

## JOHN HILL BURTON.

Historian, Biographer, and Mountaineer.

BY J. R. LESLIE GRAY.

It is now more than half a century since the spare and athletic form of this eminent man of letters was seen in the streets of Edinburgh, but it is still remembered by some of the older citizens. John Hill Burton was born in Aberdeen on August 22, 1809. His father was a retired army officer, and his mother was a daughter of John Paton, Laird of Grandholm. His schooldays were passed in his native city, and he graduated at Marischal College. After having been for a time in a legal office he migrated to Edinburgh, and was admitted a member of the Faculty of Advocates. Although he was profoundly learned in the law, forensic eloquence was not his forte, and for years he was indebted to his pen for a living.

In politics he was a Liberal of the old school and a disciple of Jeremy Bentham, but though an earnest Reformer, he was no bigot, and had many friends in both camps. Most of his works were published by Blackwood, and he was a frequent and esteemed contributor to *Maga*, as well as to the *Edinburgh Review*, the *Westminster Review*, and the *Scotsman*. His first work of importance was a "Life of David Hume," which is still the leading authority on the career of that illustrious philosopher and historian. He also wrote biographies of Lord President Forbes, and that ambiguous character, the Lord Lovat of the Forty-five.

In 1854 he was appointed Secretary to the Prisons Board for Scotland, and his salary rendering him independent of journalism, he was able to devote the whole of his spare time to the preparation of his *magnum opus*, the "History of Scotland" from the earliest times to the suppression of the last Jacobite rising. This work, which was published

in ten volumes, may be regarded as the key history of that ancient kingdom. Hill Burton's omnivorous reading and indefatigable research enabled him to bring to light many historical facts that were unknown even to such distinguished predecessors as Sir Walter Scott and Patrick Fraser Tytler. His successors, including Andrew Lang and Professor Hume Brown, gladly acknowledged their indebtedness to his labours. He shows a masculine grasp of his complicated subject, and seldom indulges in rhetoric or word painting. His scholarly, though easy and unpedantic style, enables his readers to assimilate without difficulty the facts and ideas which are embodied in his pages. To these qualities he adds the virtues, so important in a historian, of accuracy and impartiality.

Subsequently he wrote two other important works, "The Scot Abroad," and "The Book Hunter." The former consists of a series of interesting short biographies of the most outstanding figures among that numerous body of Scotsmen who, during a period of several centuries, emigrated to the Continent, and rose to high distinction in their adopted countries. "The Book Hunter" is an entertaining account of the exploits of those enterprising bibliophiles, whose scent for old or rare editions was as keen as that of a bloodhound on the track of a criminal. He shows how their discrimination and pertinacity were frequently rewarded by the acquisition of veritable treasures.

Hill Burton was a much respected and highly popular citizen of Edinburgh for nearly half a century. He held the dignified office of Historiographer Royal for Scotland, and was entitled to write himself D.C.L.(Oxon.) and LL.D.(Edin.). He was a zealous supporter of the Volunteer movement, and though he was rather over middle age when that force was first embodied, he became an original and enthusiastic member of the old Q.E.R.V.B.

Although he was so diligent as a student and industrious as a writer, he was also a thorough open-air man, greatly addicted to hard physical exercise. He was an indefatigable pedestrian well able to accomplish his fifty miles a day, and was one of the pioneers of the pursuit of systematic

mountain climbing in Scotland. When a schoolboy he spent the greater part of his holidays in Braemar, and his curiosity was aroused by the sight of the great mountains that rise in the vicinity of that famous holiday resort. An old Highland gamekeeper, whom he consulted upon the subject, told him that the range was "a fery fulgar place, not fit for a young shentlemans to go at all." This reply was rather discouraging, but somewhat later he resolved to discover for himself whether the precipices and snow-fields were really quite so vulgar as the Highland sage had pronounced them. Some of his early adventures among the Cairngorms were rather trying, and even perilous, but eventually he became thoroughly familiar with every peak, pass, and corrie in these delectable mountains. He also extended his wanderings to other mountain ranges in Scotland, and later to the Alps. He has left us an account of some of his exploits as a walker and a climber in that delightful little volume, "The Cairngorm Mountains,"\* which is one of the first mountaineering classics published in this country.

\* *C.C.J.*, IV., pp. 322-327, "a Cairngorm Classic."