

**THE BALLADS AND SONGS OF
AYRSHIRE: ILLUSTRATED WITH
SKETCHES, HISTORICAL,
TRADITIONAL, NARRATIVE AND
BIOGRAPHICAL, 1ST, 2ND SERIES**

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The Ballads and Songs of Ayrshire: Illustrated with Sketches, Historical, Traditional, Narrative and Biographical, 1st, 2nd Series by Anonymous

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BAL·LADS AND SONGS
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"Old King Coul was a merry old soul,
And a jolly old soul was he :
Old King Coul he had a brown bowl,
And they brought him in fiddlers throe."



AYR :
PUBLISHED FOR THE EDITOR BY JOHN DICK.

MDCCCLVI.



INTRODUCTION.

Renfrewshire has her Harp—why not Ayrshire her Lyre? The land that gave birth to Burns may well claim the distinction of a separate Repository for the BALLADS and SONGS which belong to it. In this, the First Series, it has been the chief object of the Editor to gather together the older lyrical productions connected with the county, intermixed with a slight sprinkling of the more recent, by way of lightsome variation. The aim of the work is to collect those pieces, ancient and modern, which, scattered throughout various publications, are inaccessible to many readers; and to glean from oral recitation the floating relics of a former age that still exist in living remembrance, as well as to supply such information respecting the subject or author as may be deemed interesting. The songs of Burns—save, perhaps, a few of the more rare—having been already collected in numerous editions, and consequently well known, will form no part of the Repository. In distinguishing the BALLADS and SONGS of Ayrshire, the Editor has been, and will be, guided by the connection they have with the district, either as to the author or subject; and now that the First Series is before the public, he trusts that, whatever may be its defects, the credit at least will be given him of sifting, however feebly, at the construction of a lasting monument of the lyrical literature of Ayrshire. He hopes farther, should encouragement be vouchsafed to go on with the collection, that all interested in the labour he has imposed upon himself, and who have it in their power, will be willing to assist by "throwing a stone to the cairn."

Ayrshire has probably been more deficient in musical composers than in poets, or ballad writers. Amongst the earliest of the latter, of whom we find any notice, is "the gude Schir Hew of Eglintoun," mentioned in Dunbar's "Lament for the Death of the Makars," which poem must have been written before 1508, when it appeared in Millar and Chepman's Miscellany. Schir Hew is understood to have been the last of the old Eglintons of Eglinton, whose daughter was espoused by John de Montgomerie of Egleshamie. He is conjectured to have written the romances of "Arthur" and "Gawan," and the "Epistle of Susanna," pieces not known—their names only being preserved in Wintoun's Chronicle. Walter Kennedy is another of the Ayrshire "Makars" mentioned in Dunbar's Lament—

"Gud Maister Walter Kennedy,
In poynt of dede lysis veraly,
Gret reuth it wer that so suld be;
TIMOR MORIS CONTRAHAT AN."

Some particulars of Kennedy and his writings will be found in the following pages. So of Montgomerie, author of the "Cherrie and the Slae," Hamilton of Gilbertfield, &c. In later times Ayrshire can boast of the name of Burns, Boswell, and a host of living "Makars," who, when the flight of time has thrown a halo round their memories, will be regarded as writers of no common merit.

Fate has not been so favourable to our composers of music as to our "Makars" of poetry. Few of the names of the earlier race of them are even known. The greater number of our most beautiful melodies are

