

## The History of Greenock Burns Club

THE Greenock Burns Club, of which it is here proposed to give a short historical account, dates from 1801, when the Poet was but five years in the grave. Several Greenock gentlemen, some of whose names and poetical productions have been preserved, constituted themselves in that year into a Burns Society, holding their deliberations in a tavern conducted by a Mrs. Cottar, a circumstance which gave rise to a witticism of the time, jocularly describing their weekly gatherings as Cottar's Saturday Nights. That Burns worship in Greenock should thus early have a local habitation and a name, might reasonably be expected when it is known that fully 50 copies of Creech's Edinburgh Edition were purchased by Greenock subscribers; and that the Poet himself (as the diligent antiquary, Weir, relates) was, during his single visit to Greenock, surprised and overjoyed to find that his fame had preceded him, and that his book had a ready sale at all the shops. Weir's historical sketch was published in 1829, and in his volume he mentions it as a well-known fact that Greenock was the first place to establish a society specifically named after Robert Burns. Intellectual conversation, and the fostering of a taste for the poetry of the country, were represented as the objects of this earliest of Scottish Burns Clubs. Acting, probably, on the principle that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery and homage, the members were in the habit of writing verses, good, bad, and indifferent, in the favourite metres of Burns. The first meeting of the Club of which any account is extant, was held on the 21st of July, 1801, and on that occasion Mr. Neil Dougal, a well-known local musician and poet, read a lengthy poem to the memory of Burns, which he had himself composed, and which is not devoid of considerable merit. The first Anniversary meeting was held on 29th January, 1802; forty members were present, and the customary ode specially composed for the occasion was recited from the chair. On Saturday, 29th January, 1803, the bulk of the members remained in

Greenock to celebrate the anniversary in the White Hart Hotel, while a detachment travelled by coach to Ayr, in order to join other admirers of the Poet from all parts of the country in celebrating his anniversary in the cottage where he was born. As the result of an examination of the registry of births for the parish of Ayr, it was, in that year, discovered that the 25th, and not the 29th, was the correct natal day of the Bard. This discovery does not, however, appear to have caused the members in the succeeding years to confine their anniversary to the 25th, for we find various dates in January (evidently chosen mainly for convenience) given in the minute-book as the evenings of celebration. Very full reports of many of these early anniversary celebrations are to be found in the local paper of the town, and corroborate the lengthier records of the official minute-book. The Club, even in the early period of its existence, was evidently a power in the town, and, besides numbering on its roll some of Highland Mary's kin, it also included many of the leading citizens of Greenock in its active membership. Mr. Galbreath, president in 1812, proposed at one of the meetings in that year that a subscription should be opened for the purpose of erecting a monument to Mary Campbell. The substance of his eloquent remarks are still to be seen in the carefully collected "Notes On Renfrewshire Topics," excerpted from the files of the old Greenock journals by Allan Park Paton, Esq., the famous Shakespearean scholar. In the early, as in the later years, of the Club's history, special efforts were made to spend the anniversary evening in as splendid and discreetly hilarious a style as possible. At the seventh celebration the members seem to have outstripped all their previous doings. Over sixty gentlemen sat down to supper,

and the celebrated band of the Ayrshire Militia was brought to Greenock specially for the occasion and regaled the members with a "superior musical performance" with great applause. Considering the means of transit then available, and the season of the year at which the meeting took place, it cannot be said that the members of the Club were lacking in enthusiasm or enterprise. On another of the early anniversaries held when this century was just in its teens, a motion was proposed and carried " that a correspondence be entered into with the friends and admirers of the National Bard in Ayrshire, requesting them to set apart a subscription to erect a monument to his distinguished memory at the place of his birth." In subsequent reports of the proceedings this matter is frequently referred to and emphasised. With the exception of certain outstanding events, the history of the Club during the five decades after 1820 is not of such great importance as to require very minute chronicling. The present work of the Club must call for more copious details. The Greenock Club is strongly of opinion that it is by present and actual services for the promulgation of literature that any Burns Society, deserving of the name, must base its claims to regard. January 25th, 1842, is, however, worthy of commemoration. On that day-the christening day, as the papers relate, of the Prince of Wales-the foundation stone of the monument to Highland Mary was laid in the corner of the Old West Kirkyard. The procession, consisting largely of "brethren of the mystic tie," and enthusiastic devotees of Burns worship, from all corners of the land, proceeded with due reverence to the hallowed spot where the imposing ceremony was performed. So many years thus elapsed before the proposition of Mr. Galbreath had practical issue. The celebration in the great year of '59 was a magnificent affair. The Provost of the time-Mr Duff-presided over a gathering of more than 200 gentlemen, and there was no lack of rhetoric and brilliancy. The speeches delivered on the occasion are well preserved in the official records of the centenary. The president of that time-Mr. Macfarlane-did much good work which is not yet forgotten.

