

VI.—JOHN CUNNINGHAM, PASTORAL POET, 1729-1773:
RECOLLECTIONS AND SOME ORIGINAL LETTERS.

By JAMES HODGSON.

[Communicated on 25 May, 1921].

In view of his roving life it is not, perhaps, to be expected that biographies of John Cunningham should be circumstantial or complete. Though he was well known in many towns in Northumberland, Durham and Yorkshire, few traces of his sojourns there remain; indeed we may be tempted to wish that he had left a diary by means of which some of the gaps in his life-story might be filled, and we might be enabled to accompany him on his travels and make the acquaintance of his associates. Such a diary must have been of lively interest; for though in company with Dickens we have met strolling players, none of these has been a poet, nor was it their lot to tour in the northern counties in the second half of the eighteenth century. But Cunningham was no diarist, and his biographers have found but little material at their disposal,¹ even that little being in some instances of doubtful accuracy. It is, however, generally agreed that he was born in Dublin in the year 1729, and that, at the age of seventeen, he wrote a drama entitled *Love in a Mist*, which met with sufficient success to give him the run of the theatre in his native city, in which it was produced, and so led

¹ In a note to the memoir of Cunningham given in the *Dictionary of National Biography* it is stated that the only authority for the accounts of his life prefixed to the editions of his poems in Johnson's, Chalmers's, Bell's and Cook's collections of English poems, and in Baker's *Biographia Dramatica*, seems to be the memoir which appeared in the *London Magazine* of October, 1773, pp. 495-7.

to his enduring ambition to excel as an actor. Further details of his life and circumstances, which may be found elsewhere, it is unnecessary here to notice, but it so happens that there is extant a manuscript by Mrs. Sarah Hodgson, proprietress of the *Newcastle Chronicle* and daughter of Thomas Slack, founder of that newspaper, who wrote at the request of John Bell, one of the founders of this society, her *Recollections* of the poet to whom her parents were such staunch friends. Bound with this manuscript is a collection of letters written by, and addressed to, Cunningham; the volume, so arranged, having passed into the hands of Mrs. Hodgson's family, and having been preserved, together with several letters by Mrs. Slack² to her hapless protégé.

Robert White, whose memoir of Cunningham is printed in Richardson's *Local Historian's Table Book*, offers thanks for a sight of the letters in Bell's possession, of which, however, he made little use, and appears to have had access to the above mentioned manuscript also; while Cromeek, whose note prefixed to Cunningham's song *Kate of Aberdeen*³ is quoted almost in full by White, evidently had heard a part of Mrs. Hodgson's story from her own lips, but as the written version includes other matter which may be of interest it is proposed to produce it here, with a selection from Cunningham's correspondence. Mrs. Hodgson wrote as follows:—

When the late Mr. Cunningham was in the habit of occasionally staying at my father's house I was so very young that I do not recollect much about him myself; however, at your request, I shall state what I do remember and likewise what I have heard from others of the family. His coming was always looked upon as an unpleasant circumstance to the younger branches of the family, he made such a difference in the house—

² For some account of Thomas Slack and his wife, see *Arch. Ael.*, 3rd ser. xvii, 145.

³ *Select Scottish Songs* (London 1810). Cromeek states that, in passing through Newcastle, he had interviews with Mr. Slack's daughter and with Mr. Bewick.



MRS. SLACK OF NEWCASTLE, 1719-1778.

From an oil painting belonging to Mr. James Hodgson.



had so many people coming after him—besides he possessed none of those qualifications which please young folks, whereas the late Mr. Robertson (the author of *Poems by Nobody*) who was a constant visitor, was all fun and merriment and made all young people fond of him, so that the contrast between the two poets has left a strong impression on my mind in favour of the latter. I likewise remember my mother used to scold Cunningham whenever he came because he was always so bare of necessaries; every time he left the house she made a point of providing him with shirts, stockings, &c., &c., sufficient to serve him till his return, but he was one of those easy souls that, if a brother actor asked him for the loan of a shirt or a guinea, he had not the resolution to refuse, so in a company of comedians like that of North Shields it may easily be imagined how the shirts and other articles would disappear. I also remember she took a great deal of pains with him, to give his mind the right bias: as nature had made him a poet she wished him to cultivate this talent, but as to an actor he was the worst that could probably be seen, yet unfortunately he was ambitious to be thought great on the stage. Many managers wished to have him in their Companies, because he was useful at writing an occasional address, song, &c. This circumstance his vanity led him to attribute to his talents as an actor. Whenever his benefit was fixed, I remember, there were always several post chaises full of people went from Newcastle to it, and on one of these occasions there was a spare corner for me. The line he attempted was low comedy, he played *Ralph*, in the *Maid of the Mill*, which was as poor a performance as could be imagined, & whenever I have seen the play since I have drawn the comparison in my own mind, of the contrast, & by this means I still retain something of it.