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without paternity, and cannot be assigned to any particular district of the country. A distinction has no doubt been attempted to be drawn between Highland and Lowland music; but this cannot well be sustained in the face of the fact that, until comparatively recent times, the bagpipe was the prevailing instrument in the Lowlands as well as the Highlands. Every burgh, town, village and baron had their piper or pipers. Ayr had her "minstrels," as the town's pipers were called, in 1558;* and within living remembrance many small burghs and villages retained their civic musician. Thus it would be difficult to say whether those beautiful pipe tunes which have been altered to suit more modern instruments and tastes, or which have been gleaned in the Highlands, where the bagpipe has no doubt lingered longer, and in greater perfection than in the Lowlands, belonged originally to this or the other side of the Grampians; and consequently it would be equally hard to say whether any of them can be claimed by Ayrshire. All that can be said is that not a few of them were popular in Ayrshire from the earliest times; and either were originally, or had become in progress of time, so peculiar to the district, that the musical world was ignorant of them until brought to light by the contributions of Burns to *Johnson's Museum*. These might be particularised, were the works of Burns not so universally known. It may not be uninteresting to mention that several tunes and songs are incidentally referred to in the Presbytery books of Ayr, which are still popular, and were so upwards of a hundred years ago. For instance, in 1720, John Chalmers of Burnton, and others in the parish of Dalmellington, were brought before the Presbytery, upon appeal from the Kirk-session of that parish, charged with dancing and singing on a fast-day morning. They had been at a wedding the night before in the house of the schoolmaster; and the singing and dancing took place in Shaw of Grimmets', whither the revellers had retired. The tune to which they danced, the witnesses averred, was "the tune of that sang that's commonly called *The Sow's Tailis to Geordie*." Several gave evidence to this effect; and they appeared to be well acquainted with the tune—some of them recognising the words, "the sow's tail till him yet." Another of the songs sung upon the occasion was "Up and Waur them a' Willie," which, if originally a Jacobite song, must have been then altogether new, as it could not refer, as such, to any event previous to 1715.

If it cannot be shown upon positive data that Ayrshire has a right to claim any of the earlier melodies of Scotland, she has, at all events, not lacked musicians and composers in later times. Among these, though perhaps not the most eminent, the name of M'Gill is familiar. The first notice we have of the family occurs in the parochial register of births for Ayr, as follows:—"John M'Gill, son lawful to Wm. M'Gill, *violer* in the Newtowne of Ayr, and Mary Hunter his spouse, was born on Wednesday, Decr. first, 1699." John, however, seems to have died in infancy, for the same parties have another son, baptized *John*, born 30th August, 1707. This latter son of "Willie M'Gill" was, in all likelihood, the well known "Johnnie M'Gill," who is still remembered as an excellent violincello player, and who has the reputation of having composed several airs. If the same individual, he must have been long absent from his native place, and had no doubt led a chequered life; for he is said to have figured in Ayr as a stage doctor immediately prior to his settling down as the assistant of another locally celebrated *violer*, John Riddel. Riddel was the composer of several popular airs—such as "Jenny's Bawbee," "The

* See "History of Ayrshire," page 190, where some curious particulars are mentioned regarding them.

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Merry Lads o' Ayr," "Stewarton Lassies," "Dumfries House," &c. He was an excellent player in his day—so much so that Lord Archibald Montgomerie, upon one occasion, laid a bet that he would get a blind man* in Ayr who would beat all the violin players in Edinburgh† Riddel had a small salary from all the gentlemen of any note in the county, at whose residences it was his duty to attend at stated periods, and as often as he pleased or found it convenient during the rest of the year. He was never without a pupil, or an apprentice—for in these days the pupils were regularly apprenticed to their teacher, whom they styled *Master*; and it was the duty of the apprentice to accompany the master in all his excursions. Amongst other pupils of Riddel was Weyms Gillespie—another violer whose name deserves to be recorded. By this time Riddel had become very old, and dared not expose himself to rough weather or much fatigue. Gillespie, his pupil, had, upon one occasion, an engagement at a carpenters' ball in Ayr, and, being a young man, his heart as well as his bow was in the projected merry-making. Unfortunately, upon that very day, he was called by his master to attend him in a special visit to one of his country patrons. This, at first sight, seemed a death-blow to Gillespie's diversion; still he was determined not to forego the pleasure, if at all possible. "We're gaun to hae a guid day, I think," said the old blind master to his pupil, as he consulted him about their journey. "No very sure o' that, master," said Gillespie, upon whose brain instantly flashed the idea of a stratagem which might emancipate him from his dilemma. "Gi'e wa' out an' see what the day looks like," rejoined the old man. Gillespie did as he was required; and, though the sun was clear and the sky bright, reported on returning that he was afraid it would overcast, as he saw certain ominous clouds gathering very rapidly. Riddel, at all times anxious to attend to the calls of his patrons, was unwilling to remain at home, and repeatedly despatched Gillespie to ascertain the state of the weather. Appearances always became worse with the apprentice, till at length he returned with the intelligence that it was "an even-down pour!" Old Riddel, somewhat dubious, was led to the door to satisfy himself of the fact. Gillespie, during his last absence, had, with the assistance of a friend, so fastened a large birch broom, thoroughly soaked in water, over the lintel of the door, that the moment the old man groped his way out the water fell upon his bare head like a shower bath. "Right eneuch, right eneuch, Gillespie, we canna gang in sic weather as this;" and so Old Riddel was satisfied, and Gillespie prepared to enjoy the carpenter's ball in the evening.

