

ROBERT WHITE.

*(Reprinted from the "Hawick Advertiser," Saturday,
September 25, 1869.)*

The name of Robert White, in connexion with the literature of the Border, from time to time meets the eye. He is sometimes confounded with the writer who has given to the world various handbooks and books of tourist rambles. The subject of our notice resides in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, where, in the mellow ripeness of years, he enjoys books and the gratification of those tastes which have given zest to a life pledged to literature. We have heard it said that the village of Yetholm claims him for his birth-place; so he is, with all his zig-zagging on the marches in ballad lore and narrative of Border battle-field, a Scottish Borderer after all. Redesdale, however, saw his boyhood disporting itself in frolic and cow-herding by the pleasant haughs of Otterburn. There he got gristle and pith into his bones by hardy labour, and pleasant days of helpfulness to his father, who rented a piece of land. There, too, he became smitten by the spirit of Border lore. The ballads, the knightly tales, the story-telling memories of the Borderland, all had their charms for him. There was Otterburn, too, a name to cause the breast to heave and the muscles of the arm to swell as the deeds of the battle of 1388 came upon the memory. Robert White read, and read with a hungry mind, till he sighed to find some broader field where he could talk with men and take his part in the more active duties of life. Newcastle at last gave him a settlement, and saw him a clerk in a brass-foundry. A poet, or with a poet's taste, he was not a dreamer. Diligence and faithful honest servitude were the vouchers which commended him to the entire confidence of his employers. With him there was not what Charles Lamb called "the dry drudgery of the desk's dead wood," but the cheerful performance of work,

and the good use of leisure hours. A youth who could breakfast on porridge, and who had shorn not a few hairsts—who had held the plough on the banks of the Reed and the Otter, and who carried the thrifty, persevering maxims of his father's roof with him, was sure to succeed, especially when favoured by the fine Roman, clerkly hand which he was fortunate to have acquired at the village school.

Settled down in the big North town, he improved his time. Congenial friends he soon came to know, who loved books, and who could direct him in his studies and cultivation of his tastes. Foremost on his list of bosom friends was James Telfer, known on the Scottish Border as the author of "Barbara Gray," and various poetical efforts which have won for him a kindly remembrance. Mr Telfer was poor—a plodding, ill-rewarded schoolmaster in a roadside cottage on the banks of the Liddel. Dearly he loved an old book, and his Newcastle friend, White, was full of remembrance of him in this passion, for it amounted to a passion. At Telfer's vacation times, the two found themselves together. It was a great enjoyment for the unkempt bookish man to lounge by book-stall and booksellers' counters on the strength of his intimacy with Robert White, and to handle the literary treasures. And it was a sight in itself for an observer, fond of the queerer etchings of human character, to get his eye on Telfer at a Newcastle book-stall. There was about him the port of a tranquil, modest man. His rain-beaten white hat, telling of a deal of wet weather about Saughtree and Daston Burn; the well *wauket* folds of his auld gray plaid hitched over his left shoulder; his big, awkward framework, with that unassuming pock-pitted face, and the knowing look and sign of inward comfort with which he handled and *keeked* between the rarer old books, would have given the hint to an observer of character that this vacation visitor was not a clown, but had the subtle something of the "grand old name of gentleman" about him.

Such was James Telfer, of Saughtree, as he appeared annually at Newcastle to be the guest of Robert White. They maintained their friendship in a close epistolary intimacy, which we trust will one day be given to the world, for Telfer was one of the very best letter writers. It was a sad day for Robert White when he learned that his friend was no more. Many have seen the picture, by Ward, of Samuel

Johnson awaiting an audience with Chesterfield in the lobby of the leader of fashion. If a modern painter is in lack of a subject we can give him one. It is that of old Telfer, in the midst of school duties, suddenly feeling that his last illness was upon him, and gathering that handful of shepherds' children about him, telling them his work was done, and counselling them all to be good and dutiful in the paths of life, and then dismissing them and crawling ben to the far end of the cottage to die.

