

XV.—JOHN WIDDRINGTON OF "THE OLD BANK;" AND CARLYLE OF INVERESK.

BY JAMES CLEPHAN.

READ ON WEDNESDAY, THE 30TH APRIL, 1884.

WE read in the autobiography of the Rev. Dr. Alexander Carlyle of Inveresk (Musselburgh), that ere Hugh Moises of the Grammar School had impressed himself on the minds of a new generation, John Widdrington was in Newcastle "almost the only man who had any literature." His culture singled him out in the closing years of the eighteenth century for the chair of the newly-formed Literary and Philosophical Society, of which the Society of Antiquaries was an off-shoot in the century that is now hastening to its end. So foremost a citizen of Old Newcastle has surely a claim to such biographical sketch of him as may yet be given; and his not least appropriate niche is to be found in the *Ælian Walhalla*. Lapse of time, though it stands in the way of a discharge of the debt in full, does not disqualify us from the acknowledgment of it. Far on to four-score years and ten from the date of his departure, the pen is not altogether without materials for the task, however much it may long for more. Scanty enough they are for the grateful office it has assumed: it must just make the best it can of them, and be thankful that they are what they are.

Early mention of the philanthropic student, of gentle manners and modest worth, who late in life was called to his post of honour and of duty, presents itself, curiously enough, in connection with the Chester-le-Street races, to which another excellent Northumbrian, the late Mr. John Hodgson Hinde, was directing the attention of the Society, on the 7th of December, 1859, in a paper on "Public Amusements." (*Archæologia Æliana*, N.S., vol. iv., 229.) An Act of 1740 had brought the "horse course" on the Durham turnpike to a stand, in

common with other minor meetings ; but the statute falling into gradual disregard, there was a subsequent revival ; and in the month of May, 1758, on the spot so renowned in Roman and Saxon story, there chanced to be among the spectators of the holiday festival four men of especial mark, one of whom had the happy habit, when anything notable was said or seen in his presence, of making a note of it. This was Dr. Alexander Carlyle, minister of Inveresk, whose well-known records and reminiscences, edited by Mr. Hill Burton, were published in 1860, and are of especial interest on the Tyne.

When J. G. Lockhart, biographer of Sir Walter Scott, was one day talking with his father-in-law of the poet Goethe, and "the majestic beauty" of his countenance, "Well," said the author of *Waverley*, "the grandest demi-god I ever saw was Dr. Carlyle, minister of Musselburgh, commonly called Jupiter Carlyle, from having sat more than once for the king of gods and men to Gavin Hamilton ; and a shrewd, clever old carle was he, no doubt, but no more a poet than his precentor." His pen, however, if not dipped in the rainbow bath of the bard, immersed itself, which is more to my present purpose, in the prosaic ink of the chronicler ; and hence we learn that in 1758, leaving London for Scotland, the Doctor had in company with him, first Dr. Robertson, visiting the Thames with a view to the publication of his *History of Scotland* ; next, John Home, author of *Douglas*, who had been bringing out a new tragedy, "and made some hundreds by it ;" and then, John Adam, one of the brothers of that name celebrated in architecture. On their northward way, the four friends made the discovery, long before the cathedral on the Wear came in sight, that they had miscalculated the cost of their return to the Borders. Their purse was failing. They must put themselves severely on short commons. "I was sensible," says Carlyle (the appointed treasurer of the band), "that we should run out before we came to Newcastle." It was expedient, therefore, that they should push forward, and cross the Tyne early in the day to secure supplies. This they might have accomplished, "had we not been seduced by a horse-race we met near Chester-le-Street, which we could not resist, as some of us had never seen John Bull at his favourite amusement. There was a great crowd, and the Mrs. and the Misses Bull made a favourite part of the scene, their equipages being single and double horses, sometimes triple, and

many of them ill-mounted ;" the equestrian members of the illustrious family of Bull utterly unconscious that they were sitting for their portraits ! The riders, well-mounted or ill, hastened on their headlong way "with a keenness, eagerness, violence of motion, and loudness of vociferation, that appeared like madness to us ; for we thought them in extreme danger, by their crossing and jostling in all directions, at the full gallop ; and yet none of them fell. Having tired our horses with this diversion (continues Carlyle), we were obliged to halt at an inn to give them a little corn, for we had been four hours on horseback, and we had nine miles to Newcastle. Besides corn to five horses, and a bottle of porter to our man Anthony, I had just two shillings remaining, but I could only spare one of them, for we had turnpikes to pay, and we called for a pint of port, which, mixed with a quart of water, made a good drink for each of us. Our horses and their riders being both jaded, it was ten o'clock before we arrived in Newcastle. There we got an excellent supper, &c., and a good night's sleep. I sent for Jack Widdrington when at breakfast, who immediately gave us what we wanted ; and we, who had been so penurious for three days, became suddenly extravagant. Adam bought a £20 horse, and the rest of us what trinkets we wanted : Robertson for his wife and children at Gladsmuir, and Home and I for the children at Polwarth manse."