The above are the principal points which I can recollect about him myself, until towards his latter end which will appear in the proper place.

The following general out line I mention from what I have heard:— I do not recollect hearing it ever exactly specified how 'Cuny' (the familiar name he always went by) became acquainted with my father; but I think it most likely from his having been in the North Shields Company of Comedians. Mr. Bates, the manager, was a very respectable man & an old friend of my father's, & this probably brought about the connection. At the time alluded to here the present William Shields Esq^{re} 4 was in the same Company, and still retains a great veneration for

⁴ It was through Cunningham's good offices that William Shields was appointed leader of the band in the theatre at Scarborough, where he had his first success as a composer in setting a number of his friend's poems to music. *Memoir of Wm. Shields* (*Dict. Nat. Biog.*).

Cuny. The first time Mr. Incledon was down here Mr. Shields commissioned him to procure him everything he could that had belonged to Cuny, and accordingly my late husband⁵ sent him various papers, etc. But to return to my subject. The real cement of friendship between Cuny & my father was at first mutual advantage. About this time the *Chronicle* commenced & Cuny's poetical pieces were published therein in rotation as he wrote them.⁶ It was just at the time when pastoral poetry was the fashion of the day, so that giving his pieces publicity made him be ranked amongst the first rate poets, and was likewise an advantage to the *Chronicle*.

In process of time his friends suggested the plan of collecting all his pieces together and publishing them in a book by subscription.⁷ This was accordingly done &, I believe, put something handsome into his pocket, but for reasons before assigned he never had a shilling before him. When his poems were about to be published a difference of opinion took place between Cuny & my mother. She wished him to dedicate the work to Mrs. Montague of Denton Hall⁸ who was a great admirer of his writings and had been very polite to him on many occasions; besides she was a lady well known in the literary world, and a particular friend of my mother's. This last point she expected would have had some weight with him; but no, all the arguments she could resort to were of no avail. Here his ruling passion operated, for, as he considered the stage the first of all human institutions, of course he fixed on Garrick; so to David Garrick Esq^{re} the poems were dedicated. He had a couple of copies very elegantly bound, & to London he would go to present them himself to the greatest man of genius that ever lived, as he thought him, and it is not improbable to suppose that he expected to be offered an engagement on the boards of Drury; but, alas, very different was his reception. A time was appointed by the great man to receive the poet, who with re-

⁵ Solomon Hodgson died 4th April, 1800.

⁶ The first issue of the *Newcastle Chronicle* appeared 24th March, 1764.

⁷ First edition of Cunningham's poems published 1766. Second edition, 1771.

⁸ Mrs. Elizabeth Montague, *Queen of the Bluestockings*, wife of Edward Montague who owned collieries in the neighbourhood of Denton, near Newcastle. From her marriage in 1742 till the death of her husband in 1775, Mrs. Montague resided, at intervals, at Denton Hall, where, it is said, she kept open house. 'For nearly fifty years she maintained undisputed supremacy as hostess in the intellectual society of London.' Memoir in *Dict. Nat. Biog.*

spectful obeisance presented the books. Garrick did condescend to turn over the leaves and look at the binding, when putting his hand into his pocket he took out two guineas which he gave to Cunningham, observing at the same time '*Poets and players are always poor.*' The mortification and disappointment he felt were such as made him take his departure without further ceremony. On his return to the North he related his reception, and when he owned having taken the two guineas my mother gave him a box on the ear, saying *that* did not degrade him half so much ! I mention this because afterwards he was very fond of telling the story, which he used to preface by saying that the best friend ever he had in his life had given him a box on the ear. The mortification he experienced at Garrick's behaviour to him never left him ; he fell into quite a low-spirited way. About this time his constitution began to break up ; but it is painful to relate that all his life he had a propensity to take a solitary glass, and after the disappointment he had experienced from the luminary he had hoped would have raised his fame he gave himself up to this failing in spite of every care that was used to prevent him. For reasons I do not now recollect he left my father's house some time before his death, and went to lodge with Mrs. Douglas in the Middle Street. He was in the habit of coming to the house in the day-time, and he, with his dog, Turk, that he had always with him for many years, used to amuse himself with visiting the neighbours ; and altho' he was evidently declining yet he never was confined to his bed till, after taking a fit in my father's house, he was carried to his lodging and did not survive many days.⁹ How his finances were situated may easily be guessed at, but this I can assert, that everything that was necessary was provided for him, & he was suitably interred at my father's expense. A number of his friends were at the funeral who afterwards wished to have a tombstone erected to his memory. This was to be done by subscription & my father was appointed to order it, &c., but it so happened when the subscriptions were to be paid one person did not expect it would have cost so much, another was not to be found, a third was not one of the party who promised to subscribe, &c., &c. ; so that the fact was my father had the money to pay himself and I remember