It is not from any want of materials in the shape of recorded speech, deliberation, and song, that we hasten to give an account of the present work of the Club, rather than utilise our small available space in transcribing minutes, which, though often shrewd and witty,\* have mainly but a parochial interest. Everywhere in the records we read of nights of social glee, copiously seasoned with intellectual conversation; of able critical papers minutely commented on by the assembled members ; and of happy gatherings unsurpassed in the records of sociality. Of more importance than those evenings of rational enjoyment must be mentioned the publication of an edition of Fergusson, the poetic predecessor, and, in some respects, inspirer of Burns. This edition, now very scarce, is marked by shrewdness of selection, and though, in our day, rendered obsolete by the careful editions of Mackay and others, it is yet an honour to the town.

The ordinary membership roll of the Club, as at present constituted, contains 300 names, including the Sheriff, the Provost, and most of the leading Magistrates, clergy and literary men of the town. There are also life membership and honorary membership lists. One member, Mr. Archibald Campbell, has a marked place of honour at the meetings. And this is rightly so, for he is a nephew of Mary Campbell, that pure and lovely Highland lass, whose beauty, and whose pathetic death, called forth from Burns's heart those imperishable lines which have made the simple girl's story familiar over the whole civilised world. Mr. Campbell is now well stricken in years; but few lovers of literature visiting Greenock fail to have an interview with him, and anon make a pilgrimage to the spot in the Old West Kirkyard, where lies the dust of Mary Campbell, marked out by a graceful monument in a portion of the churchyard, zealously tended by the special supervision of the Club. One gentleman, a president of the Club more than forty years ago-Mr. Colin Rae-Brown-is well

known in Burns circles all over the world for the ardour of his Caledonian zeal. Mr Rae-Brown is universally famed for his extraordinary efforts in connection with the great and successful centenary celebration of over 30 years ago, and for his consuming interest in every movement connected with our National Bard. Other gentlemen, resident in Greenock, and worthy of mention in connection with a Burns Club, are Mr. Jas. Tannahill, next-of-kin to the sweet and ingenious poet of Paisley, and Mr Adam Patrick, son of Willie Patrick, Burns's herd laddie at Mossgiel.

Along with a considerable number of Burns Clubs in Scotland, the Greenock Club has for some years conducted annual competitions in Scottish Literature, open to the school children of the town. The success of these in Greenock has been most astonishing, and thoroughly encouraging to the Executive of the Club. Since the inauguration of these examinations, the Club has spent some hundreds of pounds, in the shape of medals and prizes awarded to the successful candidates in Recitation and Scottish Literature.

In the latter subject, the candidates belong to the higher Standards, and by means of printed examination papers, containing questions on Scottish Authors, previously intimated, are searchingly examined as to their detailed knowledge of the subjects prescribed. The answers of the successful candidates are bound and inserted in the library of the Club. The quality of the answers submitted to the Club's examiners has been yearly increasing in excellence ; and has fully justified the Club inaugurating other competitions of a more advanced type for the pupil-teachers of the various years who are in the service of the Greenock School Board. In the Recitation Competitions some thousands of children have competed - in 1891 there were over 500 candidates - and when it is remembered that for the tests in this branch, certain selected poems of Burns must be carefully committed to memory and appropriately recited to the Club's examiners, it will be seen that the Greenock Burns Club is not lacking in successful zeal for the propagation of Scottish Literature in the community. The Bursary Committee - to which the conducting of these examinations is delegated - is certainly the hardest wrought of the many committees of the Club. It contains twelve members, among whom are four B.A.'s of London University, and for fully a month in the summer the members are busy each night conducting the competitions, superintending the written examinations, and correcting the papers handed in. The members of the Greenock School Board - three of whom are also members of the Club - together with the various clergymen of the town, have given their hearty co-operation and aid, thereby greatly lightening the labours of the Club and widening its influence. Encouraged by the success of the literary efforts made on such a large scale, the Club has of late years instituted, also through its Musical Committee, a series of competitions, in which the successful singing of songs, from Burns and other Scottish lyrists, has been rewarded by medals and other substantial prizes. By such means the usefulness of the Club has been meritoriously extended, and the musical as well as the literary faculties of the school children fostered in a manner distinctly national. When, towards the end of June of each year, the results of the various examiners in recitation, singing, and literature are published, the pupils heading the lists in the several competitions give a display of their abilities in the Greenock Town Hall, at the public presentation of the prizes by the Honorary President of the year. A small sum is charged for admission and the proceeds handed over to some of the local charities. The various medals awarded are struck from a special die made for the Club, and the book prizes are similarly impressed by the Club stamp and the Poet's armorial bearings. For the purposes of the Club's examinees, the members of the Bursary Committee are at present engaged in the production of a volume, which will embrace selections from the Scottish poets, prior to Burns, and be enriched with critical and illustrative annotations.