Dr. Carlyle, who contributes this amusing supplement to the paper of Mr. Hodgson Hinde, and most acceptable addition to my biographic materials, was already familiar with Newcastle. He had made friends here aforetime, one of them the friend in need whose purse strings were so opportunely loosened. "Some very agreeable acquaintances," he tells us in his life's history, he had made on the Tyne during the days of George the Second, including "Ralph Carr, an eminent merchant," who survived into the dawn of the nineteenth century, "and his brother-in-law, Mr. Withrington, styled the honest attorney of the north, and his son John, an accomplished young man, who died a few years ago, and was the representative of the ancient family of that name." Of John Widdrington, who died in 1797, there is twice mention among the quarto pages of Brand, in the foot-notes ; where, too probably, the name would have eluded me, but for the invaluable index compiled by the Society's treasurer, Mr. William Dodd: "March

10, 1544, King Henry VIII. granted the Black Friars, with the houses and ground thereto belonging, at that time of the yearly value of £2 19s. 6d., to the Mayor and Burgesses of Newcastle, in consideration of the sum of £53 7s. 6d., reserving to himself and successors for ever a yearly rent of 5s. 11½d., together with the bells, lead, stones, iron, and timber of the church and other edifices." Thus runs the historian's text (vol. i., page 132); and in a note he adds—"Among the fee-farm rents received in 1783, by John Widdrington, Esq., for the representatives of — Pauncefort, Esq., occurs the following—'For divers lands and tenements, called Preaching Fryers, received of the Mayor and Burgesses 5s. 11½d., parcel or reputed parcel of the late monastery of Tinmouth.'"

Brand's second note again recalls the memory of Old Newcastle, with its nunnery of St. Bartholomew :—"Among the fee-farm rents received in 1783 by John Widdrington, Esq., for the representatives of Edward Noell, Esq., occurs the following :—"2s. 8d., several tenements called the Nuns, in the Bigg Market, received of the late Sir Walter Blackett.'" The Rev. Dr. Raine, editing the second volume of the Surtees Society, gives the will of Agnes Lawson, last prioress of the nunnery, made at her house in Gateshead, March, 14th, 1565 ; and, bringing together "the old order" and the new, he appends the annotation :—"At this very time, May, 1835, the workmen employed in building the new streets at Newcastle are disturbing the bones in the cemetery belonging to the house over which she presided."

The Newcastle Bank, "now," says Brand in 1789, "called the Old Bank," had been established in 1755. In 1778, as appears by Whitehead's Directory, there were three banks in Newcastle :—Near the Bridge End, in the Close, the Tyne Bank ; in Pilgrim Street, at the end of Silver Street, the Exchange Bank ; and above the end of Silver Street, the Old Bank. Early in 1793, Widdrington, one of the proprietors of the Old Bank, took part in the promotion of the Literary and Philosophical Society ; and when the choice of a president was to be made, the members, not yet numbering a hundred, elected "John Widdrington, merchant and banker," to stand at their head. At the enterprising gathering of January 24th, held in the Assembly Rooms, a committee had been appointed to draw up a plan, to be submitted on the 7th of February to a general meeting at the Dispensary in Low Friar

Street. We now live in an age of libraries, public and private. Books abound round about us, in our homes and institutions. It was not so a hundred years ago. One of the recommendations of February, 1793, exhibits the straits to which our forerunners were driven in the matter of literature :—"That it be left to the future deliberations of the society to determine what, or whether any measures shall be taken for obtaining the establishment of a General Library; but that, in the meantime, members wanting any particular book shall be permitted to give notice of it in the society's room, in order that, if any other member be in possession of, and disposed to lend it, or can give information where it may be obtained, the person who has occasion for it may be accommodated on the following terms, viz., that he give a written receipt for any book furnished by a member, with an engagement to return it within a specified time, in as good condition as received." In other words, the members, with no very voluminous resources of their own, were to establish, out of their more or less limited resources, a Library of Exchange; and the first president, meeting the proposal with a generous response, "offers," in his opening address of the 12th of March, "the use of his books and instruments, whenever the society shall have occasion for them." This is all of his address that has come down to us; but it is enough to mark the man, and to commend him to the grateful regards of his townsmen through all coming time. Newcastle, when the ingenious expedient of 1793 was hit upon, could not have had the dimmest forecast of a day in which the inhabitants would assess themselves for the formation of a Public Library, and give it a local habitation on the line of their ancient town-wall.