⁹ It is believed that Robert White is alone among biographers in stating that at the time of his death Cunningham was lodging with Mrs. Douglas ; others have it that he died in Mr. Slack's house. Mr. Richard Welford, however, when writing his memoir for *Men of Mark*, was evidently uncertain as to White's authority, and does not say precisely where the poet died.

hearing him say that he never received anything but Mr. Carr's proportion & the late Mr. Joseph Bell's assistance, which was to paint it and put the inscription on at the end. This he not only did at the time but during the remainder of his life he yearly painted the stone, &c., as a mark of his respect for poor Cuny. It is only justice here to observe that his son, the present John Bell, has repeatedly done the same in late years.

Mr. Robert Carr was a particular friend of Cunningham's, & is mentioned as such on the tomb stone under which he was likewise after a lapse of years interred (see the stone ¹⁰). Mr. Carr was foreman in the *Chronicle* office : he was a man of great abilities, and a poet of no ordinary merit. The inscription on the end of the tomb stone was written by him, viz. *He gathered the Essence of Simplicity and ranged it in Pastoral Verse*. This sentiment was so placed as to catch the eye of the passing stranger, who never failed to enquire who was interred there, and would drop a sigh to the memory of poor Cunningham.

Mr. Carr invariably used the signature of *Primrose*, except to election songs. *The Song of Jesmond Mill*, *Modesty's Cap*,¹¹ & various others were of his writing. He might justly be said to 'catch the living manners as they rove' : he was most happy in turning the local occurrences of the day into poetry, would write a song to suit any occasion, & adopt the same to a popular tune. This peculiar talent made him as much valued by his friends as dreaded by his enemies : some of the best election songs that ever appeared on the side of Freedom were written by him. He had no desire that his writings should live after him ; his only wish was to raise the merriment of the day, but, as the fragments of his writing which yet remain have been attributed to different people, I have said the above in justice to his memory. Sarah Hodgson.

John Cunningham to Patrick Cunningham, Statuary, William Street, Dublin.¹²

N. Shields, Oct. 27th, 1765.

Dr. Brother. Your last gave me concern. I flatter'd myself that our own country would at some time or other be taught to value and reward

¹⁰ In St. John's churchyard, Newcastle. The stone was restored by the late Mr. Joseph Cowen.

¹¹ These two songs were printed in the *Ladies' Memorandum Book* of 1772, and, with music by 'Mr. Hodgson of Newcastle,' in the *Lady's Magazine*, London, 1773.

¹² According to the *Dict. Nat. Biog.* John Cunningham had a brother named Peter, a well known statuary in Dublin. Apparently Patrick is meant.

native merit. If you continue in a resolution of going to London let me know in time, for I have warm friends there that I know can be of service to you. I am obliged to you for the trouble you took in regard to my proposals, & let me remind you to advise me what booksellers I shall send parcels to. My sincerest respects to Mr. Wilks,¹³ & tell him tho' the books are at the press I never intended they should appear till the middle of next January. I should be happy to hear from him. I wrote Jemmy since I received y^{rs}, & would to Harry if I knew his direction. I thank you for family news. Death has made strange havock since my departure, but tis what we must submit to. Remember me affectionately to my sisters & poor Frank, & believe me, my ever dear Pat, most cordially yr. friend and brother Jn. Cunningham.

The bearer, Mr. Jamison, is a very worthy young fellow & my particular friend, he is an excellent engraver, but as he never was before in Ireland I must beg you to afford him as many little services as you can—the obligation will be conferr'd on me.

Mrs. Slack to Cunningham, at Stockton.

N.C. June y^e 24th 1766.

Sir. We just now received your very acceptable favour ye Pastoral Dialogue, for which we heartily thank you. I thought Bob.¹⁴ had wrote to you on Friday or I shou'd have wrote myself to thank you for your last favour, but we had it not in our power to advise you at Durham races sooner than Friday, having only received ye Ad^{vt} by that day's post. I am glad you liked our *Captandum Vulgus*: you would observe that he did not contradict any of our assertions, so consequently, tho' he said a great deal, he said nothing to the purpose, or what would require an answer, so y^t y^e most effectual way for us to guard against his schemes is by ye management of our paper,¹⁵ for which purpose we must solicit ye continuance of your sweet & ever acceptable muse. We are glad to hear of your great success at Stockton. I need not tell you that your last pastoral got a dance thro' all the London papers. Yours, &c., Ann Slack.