It was in 1829 that Robert White gave to the world his poem of the "Tynemouth 'Nun," and henceforth he was known as a man of lettered tastes in Newcastle. Local periodicals, "The Newcastle Magazine," and Richardson's "Table Book" obtained many contributions from his pen. His love of literary research, of books, ballads, broadsides, and all that belonged to them, settled, if not in authorship, in the collection of a valuable library, which, now that Mr White is in the enjoyment of ease in worldly circumstances, contains treasures which would fascinate any member of that quaint guild of the book-hunter. This easy position in worldly means which he has attained may be referred to complimentarily. It has been the well-earned result of a steady adherence to those simple, steady, and careful habits which he brought with him from Redesdale. Mr. Watson, his employer, out of a sense of indebtedness for long and faithful services, on dying left him considerable means, and from another member of the same family Mr White has received further substantial marks of the sense entertained for his character and worth. Within the last few years Mr White has been released from the routine of office work, and this has given him full opportunities of gratifying his unquenchable love of what may be termed the imaginative pleasures of literature and literary association. He has made pilgrimages to all the spots hallowed in the world's remembrance. The spirit of Dr Johnson's celebrated sentence on visiting Iona he has made a faith of. With a zeal perfervid he has wandered over all the haunts of Shakespeare, of Milton, of Scott, of Burns, of Wordsworth, of Knox, of Wallace, of Bruce, and of the great names which "sparkle on the fore-finger of all time." The old castles, abbeys, battle-fields, camps, Roman walls, the mountains, the glens, almost every spot within the British island which has a story of note to unfold he has

visited. In foreign travel, too, he has ventured far from home. It may be said this is not authorship, and any man who can buy one of Cooke's tickets may do the same ; but with him it is a service of the soul—a devout idiosyncrasy of Mr White's nature, which, combined with other characteristics, gives individuality and circumstances to the manner of his life. In all which concerns the Borderland he is a fervent enthusiast, and he has rendered valuable service in elucidating subjects of Border history. His account of the battle of Flodden gives a succinct and careful statement of that great fight. As a memorial monogram of what may be regarded as one of the best hand-to-hand fights between two brave nations, it will always be valuable. The peculiarity of Mr White in treating of such themes is that he writes with a chivalrous neutrality which gives a fairness and judicial interest to his pages. This quality is the expression of his half Scot, half English, debateable-land personality. We select the closing passage of the account of Flodden as remarkably well recorded :—

“This was the greatest, the last, and the most decisive battle ever stricken on the Borders. England, though her loss was great, obtained thereby an ascendancy over her rival which stayed the contention of arms, and evinced she would not submit to be injured with impunity. To Scotland it was a most stunning and dreadful blow. The first of her clergy, nobility, and gentry, with the very best of her warriors, all yielded up their lives for the martial display and chivalric bearing of their gallant and beloved king. When the sad tidings reached city, town, and village, shrieks and outpourings of female anguish from palace, hall, bower, and cottage were heard in every direction. Wives were made widows—mothers lost their sons—sisters were left brotherless—maids were bereaved of their lovers—and grief preying upon affectionate and susceptible hearts, would bring many a fair face to the grave ere the following spring clothed the earth with beauty. It was not till nearly two succeeding generations passed away that Scotland regained her wonted cheerfulness ; and even a century afterwards, when the direct descendant of the monarch who lost all at Flodden occupied the English throne, the story of that field—woeful as ‘The Dead March in Saul’—was listened to with regret. Later still, the mournful theme was taken up by her national bards, who instinctively tuned their harps

to the tone of popular feeling; and the strains they have sung of that great disaster, accompanied by Tradition's wild but welcome tongue, will continue to be prized while tenderness and heroic energy find an echo in the bosoms of her people."

"The Battle of Neville's Cross" was another publication of the same description. In 1858 he edited a reprint of the poems of Dr John Leyden, prefacing it with a biographical memoir of the poet. Leyden was a man for whose memory Robert White has loved to bestow the most appreciative sympathy. The impetuous ardour of the bard, his scholarship, his Border minstrelsy, his burning enthusiasm for his native soil, all formed a character sure to obtain from Mr White a full meed of regards. The book is therefore an excellent edition of a favourite poet, and it also is illustrative of the spirit and enterprise of Mr. Rutherford, of Kelso, as a publisher. We only wish the same gentleman, by Mr White's assistance, would bring out a new edition of the poems of Thomas Pringle—a book which is scarce, but one which ought not to be so, for it forms the embalming memorial, even in its restricted issue, of as fine a spirit as ever blended poetry, patriotism, and the love of freedom.

