

**THE LIFE OF  
PHILIP SKELTON**

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The life of Philip Skelton by Samuel Burdy

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**SAMUEL BURDY**

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## INTRODUCTION.

It is natural in considering a book descriptive of the North of Ireland and the subject of which is the biography of one native of that region by another, to go back to the beginning of history and to reflect that Ulster has been a home of literature from very early times and has produced a long series of men of letters during fourteen centuries. The reflection is profitable since literature is a bond which tends to draw men together for their good, and in its enjoyment to lead them to feel united in admiration of the books which are part of their inheritance. It is not necessary to explain how each piece or kind of literature is related to what has gone before it, and writers are often unconscious of influences derived from the country in which they were born or brought up. Skelton's poem which begins :

To God, ye choir above, begin  
A hymn so loud and strong  
That all the universe may hear  
And join the grateful song.

seems, when carefully studied, to indicate that he had read the hymn of St. Columba :

Altus prositor, vetustus dierum et ingenitus,

perhaps the oldest extant composition by an Ultonian author.

It was a scribe of Ulster, Ferdornach, who wrote a great part of the Book of Armagh in the first half of the ninth century. Where the art of writing was so well developed literary composition was certainly practised, and the manuscript shows that this was in the vernacular as well as in Latin.

Cormacan, son of Maelbrighde, wrote a famous lay about the middle of the tenth century on the march round Ireland in 942 of Muirheartach, son of Niall glundubh, who started from his own stronghold of Ailech near Derry, crossed the Ban into the lesser Ulster, marched south as far as the fertile plains round Cashel, and thence to Cenncoradh on the Shannon, the chief fortress of the king of Thomond, returning home through Bearnas mor in Tirconnell to Ailech, where Ceallachan, king of Cashel, and Conchobar, son of the king of Connaught, and others, his hostages for the payment of tribute, remained while great feasts celebrated the triumph of Muirheartach.

The poem of Gillabrigbde MacConmidhe on the death of Brian O'Neill at the battle of Down in 1260 carries on the series of the literary

monuments of Ulster in the original language. Manus O'Donnell's life of St. Columcille, the northern writers in the poetic controversy known as "the Contention of the Bards",<sup>1</sup> Lughaidh O'Clery's life of Aodh ruadh O'Donnell, and the passages in which the O'Clerys relate the events of their own times in the chronicle generally known as the Annals of the Four Masters, with many other writers of verse and prose, continue the literature of Ulster to the first quarter of the seventeenth century.

At the time when the O'Clerys were writing, two languages little known there before established themselves in Ulster, the English of England and the allied tongue of the Lowlands of Scotland. The former, as was natural, so completely prevailed that the influence of the latter is often forgotten. A familiar phrase used in the Irish-speaking parts of Ulster well into the reign of Queen Victoria illustrates the linguistic view of the original inhabitants. When a man nearly ignorant of the Teutonic dialects was spoken to in English he always replied, "Na Scotch". If his studies had gone a less way still, he said, "Ni fhil oen fhocal béarla", "Not one word of dialect".

No great works were produced in Ireland in the language of the Lowlands of Scotland, but its influence upon the writings of those who wrote

<sup>1</sup> Tomarbhagh na bhlligte.

English in Ulster is easily traced and gives a distinct character to many of the books produced between the time of the Plantation and that of the last Great Famine. These books, though written by men whose ancestors a few generations back came from Scotland, France, or England, show a great regard for Ulster, which the authors had made their country.

James Stuart, whose *Historical Memoirs of the City of Armagh* was printed at Newry in 1819 and his poems at Belfast in 1811, deserves a high place amongst these writers. His prose work is not a mere local account of Armagh, but is a general history of Ireland in relation to the primatial city written with great affection for the subject and knowledge of it. His love for the ancient history of the country and regard for its heroic characters are shown in many passages of his prose and in his poem of "Morna's Hill", which relates the death of Niall Caille, king of Ireland, on the bank of the river Callan near Armagh in A. D. 846.

John Graham, curate of Lifford in the Established Church, was an historical writer of less impartiality than Stuart, but whose *Derriana*, printed at Londonderry in 1823, and other historical works deserve to be studied as part of the literature of Ulster as well as because they contain a large collection of contemporary accounts of events and illustrations of the feelings of the time.