There is yet another direction in which the educational energy of this Club has been expended. The Wild Flower Competition for school-children was instituted, and is now supported, by members of the Club, conjointly with the Royal West Renfrewshire Horticultural Society. One very interesting result of these labours was recently shown in the display of collections, sent in by school children, of flowers mentioned by Burns and Tannahill in the course of their works.

In connection with these competitions, it may be stated that a sum more than equal to that required to erect a statue of the Poet has been expended in educational and charitable objects. While believing that their efforts in these latter directions, testify their love for Burns in as eminent a degree as the erection of a memorial in bronze, the members of the Club have not lost sight of the desirability of raising a statue to the memory of the Poet whose name they bear. They have also been at a considerable pecuniary outlay in the tending of Highland Mary's monument, and, it may be added, they paid for one of the panels in the Glasgow Statue-"The Vision"-the terracotta replica of which is in the Clubroom and cost an additional five guineas. The Club has been fortunate in securing the services of a series of Honorary Presidents, who have done much by their speeches and actions to encourage the systematic study of the literature of the land. Such are the Rev. John Barclay, author of a beautiful poem on the bard; Sheriff Nicholson, LL.D., a voluminous writer on northern lore; Prof. Blackie, author of numerous works on Scottish topics; and Dr. Andrew Lang, poet-laureate of "gowf," and author of the most recent Edition of Burns. The Honorary President, who takes the chair this month, is the well-known friend of Carlyle - Prof. David Masson - who possesses a European fame for geniality, learning, and critical acumen. It is not too much to say that the list of Honorary Members would also serve as a present-day list of British celebrities in art and literature. To mention but a few names :-Science is represented by Sir William Thomson, P.R.S., and Prof. Jack; Literature, by Dr. Underwood, Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes, Lord Tennyson, and Mr. A. J. Balfour; Art by Sir Noel Paton, and Sir F. Leighton; the Drama, by Mr. Henry Irving; and Music, by Mr. Hamish MacCunn, a native of Greenock, and intimately connected with the family of Highland Mary.

The Club is probably unique in possessing a handsome suite of rooms in Nicolson Street provided with a splendid portrait-gallery of the various Presidents and Honorary Members. What perhaps strikes the eye of the visitor even more than the varied relics of Burns and Highland Mary, is the handsome library of Scottish Literature recently enriched by donations from many of the honorary and ordinary members. It is the intention of the Club still further to extend their collection by placing on their shelves, works and MSS. illustrative of Scottish Literature and History of every period. The handsome manner in which honorary members have aided, and are still aiding, the Library Committee in giving completeness to this interesting collection is worthy of all praise.

While the various Committees - Musical, Library, Bursary, &c.- are constantly at work during the whole year, there are quarterly meetings of the aggregate Club, to which the work of the committees is delegated, and at which necessary business, such as election of new members, is carried out. Perhaps the most important-certainly the most attractive-parts of the programme of these quarterly meetings are the papers and lectures on Scottish Literature delivered by the members and dealing with subjects drawn from the entire range of national history. A scheme is at present in process of formulation, by which it is proposed to institute a series of public lectures to be delivered by members of the Club, who are specialists in particular departments of national literary criticism.

No account of the Club would be complete which did not make mention of the series of beautiful menu-cards, which, with many humorous and attractive embellishments, detail the names of the speakers on the anniversary evening, Appropriate selections from Burns, wittily characterising the various Scotch dishes of the dinner, together with clever sketches illustrating the various quotations, combine to make the annual menu-card a valuable work of art and a lasting memento of the occasion. The signatures of all the members present at the meeting held previous to the anniversary are ingeniously reproduced on the last page. The 500 extra copies of the menu-card for '91 - the work of Mr. Peter Kerr, artist, a member of the Club, who has also designed the sketches of all the others-were eagerly bought up by Burns Clubs in all quarters of the world.

J. B. MORISON (secretary).