James Tannock, who died at the age of ninety-nine, was one of John Riddel's pupils: so was Matthew Hall or Ha', who, now upwards of four-score, lives in Newton-on-Ayr. Though almost completely deaf, yet when made aware, by writing, that the subject is the musical reminiscences of former times, the old spirit revives, and his stories are truly interesting. He must have been a muscular man in his day; but when playing at *Shinty* upon one occasion, the joint of his right elbow was split in two by a stroke, and he never had the proper power of his arm afterwards. He was, in consequence, obliged to give up the small fiddle for the violincello—upon which instrument he became as great a proficient, if not greater, than upon the other. As is well known in Ayrshire, the late Earl of Eglington was one of the chief patrons of musicians in the county. He was himself a first-rate player upon the violincello and harp, and composed a number of airs—several of which, such as "Ayrshire Lassies," are still po-

* Riddel was blind, it is believed, from infancy.

† The Gows were not at that time in repute.

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palar. A collection of music, published "by a young gentleman," about the close of last century, when he was Major Montgomerie, is generally understood to have been his. Mr Hall mentions that he was forty-five years in the habit of frequenting Collesfield and Eglinton Castle in his capacity as musician. His chief co-adjutor was James M'Lachlan, a Highlander, who came to Ayrshire in a fencible regiment, and was patronised by Lord Eglinton. At concerts at the Castle, the late Earl generally took a part on the violincello or the harp, and amongst other professional players on the violin, bliad Gilmour from Stevenston was usually present. "O thae war the days for music!" involuntarily exclaims old Hall, as he proceeds with his reminiscences. Lately when the Castle of Eglinton was re-furnished, a number of violins and violincellos were discovered in a garret—no doubt the identical valuable instruments so much prized by the old Earl. Not knowing their history or their worth, the party into whose hands they fell, gave them away to individuals equally incapable of appreciating them. Hall and M'Lachlan played over the whole county, at all the gentlemen's residences, and even in Edinburgh and Glasgow on great occasions. In one week, to use his own words, they have "passed twenty-six parish kirks, and returned to Ayr on Friday to a ball, never getting to bed till Saturday night." They obtained snatches of sleep as they best could during the intervals of playing and travelling. At one time Hall and M'Lachlan were at the Duke of Argyle's for six months together. M'Lachlan had been there before as footman to Lord John Campbell. It was a time of much festivity—a blind Irish harper of the name of O'Kean, was also amongst the party of musicians. The harper, conceiving himself to have been eclipsed by the violin players, or fancying an insult from the Duke of Argyle, left the party, and bribing some boys to procure materials, actually set fire to the lower part of Inverary Castle, which would soon have been wholly in flames, but for the timely discovery of the rascally act. The incendiary was taken to Inverary Jail, and no doubt met the punishment he deserved. Mr Hall's bass fiddle was a present from the late Countess of Eglinton. It is perhaps worth mentioning that he was the *first Mason* ever made by the poet Burns. Burns himself was made by Alexander Wood, a tailor in Tarbolton.

The late Major Logan was a delightful amateur player on the violin. He also composed a variety of airs—some of them very excellent, but, from his own peculiar style of playing, so difficult of execution that few would attempt them. The collection which he left, however, might be capable of revision and alteration. If so, it is most desirable that they should see the light. In more recent times the Messrs Hall of Ayr have long maintained a high reputation as violin players—so have the Andrews in Lave-mill, near Dundonald; while there is scarcely a village throughout the county that has not its instrumental or vocal club.

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