

A HIGHLAND TOUR IN POETRY.

BY ROBERT ANDERSON.

ONE day, I picked up on a Castlegate stall a sadly-battered copy of "The Highlands; the Scottish Martyrs; and Other Poems," by the Rev. James G. Small, Bervie. A glance at it showed me that the principal poem in the book was more or less a descriptive account of the Highlands, one page, for example, being headed "Glenmorriston—Glen-garry—Ben Nevis," so I handed over the small sum demanded and made myself its owner. The work and its author were alike unknown to me, but a reference to D. H. Edwards's invaluable "Modern Scottish Poets" furnished some information regarding both. Mr. Small was born in Edinburgh in 1817, was educated at the High School and University, and was licensed by the Presbytery as a probationer of the Church of Scotland. He was evidently still without a church when the Disruption occurred, and, throwing in his lot with the non-intrusionists, he occupied several preaching stations as a probationer, finally becoming minister of the Free Church at Bervie, in Kincardineshire, in 1846. He died in 1888.

Mr. Small displayed considerable poetical talent even in his student days, carrying off prizes for poetical compositions. The work already named was first published in 1843, and comprised, besides the poem on "The Highlands," a narrative poem, "The Scottish Martyrs," nearly as long; "The Liberation of Greece from the Turkish Yoke," a prize poem in 64 stanzas, written in 1835; "Imagination," a "tale" extending to 72 stanzas; and a few minor pieces. A second edition appeared in 1844, with "Notes" to "The Highlands" poem, intended as a guide to the itinerary followed, or, as the author phrased it, "to supplement, as concisely as possible, the musings which he has attempted to express in verse by the matters of fact which are more proper to prose." It was followed by a third

edition in 1852, containing a few more poems; and it is this edition that I now possess.

Of its contents the poem on "The Highlands" is the only one that need concern us here. At one time, I believe, it enjoyed considerable popularity. Contemporary reviewers praised it, one of them commending it as "an eminently beautiful piece of composition, exhibiting evident signs of the vivifying spirit which makes all nature 'beauty to the eye and music to the ear.'" And, according to the memoir of Small in "Edwards," Wordsworth had acknowledged that he found in it, both in sentiment and expression, "much, very much to admire." Without in any way disparaging these encomiums, the present-day reader would probably regard the poem as too long and diffuse, more fluent than virile. As a poetical picture of Highland scenery it is in a way reminiscent of descriptions given by Sir Walter Scott in "The Lord of the Isles," but no passage in it at all approaches the celebrated lines in which Scott delineates Loch Coruisk, in Skye—

The wildest glen, but this, can show
Some touch of Nature's genial glow;
On high Benmore green mosses grow,
And heath-bells bud in deep Glencroe,
 And copse on Cruchan-Ben;
But here—above, around, below
 On mountain or in glen,
Nor tree, nor shrub, nor plant, nor flower.
Nor ought of vegetative power,
 The weary eye may ken.
For all is rocks at random thrown,
Black waves, bare crags, and banks of stone,
 As if were here denied
The summer sun, the spring's sweet dew,
That clothe with many a varied hue
 The bleakest mountain-side.

This, however, is an exceptionally high standard to attain; and, though falling far short of it, Mr. Small's work contains many passages of effective description. He manipulates the Spenserian stanza with considerable ease

and a certain degree of felicitous smoothness, but the poem is marked—not to say marred—by an excessive indulgence in imagery and rhapsody. Descriptive narrative, in short, is sacrificed to moral reflection—only it must be owned that the author frankly intimates that “his lay is meant rather as a reflective than as a descriptive one,” and expresses the hope that, while he has principally endeavoured to “interpret the voice of Nature,” he has at the same time given “sufficient intimations of what his eyes have actually seen, and his ears heard, to enable those who are conversant with such scenes to judge of the fidelity of his interpretations.” The reflective tone is pitched at the very outset, for the first canto—there are five cantos altogether—opens in this fashion :

Dull is the soul that e'er hath roamed along
 'Mong Scotia's vales and hills, and hath not caught
 The inspiring breath that prompts to pensive song ;
 To whom, in seasons of sweet, silent thought,
 The image of these scenes is never brought,
 Nor fondly cherished as a precious dower ;
 Upon whose breast their influence hath not wrought
 As with a charm—whose gently soothing power
 His heart hath gladly owned in many an after hour.

And I have felt that charm—and, not in vain,
 Upon my soul unfadingly impressed,
 These scenes in lively vision still remain ;
 For never yet hath my delighted breast
 Such calm, deep, purifying joy confessed,
 As when 'mid these bright regions I have stood,
 Or as when Memory my soul hath blessed,
 And with her magic mirror hath renewed
 To fancy's gladdened eye, lake, dell, and bosky wood.

After this, it is hardly surprising to find “the gladdening influence of a bright summer's day, succeeding to a threatening morning” expanded into eight stanzas, of which the following are two :—

The morn rose wrapt in clouds ; the murky sky
 Deluged the earth ; and, for to-day, I deemed,
 No smile from nature's face would cheer mine eye.
 But soon from heaven a ray of promise beamed,

And the glad hills looked out, and brightly gleamed ;
And forth I fared rejoicing, for I found
That down the mountains now the torrents streamed
With livelier mirth and more exulting bound,
And a new beauty seemed diffused o'er all around.