¹³ Thomas Wilks, manager of a theatre in Dublin.

¹⁴ Robert Carr.

¹⁵ This and similar allusions in subsequent letters refer to the quarrel between the Slacks and Mr. Isaac Thompson, proprietor of the *Newcastle Journal* of that time, of which an account has been given by Mr. Oxberry—*Proceedings*, 3 ser., ix, pp. 179-82.

Mrs. Slack to Cunningham, at Whitby.

Newcastle, Nov^{br} ye 24th, 1769.

Sir, I was rejoiced to see the shadow of your hand in Mr. Brymyard's¹⁶ l^r, which by-the-bye was without date, so y^t had it not been for the post mark I had not known how to direct an answer, &c. I hope you will excuse the liberty I have taken with you in ye Introduction to ye Ladies' Book, which I thought incumbent upon me, both on your account and my own: on yours as Robinson & Rob^{ts} had taken it on condition it was refused to ye *St. James's C.* it might have given offence to Baldwin,¹⁷ which you observe I have provided against; and on my own as I wou'd not let slip so mighty a compliment which might be of infinite service in sale of ye Inst.: from ye prodigious number of Ladies' Books that are sold, one half of the purchasers of which cannot possibly even suspect ye editors of y^e two books to be y^e same person,¹⁸ and those few that do know me must necessarily know y^t I have received provocation & injustice enough from y^e quarter aimed at, consequently it can be no discredit to you to figure in a good cause. I herewith send you two Ladies' Books for yourself & your lass; with two or three hand bills of what appeared in y^e *St. James's Chronicle* some time ago, as you'll see by y^e Introduction, and for which we stand indebted to an unknown friend.

Mr. Slack apply'd for you for this town when desired but got for answer that it was engaged for Austin's Co., but we hear lately that they cannot come till near Candlemas, which y^e town is a little shagreen'd at. Now if you thought it worth your while and could procure the Moothall, it would be running a march upon them. We are glad you are coming to this neighbourhood when I hope we shall be able, & you'll be ready, to go on with another edition of your poems. We have writ to London to urge it & purpose to take half those they have upon hand if required, to have them at once into a better selling size. When we hear from them will let you know. Mr. Slack, Bob & my young folks all join in compliments to Mr. Cunningham.

Sir, Your most obliged humble serv^t.

Ann Slack.

Our compliments to Mr. & Mrs. Brymyard

¹⁶ A member of Bates's company in which his wife was 'leading lady.'

¹⁷ Henry Baldwin, editor of the *St. James's Chronicle*, a friend and correspondent of Cunningham

¹⁸ Mrs. Slack, under her maiden name, Anne Fisher, compiled the *Pleasing Instructor*, and also edited *The Ladies' Memorandum Book*, anonymously. See *Arch. Ael.*, 3rd ser., iii, 34-36.

Robert Carr to Cunningham, at Sunderland.

N^o Castle, Jan. 19, 1770.

D^r Cuny,

I suppose you believe me, as I have for some time supposed you to be dead. What! not one letter to inform us of your near approach to Newcastle. No matter, whilst I strike you for idleness, conscience tells me to look to the moral of your fable of the *Cat & the Fox*, or the *Fox & the Cat*, I don't know which. However one would think our near situation to each other might revive a weekly correspondence for the news, as it goes. I'm glad your patron & great friend, the M—s of Granby, has come over to us. I congratulate you on this great, this unexpected, event. You may, & I hope you will, have the honour of being directed to once more by that Champ. of Liberty, that usurper of almost all my thoughts, words & actions, the immortal M^r Wilkes. I wish you great success in yr new residence. The gents here, in the theatrical way, I believe will do well. They had a very full house the first night. Massay, who performed *Jobson* that night, was greatly insulted & hiped for having taken in the town with some ludicrous poems at his last departure. However he came forward & told the audience that he never had any intention of publishing his songs, that it was done at the urgent solicitation of many gentlemen in town, & if any offence had been given thereby, he humbly asked pardon! Which was granted with an *éclat*. Jack Murdock was here some time in autumn, & purposed to call at Scarborough in his way home to see you. Whether he did or not neither you nor he has been so civil as to tell me. M^r & M^{rs} Slack send their compliments to you, & would be glad to see you over, the first frost. You'll please give my compliments to the gents of your Comp^y who you know I am acquainted with, to M^r Graham, & heartily to yourself, & believe me D^r Cuny

Your unshaken friend, Rt. Carr.

