

**THREE CENTURIES OF
SCOTTISH
LITERATURE. VOL.
II: THE UNION TO SCOTT**

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Three centuries of Scottish literature. Vol. II: The union to Scott by Hugh Walker

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HUGH WALKER

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SCOTTISH LITERATURE

BY

HUGH WALKER, M.A.

PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH IN ST. DAVID'S COLLEGE, LIMERICK

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THREE CENTURIES OF SCOTTISH LITERATURE.

CHAPTER VII.

RAMSAY TO FERGUSSON.

IN an earlier chapter reference has been made to the long and disastrous eclipse under which the native literature, and especially the poetry, of Scotland passed during the seventeenth century. The union of the Crown of Scotland with that of England would in any case have drawn talent from the smaller country; but if it had brought internal peace the loss would soon have been made good, and more than made good. But the Union did not bring peace. In the disturbed annals of Scotland there are periods of more violent commotion than the seventeenth century, but few if any more full of petty quarrels. Not only was the country shaken by the great civil struggle which convulsed England as well, but it was distracted also to a degree which England never experienced by religious differences. The mutual hatred of sects drained the strength of the nation; and on the whole it is little to be wondered at that there were only a few, like the Semples of Beltrees, who kept alive, in occasional compositions, the tradition of vernacular poetry.

As soon as the Revolution had effected a settlement, and the strong government of William, while justly establishing the Presbyterians as the exponents of the religion of the State, had prohibited the persecution of the now vanquished Episcopalians, literature and art began to revive. Some time had naturally to pass before the fruit of firm government and internal peace ripened; and the literary revival is chronologically associated rather with the union of the Parliaments than with the Revolution. The removal of the seat of government to Westminster, if not a greater fact than the union of the Crowns, at any rate made a deeper and more permanent impression upon the literature of the smaller country. It was also different in its action. In the seventeenth century the leading poets, such as Sir William Alexander and Drummond of Hawthornden, Anglicised themselves as completely as they were able, and by doing so lost, to a large extent, their national audience. Vernacular literature seemed to be in danger of extinction. In the eighteenth century, on the contrary, an English and a Scottish school arose and flourished side by side. Further, the Scotchmen of the seventeenth century were almost wholly borrowers from the English; they contributed no appreciable national element to the strong and healthy English literature of the reign of James I. Three generations later the case was very different. Not only the native school, but the Anglicised writers, taught at least as much as they learnt. They gave to a somewhat jaded literature a fresh impulse and a new vitality. In view of the condition of the literary society of Edinburgh in that age, this statement, as far as concerns the writers in English, may seem questionable. That society

was organised in the closest imitation of that of London. Clubs sprang up where the wits assembled and sharpened their intellects one against another; periodicals were started to emulate *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*; and "correctness" was studied with as anxious care, though not with such conspicuous success, in the High Street and the Canongate as at Twickenham. And it is true that the minor writers of English are as little original as it is possible to conceive. With regard to the more considerable men, it will be the business of a separate chapter to justify the assertion that they taught as much as they learnt in England.

The first place in interest must however be given to the native school. It was original; for though Ramsay and his collaborateurs followed, they did not merely reproduce the old Scottish poetry, but adapted it to new circumstances and a new age. It was original so far, that the writers in it were among the earliest precursors of that revolution in poetic style which swept away the traditions of the "correct" poets, and established in their place the naturalism of Wordsworth. Many influences doubtless united to bring about that revolution; but the natural style was practised by Ramsay and his contemporaries, and after him by Fergusson, in Scotland, long before the principle of it was proclaimed in England. At the same time, the practice of these men was inconsistent. They apparently detected no incongruity between what they did in Scotch and what they did as imitators of Pope in English; probably they never brought the two styles of work together, tacitly assuming each to be proper in its own sphere.

The significance of Watson's *Choice Collection* has been already noted in connexion with the songs and ballads.

It gave a powerful stimulus to Scottish poetry in general, and especially to poetry in the vernacular; but, although part of the contents of the collection was new or recent, Watson brought to the front no hitherto unknown genius, no one who displayed a capacity for leadership, or who might have been expected to revive the poetic traditions of Dunbar and Douglas and Lindsay. William Hamilton of Gilbertfield was no more than respectable; yet he was the equal of any of the living writers whom Watson helped to bring forward. Five years passed between the beginning and the conclusion of Watson's undertaking—if that can be said to have a conclusion at all which ends with what was practically a promise, never fulfilled, of a new volume—and still no one had appeared of more than mediocre gifts. To the year after the appearance of Watson's third part, however, belong the earliest known verses of a man who, though not himself a great poet, did a great work for poetry. In 1712 the Easy Club was founded, and Allan Ramsay addressed it in a set of poor verses. He it was who was destined to breathe new life into Scottish vernacular poetry, and who in consequence holds a position inferior in historical interest only to that of Burns. He may be said, in fact, to have made Burns possible.

Allan Ramsay was born in the parish of Crawford-moor, a lonely district of Lanarkshire, in 1686. He was of good family, claiming kinship with the Ramsays of Dalhousie—

“Dalhousie of an auld descent,
My chief, my stoup, and ornament.”

But the early death of his father and the remarriage of his mother left him to face the world poor and unassisted. In