And now the slowly rising clouds disclose
A glorious scene. The sun, with struggling pride,
Bursts forth, and in his beams the water glows.
The distant islands scattered far and wide,
The rugged mountains rising by my side,
Trees fresh and fragrant from the recent rain,
The long low heave of the returning tide,
And all the glory of the boundless main,
Invite me forth to muse—nor is their call in vain.

This "glorious scene," by the way, is on the coast of Moidart. We are supposed to have embarked at Oban, swept round Mull, and visited Iona and Staffa, the poet outlining the scenery *en route* and contributing also disquisitions on the ancient Caledonians, the mythology of Ossian, the introduction of Christianity, and the Culdees. Now, in the second canto, we make for Skye, "where the dark Coolins in wild glory tower." "'Twere well," our poet says :—

'Twere well to linger here, and silently
To muse, till night's descending shades should throw
A deep and solemn gloom across the sky,
Congenial with the gloom that rests below,
And mark the mountains as they seem to grow
To wilder grandeur and more awful height.

But, instead, he "keeps his onward course," touching at Loch Duich and Kintail, and finally reaching Loch Torridon and Loch Maree :—

Away ! and let me wander where the hills
Gird wild Loch Torridon, till now I stand
Beside that cliff-encompassed lake, which fills
Beyond all other in this teeming land,
The musing soul with feelings of the grand
And sternly glorious, not unmingled oft—
And most when eve doth o'er the scene expand
Her dewy wings, and rests serene aloft—
With thoughts more sweetly calm, feelings more mild and soft.

Far let me wander down thy craggy shore,
 With rocks and trees bestrewn, dark Loch Maree.

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In rugged grandeur by the placid lake,
 Rise the bold mountain-cliffs sublimely rude,
 A pleasing contrast, each with each, they make ;
 And, when in such harmonious union viewed,
 Each with more powerful charms appears imbued.

Our poetical cicerone must needs moralise, however, and find a comparison in "mingling hearts," just as, when, in the third canto, he reaches Ben Nevis by way of the great glen, he perceives the Scottish character typified in its "brooding tempests" and "ceaseless showers"—

Grieve not when tempests rave and darkly roll
 Th' embattled clouds along the mountain's side,
 These towering hills are like the dauntless soul
 Of Caledonia, and when tempests chide
 And winds assail them, then in strength and pride
 They rise, and seem more glorious than before.
 See ! down each rugged steep with foaming tide
 Rush the retreating waters : so of yore
 Fled the assailing foe from Scotia's rock-bound shore.

Another canto describes Scottish lakes ; and, after visiting Lochs Katrine, Achray, and Vennachar, the poet sees

The fair Loch Ard display
 Her placid bosom, 'mid a rich array
 Of skirting woods, and isles that calmly rest
 On the bright waters, gleaming in the ray
 On the descending sun ; while in the west
 The dark Ben Lomond rears far off his snowy crest.

The last canto deals with a "return" journey to the Highlands :—

Again among the Highlands ! and again
 Upon my sight these wondrous scenes arise.

But the route is a new one—through Glenfalloch and Strathfillan, along Loch Tay and down the river to Logie-rail, then "up" "by the Tummel and banks o' the Garry"

to Killiecrankie, Blair Atholl, and over the Perthshire border to Loch Laggan and Upper Strathspey—

While thus I muse where the wild Bruar rolls,
Gazing across the northward moors, the thought
Of dark Loch Garry with its verdant knolls.

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Of drear Loch Erich't's awful solitude,
And lonely Laggan, to my soul is brought ;
And I remember how, entranced, I stood
Where Rothiemurchus spreads his wide and bristling wood.

This mention of Rothiemurchus is the solitary reference to any place within the immediate "region" of the Cairngorm Club, but the author in his preface furnishes a reason for not introducing "a few additional passages regarding some scenes which, since the publication of the second edition, he had an opportunity either of visiting for the first time or of more fully exploring"—Deeside in particular. He enumerates, however, the chief points of attraction which "this interesting district" presents, dilating on Balmoral, to which Queen Victoria had at that date only begun to resort. "Our loyal heart," he says, "rejoices to find that this retreat of our liege Lady and her Royal Consort contains all the elements of grandeur and of beauty;" and he gives a good reason for the confident opinion thus expressed—"Viewed from the north bank of the Dee, Balmoral presents a lordly aspect, and even wears, from the magnificence of its setting, an air of majesty which well comports with the royal associations which are now attached to it. This is especially felt on a fine autumnal evening, when the western clouds are suffused with a gorgeous glow, and the stately form of Lochnagar, wrapped in the solemn gloom of its own shadow, stands out, abrupt and bold, against the golden sky, which gives depth, by its contrasted brilliance, to the stern darkness of the precipitous mountain." With this facility for word-painting, Mr. Small might well have essayed fuller descriptions of Highland scenery. Had he done so, and curtailed his moralisings, his book would probably be better known to-day.