We ought in proper order to have referred to the "History of the Battle of Otterburn" by Mr White, which appeared in 1857. This also is a tastefully got up publication, and a valuable memorial of one of the most stirring events of Border History. There was a poetical fitness that a man of Mr. White's style of mind should become the historian of a battle fought upon the very benty knowes where he had tended his father's flocks, and heard the cocks crow, and seen the smoke of hamlets curl. The book was dedicated to Algernon, one of the late Dukes of Northumberland, who had felt much interest in its preparation. In it the reader will find the best editions of the ballads, which with Homeric fire recite the martial deeds of "the invincible knights of old," in the

"Fray which 'gan at Otterborne

Between the nyghte and the day."

As many are aware, there is a controversy, which is renewed from time to time, and at present by Mr. Timbs, as to the ballads which really pertain to the Otterburn fray. "Chevy Chase" has with most been supposed to be an epic commemorative of this event. This is now strenuously

denied by some writers, who contend that that ballad is merely a hunting rhythmical bravo, composed at a venture by some minstrel, and having no fitting relation to the Otterburn battle.

In our opinion "Chevy Chase" does form a memorial recital of the battle. Its inaccuracies, its dramatized flourishings, its mixture of hunting and war, its little bits of sentiment, are nothing else than what Tacitus termed the *licentia poetatis*. What is it to a minstrel composing a narrative of a battle which comes to him through tradition only (for "Chevy Chase" is doubtless much more modern in its composition than the century of Otterburn) to jingle and jumble things together, even though dates, names, and allusions get a-jee? He has a purpose for the nonce to serve, and it is merely trying such ballad remains by a standard they never were meant to be tried by, to subject them to the test of critical or narrative accuracy. This is well stated by Lord Macaulay in the preface to his "Lays of Ancient Rome." Whoever wrote "Chevy Chase" did his work well, and he need not have been ashamed to put his mark on his work, so that after ages could have known him—a work which stirred the inborn chivalry of Sir Philip Sidney, and charmed the most graceful of English writers. Mr. White's book of "Otterburn" possesses many merits which will preserve it as a record of an important historical event, not likely to be narrated with minuteness by writers at a distance.

We have referred to Robert White as a poet. It would be uncourteous to a man of so much literary zeal to overlook his claims in this respect. These are seen in many pieces which are scattered over the course of his mental history. They seem to possess more of the quality of a fanciful recreation and intellectual exercise than anything indicative of intense feeling or the ambition of the higher strains of the poet's art. They may be nothing to the world, but they are much to him. The humble incident, the graceful kindness of sentiment, and the unvarying healthy fancies, are rounded off in a simple, smooth versification. In 1867, Mr White, as a pleasant souvenir, placed before the world a selection of his pieces in a handsome volume, also produced by the press of Mr Rutherford, of Kelso. Prefaced to the publication is an excellent likeness which will, we are certain, please friends and serve a pur-

pose of remembrance. It is that of an honest, plain man, who has quitted himself honourably in the business of life, and who, though war has been much his theme, is full of peaceful feelings, and brimming over with kindness of heart—a man “tendir and trewe” in all the friendships of life, with the indefeasable right to write pleasing verses as the outcome of the more imaginative part of his nature, if he so wills. The more ambitious poem in this volume of Robert White, is “Edwin, a Northumberland Tale,” founded on events connected with an invasion of the eastern border by Sir William Wallace with the Scottish army. Our space precludes us giving portions of it at present, as we prefer to give several stanzas of his spirited ballad on the “Lighting of Beacons on the Scottish Border during the night of Tuesday, the 31st of January, 1804.”

“It was within our father’s time, full sixty years ago,
That Britain stood in readiness to battle with her foe ;
For France beneath Napoleon’s eye had gather’d every
band
That she might come to conquer us, and seize our father-
land.

Wide o’er the Scottish Border, on each commanding height,
Were beacons placed that, by their flame, might tell
throughout the night,
If once the base, invading hordes should dare to venture
o’er,
And show themselves in war array upon our native shore.

Soon set the sun—the lingering eve all dark and lonely sped,
Till the good folks of Yetholm town had partly gone to bed ;
When, hark ! a mounted horseman came spurring from the
north ;
Then long and loud a bugle blew, when man and maid came
forth.

‘Awake, arouse ye, Volunteers !—this is no time for sleep :
Make ready for the enemy, though wife and children weep ;
The beacons high are blazing bright ; the French are doubt-
less near ;
Arise and arm you for defence of this our country dear !’—
Then beat to arms the rolling drum, and many a darting
light,
Through open door and window small, gleam’d flickering on
the night ;

While little girl and mother kind, and matron growing
old,
Gave ready aid as if their hearts were made of sternest
mould.

