When the sudden death of my father occurred, in the early autumn of 1879, he had so far completed the work that he confidently looked forward to its publication before the end of that year. On examining the manuscript, however, I found that, although it was complete in the sense of the first and last pages being written, there was a considerable number of blanks and of unfinished sentences where the author's memory had for the moment failed him, or which he meant to fill in on further reference or inquiry.

The difficulty attending the satisfactory completion of the manuscript—residing at a great distance from the scenes of the story, and with very little time at my command—deterred me for a period of three years from attempting the task. But I could never banish from my mind the strong feeling my father had with regard to the publication of the work, admirably expressed by the motto from

Carlyle which appears on the title page, and which was selected by himself for the purpose.

In the meantime, I had received letters of inquiry from various quarters as to what had become of the book; and one gentleman of very considerable literary experience and a distant relative of the Nicolls, was so kindly persistent in his inquiries, that I promised, if he would look over the manuscript and thought I could satisfactorily complete it, that I would endeavour to do so. The result was that he returned it to me, making light of the blanks, and strongly urging me to publish it.

Before proceeding, however, I resolved to test the public mind on the extent to which the book was wanted, and the response to my appeal for subscribers was so prompt and hearty that I resolved at once to set about the work of completion and revision.

Though the number of subscribers would have justified me in issuing the book to them only, which was my original intention, still, I am sure that, in the interests of the subject, they will think it only matter for congratulation that it is likely, through the enterprise of the publisher, to reach a much larger circle of readers.

I take this opportunity of thanking the subscribers for their encouragement and support, without which it is very doubtful if the book would ever have been issued to the public.

While the work has been passing slowly through the press, the task of correcting the proofs has

been greatly lightened by many kind and encouraging letters from friends both of NICOLL and of my father, from all parts of the world, many of them bearing out in a singular manner the estimate of NICOLL, both as a man and as a poet, which is presented in the following pages. For these, I am truly grateful.

The author's original intention—never, I believe, quite abandoned during the writing of the Memoir—was to issue with it a complete edition of Nicoll's Poems; but before the copyright in the old edition (the property of the publishers) had quite expired, the publisher of the present volume, knowing there was a demand for them and unaware of my father's intention, issued, by arrangement, a reprint of the old edition, with Mrs. Johnstone's Memoir prefixed.

It seemed inadvisable to increase the cost of the present work by the addition of the Poems, which are in the market at a reasonable price. I therefore abandoned that idea, and amended the text, as far as possible, to suit the altered plan.

There was also some sort of intention of re-writing the whole of this Memoir and of incorporating with it a life of the Poet's brother, William, and, at least, a selection from his unpublished Poems, which had been sent to my father by the Poet's sister for the purpose, and of which he thought very highly. But nothing had been done towards this scheme—I only mention it to show how comparatively unfinished were the author's plans.

With regard to my own dealings with the text in revising the sheets for the press, I need scarcely say that, while I have done all in my power to make some obscure passages clear and to verify and correct, where necessary, matters of fact, I have most scrupulously studied to preserve what appeared to be the author's meaning in every matter of opinion.

My father, being an almost self-educated man, made no pretension to style; but in this Memoir, as in all he ever wrote, he had a clear purpose in view, and his wish was to tell the story of his dear friend in a plain and truthful way, believing that with his special knowledge of the subject, he could throw such fresh light on the spirit which animated the Poet when life with him was at high-water mark, as would materially alter the conception of his character existing in the public mind.

In telling the story of a life so comparatively uneventful as that of NICOLL, there was necessarily much that could only be repeated from preceding biographies; and so the author is found frequently quoting from Mrs. Johnstone—whose biography of the Poet was compiled in great measure from material supplied by his brother William, and is in the same measure likely to be authentic—and has made use of much of what he had himself collected many years ago, and partly published in the Scottish newspapers. His position with regard to these matters was exactly that of the minister in Dean Ramsay's Aberdeen story—"Fat better culd the

man dee nir he's dune?—he bud tac big's dyke wi' the feal at fit o't."

It now only remains for me, in deprecation of any severe criticism of occasional repetitions or want of definiteness in the narrative, to remind the reader of the comparatively unfinished state in which it was left, and that it is the work of an old man, full of his subject, but thinking it out through the vista of forty busy years.

With regard to the difficulties of my own position, I would only say to any sceptical reader—let *him* take up the work almost wet from the pen of a father, fondly loved and but lately lost for ever, and set about preparing it for publication, and if the conflict in his heart between reverence for the letter of the work of so dear a hand, and the fear of the cold eye of the critic on the weak points it may contain, does not make him sympathise with me, then I envy him neither his task nor his feelings.

But, now that the work is done, I send it forth with joy into the world, feeling sure that its truthful character will find it a warm welcome from those (and they are still not a few) in whose memory the subject lives perennial in its sweetness, and in the hope that the new generation may find benefit to themselves in the study of so pure and noble a life as that of ROBERT NICOLL.

J. D.

Highbgate,
London, N., March, 1884.