Patrick Cunningham to John Cunningham.

Dublin 26th Feb., 1770.

My Dearest Bro^r. I really am surprised you have never favoured me with an answer to any of my letters, I may say for some years, and as I understand you enjoy an indifferent state of health it makes me sometimes despair of ever having the pleasure of seeing you, but hope, as I never offended you, that you will oblige me with an answer to this. In my

last I acquainted you my wife was in a declining state of health, indeed I have burried the dear woman about six weeks ago. She has left me the father of four little boys, the eldest of which is not ten year old. I must endeavour as well as I can to get them bread & education, & hope God will favoir my intentions. I must also inform you that our good aunt Nelly died since in Drogheda, and with unremitted illnature hath cutt us and her brother's children off with a shilling each, leaving her money & effects, esteem'd near 2,000*l*, to one Magrane and one McGowan, merch^{ts} in Drogheda, to be equally devided between them. We are not much disappointed in our expectations from her, as she was always prejudiced against us, but God forgive her. I must now entreat you will write me an account how you are in health, and your situation in life, whether you receive enough of the gifts of Fortune to make life happy, and whether you will ever favour us with a visit. I know nothing would be more agreeable to me than to have the pleasure of seeing you here, and make no doubt but bro^{rs} Jemmy & Harry will come to Dublin on that occasion, & we shall be happy in one little jubilee of our own to commemorate our youthful days, before hoary time has laid his hand too heavy on us.

I have taken sister Nelly home to preside over my little family and we begin to be happily in order again. She and the little ones desire to be remembered in the kindest manner to you, and I remain

Your most affec^t bro^r Patk Cunningham.

Cunningham to Robert Carr.

Sunderland 15th May, 1771.

My D^r Bob. I was distrest when I heard you had been over to Shields & I had not come up to see you. The enclosed return'd proof I had sent to the carrier, but by some mistake or other twas forgot to be sent. I believe ye mistake was owing to the carelessness of a servant, because the woman, where I lodg'd, sent it after me & I received it here yesterday. In *Noon*¹⁹ *edge* is set down for *hedge*, & in *Kitty Fell*, *sooths* instead of *smooths*. The multiplicity of notes of admiration, I think, but you are a better judge, would admit of correction. I have marked some. I

¹⁹ A writer in the *Critical Review* of March, 1766, whose remarks were reprinted in the *Newcastle Chronicle* of the 19th April, 1766, after quoting the stanzas on *Morning*, *Noon* and *Evening*, expresses the opinion that this piece shews Cunningham to be possessed of a lively imagination and to be worthy of a place among the first descriptive poets of that age.

would have been over yesterday, but was obliged to attend two rehearsals; morning viz, & evening, for *The School for Rakes*; which we play tonight. I have sent M^{rs} Montague's elegant letter that ye may all see it. It honours me too much. I shall thank M^{rs} Slack, I hope, in person; & would consult her & you, & everybody, whether I should continue M^r Garrick in the class we have placed him. Young M^r Harrison was displeas'd at my inserting the lines on his father, as the mentioning his name renewed the family distress, & begs it may be omitted in the edition. With my cordial respects to M^r & M^{rs} Slack & the ladies. I am, my good lad,

Y^{rs}, J. Cunningham.

Send M^{rs} Montague's letter back, my good lad.

Mrs. Slack to Cunningham at the Theatre, Scarborough.

Newcastle Sept. ye 4th 1771.

Sir. I got yours of Sept. ye 1st and one before which I never acknowledged because I thought Bob had. We all thought it best to continue ye old dedication on all accounts, as you continued to dedicate to ye same person. I have not heard from M^{rs} Montague since you left Shields.

Your book is all off now, but not dry enough to bind; a month or two later of ye season is ye proper season for publishing you may depend of it, and if your friend Burk Grey Esq. was in earnest with his subscription he'll do it still—it will be well advertised. M^r Slack is now in London. I have wrote him to get you an address to ye said Burk Grey, & if you have any commands in London write to M^r Slack at Robertson & Roberts. I sent you some notes to Durham upon a M^r Wallace, &c., which I hope you have got, & if you want a little supply till your book be abroad you must contrive how I must remit it to you. These are but common & trifling obligations to what M^r Cunningham's muse can confer upon me: now we are going on with the *Ladies' Memorandum Book* & I hope to be favoured with a Pastoral Song or some recommendatory article from M^r Cunningham, or we shall lose ground with it. I am to expect no favour from M^r Carr this year it seems, like ye overfed goose he has turned useless since his lottery ticket, & forgot who gave it him; and for my own part Dame Care has entirely destroyed my fancy, with all the poetical talents I was ever mistress of. You'll think I was profuse in giving your favours to ye *Ladies' Mag.* y^t I might have transfered to my own use; but you'll consider y^t your book which contains them must, at any rate, be published before ye *Ladies' Book* in which therefore they could not have been originals,

& as M^r Cunningham, I'm persuaded, cannot bestow his leisure time better to his liking yⁿ to write me one I flatter myself I shall hear from him in a week or ten days time.