Mr. Widdrington, entering upon his seventh decade at the period of his appointment to the chair, occupied his honourable eminence but a few short years. His public-spirited career was terminated by death on the 4th of November, 1797. Not only the local press commemorated him, but the *Monthly Magazine* (London) of Sir Richard Phillips, and other distant periodicals, recorded the decease of the late "partner in the Old Bank at Newcastle." On the 13th of March, 1798, the new president, Sir John Edward Swinburne, was in the chair at the annual meeting; and here, in the collection of the society's minutes and papers made with such loving care by the Rev. Anthony Hedley, is a portrait of the Baronet of Capheaton, who held the office to which he

had been chosen for the space of a generation and more. Here, too, is a copy of the report of the committee to the members, with its tribute to the virtues of their lost chief, "whose estimable qualities endeared him to a numerous acquaintance, and whose character as a merchant, a magistrate, and a man, is too well-known to need any encomiums in this place; a gentleman who, in the variety and extent of his knowledge, particularly in natural philosophy, was well qualified to fill the chair at its meetings with dignity and advantage, and whose urbanity of manners and turn for literary conversation were calculated to reflect credit upon the institution at the head of which he was placed in the general intercourse of society."

Mr. Widdrington, who was a county magistrate, died at Hauxley, in his 66th year. In 1795, he appears in the directory of William Hilton, as "merchant and banker, Hanover Square;" a square begun subsequent to the accession of the House of Hanover, but never completed to the extent of the founders' design. The visits to Newcastle of Alexander Carlyle, son of the minister of Prestonpans, had brought him into intimacy with the Widdringtons. In his early manhood he had witnessed the memorable engagement there in 1745. He had previously stood shoulder to shoulder with Robertson and Home in the ranks of the College Company of Volunteers that mustered in Edinburgh against the Jacobite rebellion; and shortly after the battle fought at his father's door, he quitted the paternal roof to continue his education in Leyden, then a favourite resort of the studious youth of these islands. Arriving at Newcastle in the month of October, after the municipal election of Michaelmas Monday, and being acquainted with some of the Common Council, he had an invitation to dine with the Mayor at a Guild dinner. It was a season of emergency, when the old walls and gates had once more, and for the last time, been placed all round in a posture of defence, lest the Pretender should choose the eastern route for his advance into England; and the young collegian, "fresh from Scotland, had to answer all the questions that were put to him concerning the affairs of that country, and saw all his intelligence punctually detailed in the *Newcastle Journal* next morning." His passage to the Continent was to be made in a sloop appointed "to sail with the London convoy;" and on Monday, the 14th day of October, after considerable detention in Shields, "he went

on board the *Blagdon* of Newcastle, Tim Whinny, master," laden "with kits of butter and glass bottles," eventually reaching in safety the coast of Holland and his destination, Leyden. There the sociable Scot made the acquaintance of students from this country, comprising Dr. Anthony Askew (of whom, and of his family, much may be learnt in Mr. Welford's illustrated quarto, dedicated to the Monuments and Tombstones of the Church of St. Nicholas, in Newcastle), and John Wilkes, then a youth of eighteen, the idol of our town and country in an after-day, to be read of in the local records of Sykes. Newcastle had in that age admiring burgesses who, in the large phrase of a pen of the period, were "exemplary to surrounding millions;" and Dr. Johnson, even in the remote haven of Tobermory, in the Isle of Mull, found himself beset beyond escape by a skipper of the Tyne, with his cry of "Wilkes and Liberty!"

Before the return to England of Carlyle in 1746, great events had happened for the historian. He had left home in October, 1745, with the shot of Prestonpans ringing in his ears, and found himself, in April, 1746, on the Thames, "in a coffee room with Smollett," when the news of Culloden arrived, and when "London all over was in a perfect uproar of joy," an extemporized portrait of the Chevalier Prince "selling in all the shops" that "had not the least resemblance to him."

It was within about a couple of years from this time of excitement that Carlyle became the settled minister of Inveresk, where he remained down to his death in 1805; and some time subsequent to his entrance on his pastoral charge on the Esk, his connection with Newcastle, begun in early life, was drawn closer by his marriage with Mary Roddam, one of two orphan sisters, co-heiresses of Heathpool in Kirknewton, Northumberland, who resided in the manse of Polwarth (of which we have already heard) with the minister, William Home, and his wife, a Roddam and her aunt; while the other and elder sister, Sarah, dwelt under the care of Alexander Collingwood of Unthank, their mother's cousin, he and the Polwarth minister being trustees of the fair twain. We are all familiar with the old Northumbrian adage, bearing witness to the antiquity of the Border name:—

"While sheep bear wool, and cows grow hair,
Roddam of Roddam for ever mair."