* * * * *

Rang forth the martial music, and many a moisten'd
eye,
Beheld the squadron nothward march beneath the starry
sky,
But soon arose the waning moon, sole empress of the
night,
And towering hill and lengthening dale gleam'd in her
silver light.

Ascending up to higher ground, a stirring sight was
there !
Far to the right the hill of Hume sent forth its ruddy
glare ;
Upon the left o'er Caverton the light was flaming high,
While Dunion distant in the west illumed both land and
sky.

As on they went, from every side came men in headlong
speed ;
As now by Kelso's spacious bridge they cross the lovely
Tweed ;
But when they reached the market place, arose so loud a
clang
Of welcome, that the streets around and neighbouring
echoes rang.

The sun arose, and such a morn ! Through all the Border-
land,
From Berwick west o'er Liddesdale and on to Solway
strand,
Our yeomen brave by thousands, all bearing arms, came
forth,
Determined nobly to defend the country of their birth.

Advanced the day, and then the truth more plainly did
appear ;
At Hume the warder chanced to mark in England, burning
clear,
A blazing fire, and deeming it betoken'd woe and harm,
His beacon high he lighted up and hence the false alarm.

Now glory to the gallant men who thus so bravely stood,
 And in defence of all we love had shed their dearest blood ;
 Although unused to feats of arms, the British spirit bold
 Burn'd in their manly bosoms as it did in knights of old.

Oh ! may the same a lesson prove through each succeeding
 age !

The gift of FREEDOM is our best and glorious heritage :
 Our fathers won it as their right, through peril, blood, and
 strife ;

And did we lose a boon so rare, oh ! what to us were life !”

Bravo, Robert White ! we have seen a pension given for
 worse things. If this stirring speech does not equal
 Macaulay's "Armada" ballad, we can at least welcome it
 with a lusty shout of "well done," or with the applauding
 cry of Tasset and Tarretburn "oor seyde yit, yit, yit, yit,
 oh brave us, poke-pudding rogues !”

There is a very good fishing song—a subject of composition
 in which Newcastle literature has shone—from which we
 will quote a stanza—

“ At Birdhope Craig, and sweet Todlaw,
 The finney spankers lie,
 Near jutting craig or spreading shaw,
 Secure from sun and sky ;
 But we can lightly thraw a flee
 Each distant eddy o'er,
 And switch them out by stane and tree,
 As we hae done of yore.

'Neath Lisha brig, fu' pure and soft,
 O'er holm and upland broun,
 Which we in youth hae traversed oft,
 The westlin wind comes down.
 Sweet is its breath, but sweeter still
 Upon the gurly shore,
 Wi' pliant rod our creel to fill,
 As oft we did of yore.”

A stave from another song, "Coquet side," and we will
 draw our notice to a close—

“ See trouts are loupin' left and right,
 Now let your flees fa' softly down ;
 The rain that pattered through the night
 Has dyed the water lightly brown.

Ye've nabbed him there, a switchin' loon,
 In stream or pool nae mair he'll glide :
 Three fish like that are worth a crown
 To chieils like us in Coquet side.

Another's heuk'd, I hae him fast,
 The danglin bob is snatched and a' ;
 These lucky moments winna last—
 We hae a rise at ilka thraw.
 How fine the welcome breezes blaw,
 And curl in waves the dimplin tide !
 Sic sport as this I never saw—
 What think ye now o' Coquet side !

Your kings might prize a shepherd's lot,
 Wi' streams below, and hills abune,
 For blessings grace his cozy cot
 When heart and saul are baith in tune.
 If life be like a day in June,
 As we hae choice o' England wide,
 Wha wadna spend the afternoon,—
 And gloamin' too, by Coquet side ?”

Mr White has told the story of various battles, but one remains yet to be recorded, that of Bannockburn. A notice recently appeared in the *Athenæum* that he was engaged on a work of this kind. Scotland more and more lends an ear to any one who will repeat the tale of that great deciding battle. Who would not gather round were it only an old pensioner on sixpence a day to hear from him the story of Waterloo ? Bannockburn was the best summer day's darg Scotland ever did. She put in the sickle and reaped a great harvest, which has filled her barns and fed her children with the food of freedom and stout hearted exultation, and we will never tire of listening to the way and manner in which she went about the work, and we will be all the more pleased that Robert White recounts it.

J. H.