You'll perhaps keep to yourself what I have hinted about Bob, which is however very true, but may require some explanation at our next meeting.

Say how long you'll stay at Scarborough & what is ye next town you go to.

I am, Sir, Yours sincerely, &c., Ann Slack.

Cunningham to Mrs. Slack.

Scarborough, Sept., 13th, 1771.

Madam. I wrote to you a post or two ago. Tho' not favoured with acknowledgment, I hope my letter was received. One of our singing ladies requested a ballad with a burthen ; I set about it in hopes (trifling as it is) your Memorandum might admit it. Tis wrote on the other side. Tis a pity we had not contrived to make our publication before the Scarborough spaw season. The Earl of Kingston & his lady sent for me about it ; (they are my country folk) my answer was a blank. We are not yet determined about our route. I beg to hear from you. Wallace's account I will answer for ; the other I shall do my endeavour to attain. The annexed is in no hands but mine, our musical composer's, & now in yours ; so that it shall be entirely yours, if it pleases you that it should be so.

With respects unlimited, I am yours with attachment, Jno. Cunningham. Write to me, 'twill give me spirits, which I realy want.

Mrs. Slack to Cunningham, at Scarborough.

Newcastle, Sept 17th, 1771.

Sir. I received your two kind letters containing your two excellent songs for which I heartily thank you, they have quite set me up. M^r Slack is at London, & has been for some time, on which account I have been too much hurried with business to be so punctual in my correspondence as I cou'd have wished. We shall dry your title sheets directly to be ready to send a few books to you in a week's time, if you choose it, & advise how we are to send them & to what quarter, as you talk of removing from Scarborough. I am sorry that ye want of y^m shou'd have been any inconvenience to you now, in the Spaw Season ; however they are not

sufficiently hardened for binding, & I hope your friends will find you when they are. I shall give you many a puff in advertising the Ladies' Book respecting your songs & do not doubt but this edition of your poems, being a right portable size, will go off like smoke, & to print you another edition of them against the next Spaw Season, & pray, good Sir, what are you hiping at? What's the matter with your spirits? Such a provident hand as Master Smollet, or such economists as many of y^r Scots scribblers are, would make a fortune of Genius far inferior to yours, & roll about in their coaches, while you are desponding for spirits to support you upon your humble stumps! Let us hear no more of your whining: God helps y^m most who strive to help themselves. You have nothing to do but take care of your money, you'll get it fast enough by your publications, if you would renew and get another vol., whether you hear from Master Garrick or not. M^r Slack comes home on Saturday, which will set me at liberty to plague you with letters, which you may depend I shall do, so enclose you a little note to pay the postage of them, till we get you nearer hand us. Get y^t other note of ours up, or speak to Mr. Bates to get it for you. Now let me thank you again for your ingenious songs,²⁰ you know not how much they have obliged me.

I am, Sir, your very sincere friend, Ann Slack.

Mrs. Slack to Cunningham, at Scarborough.

N'Castle, Oct. ye 25th/71.

Sir. I received yours of the 22^d inst. & forwarded you two dozen of your books today by ye York carrier, directed for you as this letter. I hope you'll get them safe tho' I'm afraid tis a cross road. We are all sorry for your ill health, but hope you are not so ill but that you can get to the company, or to Whitby. As soon as you have received & deliver'd the books above mentioned to your friends there we can venture to send you what books you want to Whitby, to any person's care you'll direct us. You did not say you had got any money of M^r Bates, I hope you did, but M^r Slack says I should have sent you a bill upon him. I did not know y^t M^r Bates owed us any money or I would. I have not heard from M^{rs} Montague since you left us, but do not think you should send any (books) to M^r White till you send to your publishers at London to avoid

²⁰ *The Winter of Life* and *The Birthday of Phyllis*, afterwards set to music by William Shields.

offence. They do not think proper to publish in London till near Christmas, with ye Memorandum Books. We shall take care M^r White has them before publication, & advise you accordingly. Your l^r of the 18th inst wou'd afford, or admit, of some animadversions, but I shall forget everything sooner than the great obligations we stand under to M^r Cunningham since the first commencement of the Chronicle, & in return will ever be his friend in the best sense of the word, tho' it may not always be consistent with your sense of it : nor does M^r Slack wish, I am sure, to make any advantages of you without adequate returns ; he wants you to be careful for your own sake, y^t you may have money in bank when all's done. We are all distressed at your complaints of bad health, & are afraid you've more unhappinesses in that company than you'll mention. Had not you better accept of M^r Digg's ²¹ invitation to Scotland ; or come to stay with us awhile : if you make no money you had better leave it & go where your mind is more at ease. God bless you, let us hear from you soon. I shall get M^{rs} Montague's books bound & sent soon.