Through John Home, the "Young Norval" whose drama had thrown the two kingdoms into a state, if not of greater, of more prolonged excitement than the rebellion, Carlyle was led into an engagement with Mary Roddam, ending in marriage; and her sister, whose mural monument looks down upon you from over the vestry door of St. Nicholas', became the wife of John Erasmus Blackett (youngest brother of Sir Edward Blackett of Matfen), "living in Pilgrim Street, in a small but very pleasant house near the Gate," (directly opposite the "fine old house of Sir Walter Blackett,") with a garden in the rear, and also the verdant Carliol Croft, a cherished pleasure-ground and promenade of the inhabitants in the last century. Here the Carlyles were not unfrequent visitors. Here, too, Mary Home, of the Polwarth manse, Mrs. Blackett's cousin, "a pretty, lively girl, reckoned very like Queen Charlotte," would stay by the month; and her presence drew also John Home to Pilgrim Street. Hither the poet came in 1770, on the eve of their marriage in Bath; in which year the Doctor and his wife, travelling homeward from a visit to London, paused on the Tyne. "We arrived," says he, "at Wallsend, a very delightful village, about four miles below Newcastle, on the road to Shields, where Mr. Blackett had a very delightful house for the summer. There were other gentlemen's houses of good fortune in the village, with a church and a parsonage house. Next day, the 1st of May, was so very warm that I with difficulty was able to walk down to the church in the bottom of the village, not more than two hundred yards distant;" the ancient church of the Holy Cross, of which Mr. Oswald was discoursing to the Society so acceptably in the month of May, 1883;¹ now a ruin, with memorials scattered around of the old glassmakers of the Tyne, and stones incorporate in the wreck borrowed by its builders from the adjacent Wall, that gives the village its name; the falling structure serving, within sound of the railway whistle of the nineteenth century, as a stepping-stone from the age of the Plantagenet founders to the remoter days when the Romans were stretching their barrier from the Tyne to the Solway shore.

Mr. Blackett, who had here his summer retreat, was four times chief magistrate of Newcastle; and after his second mayoralty a deep shadow fell over his civic honours, his wife dying in her noonday prime

¹ *Proceedings*, Vol. I., (1883) pp. 21-23.

of life :—"Friday, July 14, 1775, at night, Mrs. Erasmus Blackett." At the age of 35, she was on the 18th of the month borne to her burial in the mother church of St. Nicholas, one of the eight pall-bearers being Mrs. Widdrington. The others were Mrs. Simpson, Mrs. Surtees, Mrs. Mosley, Mrs. Baker, Mrs. Bell, Mrs. Fawcett, and Mrs. Gibson ; and ere the first anniversary of the mournful procession had come round the *Newcastle Chronicle* has to add :—"Saturday, June 29, 1776, Master Blackett, son and heir of Erasmus Blackett, Esq., Alderman of this town ;" one of those broken promises of our homes which drew from Edmund Burke his cry of anguish, "What shadows we are, and what shadows we pursue !" The son and heir died in childhood. To Mrs. Widdrington length of days were granted beyond the common span. Mackenzie quotes her tombstone in St. Andrew's :—"In memory of Jane, widow of John Widdrington, Esq., of Hauxley, Northumberland, who died 6th September, 1824, aged 88."

From the roll of Aldermen in Whitehead's Directory, 1787, it is to be learnt that Mr. Blackett had then removed from Pilgrim Street to Charlotte Square, "the handsome new square" of Brand, "built by Mr. Newton, architect." In the summer of 1791, in the course of his third mayoralty, his eldest daughter, named Sarah after her mother, was married to her kinsman, Captain Cuthbert Collingwood, R.N., the future Admiral and Peer, in whose Life and Letters (one of the many ornaments of our north-country literature) allusions are to be found to the manse on the Esk ; as when, from the Culloden off Ushant, in the month of February, 1804, the great naval commander writes to his father-in-law from his cabin :—"This" (the decease of Sir Edward Blackett), "and the death of our good aunt Carlyle" (the Mary Roddam of bygone days), "make me very sad ; for I see those that loved us going off, and leaving a blank in our friendship that can never again be filled. Poor Dr. Carlyle ! I pity him very much ; his home is desolate indeed ; and he is at a time of life when domestic comforts are the only ones which are suited to his age."

Even after the longest intervals of time, who but must sympathise in the shadows and sunshine of those that have gone before—the Widdringtons and the Blacketts, the Carlyles and the Collingwoods, the Roddams and the Homes—their fortunes interwoven in life and death. It would have been so easy to tarry with them at greater

length, that I trust I may be pardoned not to have been more brief. To compare small things with great, let me anticipate for my digressions the plea that was put in by Johnson for the author of the "Divine Legation," who, amid "the variety of his materials, brought from the north and the south, and from every quarter of the compass, carries you successively round and round, without carrying you forward to the point;" "but then," adds the indulgent Doctor, "you have no wish to be carried forward;" you are so contented as you loiter on the road, you are not impatient as to the way or the end.