

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

OF

ROBERT DAVIDSON

DAY-LABOURER, MOREBATTLE

WRITTEN IN HIS SEVENTIETH YEAR

October, 1847.

I was descended from poor but honest parents, who, like the great majority of mankind, had their bread to earn by the sweat of their brows; so, of course, my patrimony was poverty and toil, which, in agricultural districts, amount to an unalterable entail. My education was indeed very limited, the schoolmaster having been but a short way abroad. In those days there was much of the valuable time of children wasted, and little progress made. There are many now more advanced in learning at seven or eight years of age than could, in former times, have been found at twelve. In many country schools very little attention was paid to spelling. Perhaps once a-week we were made to spell the names of a few men, or the names of some towns or villages; indeed, the only part of my early education that I have never forgot is to misspell. There are great changes in the manners and modes of life among the peasantry since my school-boy days. The spinning-jenny had not then supplanted the spinning-wheel, and the spinning-wheel had not altogether expelled

the distaff and rock. I remember several aged matrons, who, with that simple instrument of industry in their bosoms, used often to entertain groups of happy youngsters, gathered around their hearths in the winter evenings, by telling them legendary tales of border barons and their bloody feuds; and they would sometimes croon over to us scraps of ancient ballads that had been the favourite songs of their youth; and although there was but little melody either in the air itself or in the voice of the songster, they were listened to with as much breathless attention as ever the strains of Madame Catalini or Jenny Lind could have been by the crowded audiences of a very different description. As superstition prevailed among the peasantry far more than it does now, we were often told fearful stories about fairies, brownies, and bogles, the truth of which the narrators themselves had not the least doubt of; and I can assure you we believed and trembled, for we always sat closer together, and drew nearer the fire. It has always been observed that early impressions are seldom altogether eradicated; and I have no doubt but that some who were then listeners, even when they had arrived at the years of manhood, when exposed to a dark night, may have sometimes looked around "with prudent cares".

When I was ten years of age I was hired to herd a few cows; as the country was then almost uninclosed, a good

number of boys were wanted for the same employment. I had by that time a great inclination for reading, but there were few works in the possession of the peasantry at that time indeed. Very few cottages were without Boston's and Erskine's works – certainly an invaluable library; but their worth could not be properly appreciated by a boy of my age. I can never forget the extraordinary excitement and delight I felt when the history of Sir William Wallace fell first into my hands. What, I believe, added much to the enjoyment was, that I thought it all as true as truth itself, and not the production of Blind Harry. I conclude, from my own experience, that no kind of reading, either for pleasure or profit, is equal to authentic history – truth being most congenial to the human mind; at least what we consider to be so. What makes children so fond of the tales of "Jack the Giant-Killer" and "Jack and the Bean-Stalk" is that they believe them to be true at that period of life. When "Barry's Collection" for schools came first into my hands it was a great treasure to me, there being nothing of the kind at the paltry school at which I was taught. When I read, in prose and verse, extracts from the works of the great writers that are inserted there, I felt as we may suppose Gulliver to have felt in his travels, when he was carried from a nation of pigmies among a race of giants; for up to this time I had seen little of the writing of profane

authors but penny histories and ballads. I had attempted before this to compose some simple verses, of which, in my own mind, I was proud; but I found now that doggerel rhyme and poetry were two distinct things.

I continued to herd cattle in summer and to wait on them in winter until I went to learn to hold the plough. At that employment I continued six or seven years. In the twenty-first year of my age I was hired to a farmer who had a share in a country library, and who likewise got the newspapers once a-week; and as he cared little about reading himself, he was so good as to allow me to take out what books I had a mind to, and likewise to give me a reading of the papers duly. Until that time my acquaintance with books, or with what was passing in the world, was so limited that I never heard either of the name or of the works of Robert Burns, it being then two years after his death. I need scarcely say that I felt both astonishment and admiration of the poetry and powers of that extraordinary man.

My simple muse oft visited me at the plough and made the labour to seem lighter and the day shorter. At that time none of my fellow-servants knew anything as to how I was employed, for I thought I would be laughed at. Goldsmith says his poetry was his shame in crowds but his pride in solitude; and I believe many a humble rhymster has had the same feeling as that great poet.. None of my at-

tempts at poetry were ever written down until I was married and had a house of my own, where I had an opportunity to write without any person knowing what was written.

I now took a house in Morebattle, and worked as a day-labourer, and sometimes took jobs by the piece, which I greatly preferred. At this employment a number of years of heavy toil passed over my head, without ever giving me a heavy heart. I had youth, and health, and a happy fireside; my children were then about me, and I was happy in my partner in life, though her dowry was only truth, honesty and prudence, and, I may add, a steady and contented mind. I am convinced, both by observation and experience, that a man's fireside is a source whence arises his bitterest griefs or most exquisite pleasures. A man is more than repaid for the toils of the day, if, at home, there are eyes to mark his coming, and to look brighter when he comes. I must say this was almost the happiest part of my life. I was content with the station in which Providence had placed me, - proud when I thought of the country in which I lived, where the poorest peasant has rights and dares assert them; but the road of life, like the surface of the earth, has its ups and downs. In 1811, wet seasons and late harvests raised the markets so much that the wages of labour could not purchase provisions equal to support life, to those who had large families, and I had then a wife and six children. The situation I was

then placed in made me appear as an author, which, before, I had resolved not to do; for I knew that the public allowed no mediocrity in poetry; therefore I could have but little hope. Back seasons and dearths still continued, so I was forced to betake myself to my old employment, the plough, as I got corn for my wages, which supplied my family with bread; and at this I continued until part of my family could do something for themselves. Then I again took a house in Morebattle, and wrought as a labourer; like the country mouse in the fable,

“I sought again my hollow tree,

My crust of bread, and liberty.”

In 1824 I tried another publication of my little pieces, but, as respected profit, they did not do much. When I came to peruse the splendid poetry of the great men that were then living, I thought any attempt made by me to attract notice would be foolish as the glow-worm to light its feeble lamp in a twelve o'clock sun; and at two different times I destroyed all my papers, after they had accumulated to a good bulk, being convinced I was only troubling myself in vain; but my muse and I were like the honest webster and his wife – we could neither agree when together nor remain separate.

It is now fifty-three years that I have wrought a man's work; and in that period, like those who have travelled the way before me, I have seen both joys and sorrows.

About four years since my wife died, and a short time after three sons went to America; and I am now taught that, as far as this world is concerned, all is vanity. Thus I have given you an account of the different steps of my life, in which not much interest could be expected; indeed, excepting in the difference in years, it might be all contained in an epitaph written by Ben Jonson, which

“Here lies who laugh’d and cried,
Told five-and-fifty-years and died.”

ROBERT DAVIDSON