Your very sincere friend, Ann Slack.

Mrs. Slack to Cunningham, at Scarborough.

Newcastle, Nov. 5th, 1771.

Sir. I hope you received your books advised on in my last & are ready for more ; we are now sending them off with ye Memorandums & as M^r Robertson in ye York Company is your friend can send him as many as you please to dispose of among your friends in the Company. Now mind not to be too profuse in giving copies away, you remembered your friends in your first edition, you must save money by this. M^{rs} Montague is not yet come to her house in London but will be in town by the time the books get up. We send Messrs. Robinson & Co. their's this week & shall send M^r White his at the same time. I have two binding in the most elegant taste for M^{rs} Montague which I shall take an opportunity to send by some passengers going in the fly & wou'd have you send a letter to enclose along with them, or you may write her directly & say y^t you have given me such an order & that she will receive the books in a few days ; & mind to hint to her y^t if any more be wanting for her friends she'll please to send to either yourself or me with her orders. If she

²¹ Manager of the Play House, Edinburgh, with whom Cunningham was a prime favourite.—*Dict. Nat. Biog.*

sends to Robertson & Roberts they will expect a bookseller's profit upon them, we'll not desire it, we have no other motive than to serve you in the publication, but if your friend M^r White will serve her orders without any drawback upon you, you had best refer her to him, which will still be readier & give her less trouble. I choose to have y^e two books above mentioned bound here rather than refer them to Robinson & Roberts lest they shou'd neglect till they had given out other copies, & she shou'd have y^e first by all means. I knew she was out of town or they shou'd have been bound sooner, & y^e longer time they have to dry before bound the better. Tis very elegantly printed depend of it. Write immediately on the receipt of this how you are & where, God bless you, in haste.

Your very assured friend, etc., Ann Slack.

We shou'd have advertised you e'er now but want to have ye books in y^e hands of the trade first, which is a great advantage to any publication. If you have anything particular to say in advertising advise immediately. Now if I do not hear from you by return of the post I shall think you are dead.

Mrs. Slack to Cunningham, at Scarborough.

Newcastle, March 3rd, 1772.

Sir. I am glad to hear you got safe to Sunderland; there was a man enquiring for you, but not hearing that you were here left not any letter. I here send you four books & four cuts, the latter of which I am at a loss to contrive what you'll make of: as to the plate being a different size from the book, it must be replaced with a new one whoever lives to print another edition. Now you'll mind not to give any books away; but remember that you have received more money than all ye edition will come to, which may not be all sold off this many years, many of the damaged ones never at all perhaps, so mind & get yourself trim'd up & come & stay with us awhile, before you go to Durham if you possibly can. Mind to make our man leave you a *Chronicle* every Saturday while you are within reach of it. I told him last week but fear he had neglected. Let us hear from you as soon as possible in ye poetical way, & set about for a second volume. I have writ to know what number M^{rs} Montague wants, & told her y^t you were to have y^e profits if they came from us or you, so I expect she'll be generous to you.

I am, Sir, Your very sincere friend & humble Ser^{vt} Ann Slack.

Cunningham to Mrs. Montague, unaddressed; but endorsed by Mrs. Slack.

'Copy of l^r to Mrs. Montague.'

N. Shields, Nov^{ber} 7, 1772.

Madam. Tho incapable to express the happiness your partial notice of me bestows, I presume to address you. I received your generous favor, far less valuable than the honour you conferred on me in your condescending letter. M^{rs} Slack desires me to tell you how unhappy she was when lately in London not to have y^e pleasure of seeing you. Her health she saies would not permit or she would have followed you to y^e country. As for me I will endeavour to follow y^e advice of my amiable & valuable physician & try how some little excursion on the Borders of Parnassus will contribute to y^t health you are kind enough to wish me. I was at Scarbro. when y^r obliging letter arrived at M^{rs} Slack's, she was not certain of my direct place of residence so waited for me till I arrived at Shields, where I now am, & where I received y^r favours. Y^r invitation to wait on you when you arrive in y^e North is an additional honor. I know not how to close this letter. I can not find a proper expression to describe the sensations I feel of respect, esteem & gratitude. I can only say that I am, with attachment, Yours, John Cunningham.

Mrs. Slack to Cunningham, at Darlington.

Newcastle, June y^e 12th/73.

D^r Sir. I have just received your letter which has greatly afflicted me. How unlucky it is that neither M^r Slack nor I can possibly get to see you just now, from his being in Cumberland, which confines me at home; but, however, as bad spirits are frequently the effects of bad nerves, I would fain hope that you will recover, by applying for the best advice. You have famous physicians in Darlington, and as your disorder has taken a different form since Dr. Brown saw you, another prescription may be necessary. And let me beg of you not to want for the best advice and the best attendance, & if you want money, if M^r Bates will be so good as advance it for you I will repay him, with thanks; you may shew him this. Last time I saw him he professed y^e greatest friendship for you, which I am sure he was sincere in, and that he would see you taken the best care of. Should your disorder increase I wish we could have prevailed upon you to have come hither when you went from Durham, and we



should have been happier at having you with us, but beg you to write, or get somebody to write, us frequently how you are. And if you do not get better before M^r Slack comes home you may then depend upon a visit from your very grateful & affectionate friend,
Ann Slack.

P.S.—Now keep up your spirits (when the heart is gone all is gone) & I hope you will live to see all your Newcastle friends, and many a happy day yet, & to write my epitaph, & I'll promise you in return that, if you should die first, M^r Slack shall erect a tombstone over his ingenious friend, and muster up the best poet we can think of to write yours. Pray let me hear from you, or of you, in a post or two.

Cunningham to Mrs. Slack. A pitiful scrawl, evidently written in suffering.

Darlington, 20th June, 1773.

D^r Madam. The post is come in—no letter from M^{rs} Slack—If I live till our benefits are over I'll write to you—I rest as I write—I can go no further—I remove from this to Durham races. Get me, if you please, a private lodging at Newcastle, where I hope to see you. Gcd bless you, & y^r family. Adieu. Yours truly, John Cunningham.

When Cunningham wrote this last letter probably he had made his final appearance on the stage. Apparently, being unable to play his part at Durham, he came directly from Darlington to Newcastle, where he was received for a time into the house of his friends, and his sands ran out as has been described. He died on the 18th of September, 1773, aged forty-four.²²

We are told that 'no family history can be dull reading wherein old letters are cited at length.'²³ It is hoped this may apply as

²² Mr. J. C. Hodgson kindly supplies the following :—In Sir Harris Nicholas's memoir of Joseph Ritson, prefixed to vol. 1 of the *Letters of Joseph Ritson, Esq.*, London, 1833, pp. vi-vii, there is a footnote containing a biographical sketch of Cunningham, written by Ritson himself, which concludes as follows :—'The account of his death which appeared in the *Newcastle Chronicle* was written by Mrs. Slack, wife of the printer at whose house he died, [*sic*] whose disinterested friendship and tender attention to this most ingenious and unhappy man were as meritorious as instances of such a nature are uncommon.'

²³ *Ancestor* 12, 100.

well to the above, and that light is thereby thrown on the gifted personality of the poet-player, once a familiar figure in the narrow streets of the old town where, in his wandering life, he found all he knew of home. Unhappily the disabilities of our poet are no more to be disguised than are his abilities, and it is plain that Mrs. Slack had set herself a heavy task, almost, as it were, the guidance of a grown-up child. Yet, though Cunningham is shewn to have been careless and improvident, are not such failings often incidental to the poetic temperament; and though he appear indolent and perverse, it may well be that he knew his own limitations better than did those who were most anxious for his welfare. Never physically strong and frequently in indifferent health, all his energies were devoted to, and probably exhausted by, the stage; and, to do him justice, a certain strength of purpose is shewn in his steadfast adherence to the one way of life in which, as it seemed to him, he could earn an independent livelihood. Moreover, apparently, he had no great love of writing, but wrote only at odd moments, for amusement, or in response to the pleadings of his friends. Mrs. Hodgson has expressed, elsewhere, her belief that he more often wrote to please her mother, and put her in good humour with him, than from any other motive. And, indeed, it would seem that his life as an actor, in the gregarious society of his colleagues of Bates's company, among whom, evidently, he was highly popular, could afford him few opportunities for quiet thought, and but little stimulus to his poetic fancy.

In character, it is clear, Cunningham was kindly and attractive. For we see him as a man of many friends, whose affection he inspired, and retained to the end. When all is said, he alone suffered by his weaknesses, while his innocent pastoral poems and songs gave pleasure, widely spread, to the simple taste of his time.