Preludes

X—

MA thesis

Ulster Poets

Draft - handwritten

complete.

as, it is
such
every
united
try's
less
say
k on."
ch 1848).
ty
tey
entist,
s
ker.
a
and

Preludes

"The histories we now want are particular and local; such as, it is true, would furnish no material for large philosophic inductions, but such as will enable us to know one another and the land we live in, and every spot in it; that such knowledge may beget mutual confidence and united labour, and that we may strive to advance our own and our country's fortunes here in the place assigned to us in the world, quite regardless of what others, who are not concerned in our relations, may think or say respecting the meagreness or barbarism of the material we have to work on."

Samuel Ferguson, in a review of Annals of the Four Masters, (March 1848).

"But most of the poems men write are not so blessed, and they collect ivy, they ruinate, they break up and vanish in time. Or they used to; because nowadays the literary historian, a pseudo-scientist, is trying to halt the process, just as the Office of Works tries to stabilise ruination, and prevent what is far from becoming further. It fences the ancient monument around, leaving you to enter by a revolving wicket. This preservation of castles and poems, this antiquarianism, is not kept to its bound, is not kept distinct, and is allowed to appear to be 'taste'; so by prejudice it becomes a hindrance to the arts of the living."

Geoffrey Grigson: preface to The Victorians (1950)

X

Dont number this page

Don't give this page a number

Introduction

This is a study which has never before been undertaken. At the end of last and the beginning of this century, a few students, D.J. O'Donoghue, J.S. Crone, F.J. Bigger and David Kennedy shewed active interest in the subject, almost entirely of a bibliographical kind; and while O'Donoghue's *Poets of Ireland* is utterly indispensable as a map and guide, none of them seems to have troubled greatly about the verse itself. They accumulated a certain amount of material regarding the author's lives from old newspapers and magazines, but they failed, in most instances, to open the books.

So it has seemed useful to undertake a survey of the verse of the period, and having regard to literary values to attempt a general assessment; further, I have been forced to consider a whole complex of related problems apart from the purely stylistic, the modes of publication, the kinds of writer, their geographical distribution, their social and historical background. Ferguson pointed out that in Ireland we were deficient in scrupulous studies of the smaller aspects of our nation's past; and while, since his day, excellent work has been accomplished in the fields of political, constitutional, and, to a lesser degree, economic history, in literary history we have failed to register a comparable advance – it must be admitted that the subject lacks the initial excitement of the political event. So far only Kiely's study of William Carleton, *Poor Scholar*, and Farren's *The Course of Irish Verse* have any claim to serious status in this regard.

It may well be that from a literary point of view the subject should seem somewhat unrewarding; but no one has any right to deliver that judgment until he has acquainted himself with a representative range of the verse; and, hitherto, it seems not to have occurred to anyone to undertake this course.

In a subject of this nature, involving what must, in greater or lesser numbers, inevitably prove mediocre, even bad poets, the usual apparatus of complete documentation, of notes and cross-references, would appear disproportionate, pedantic, even gratuitously pompous. It cannot really matter to anyone whether a certain fact relating to, say, William Hamilton Drummond, is to be found in Shannon Millin's *Sidelights on the History of Belfast* (1932), or in the same author's History of the Second Congregation of *Dissenters in Belfast* (1900). But where I have quoted actual words or phrases, I have indicated the source. In other instances, it will, I am afraid, have to be taken that every statement of fact has published authority; the books, journals and papers containing these sources are listed in the bibliography. The conjectures are my own.

I am grateful to Mr. Geoffrey Taylor, who first taught me to look for the particular delight which may often be found in reading minor verse – a very different experience from the life-enhancement afforded by the great masters – but rewarding in its own way, no mere antiquarianism, but an exercise in appreciation; and to Mr. E. Norman Carrothers, from whom I have learned never to despise any of the works of man, or to treat the minutest piece of information as contemptible, and that the past is our inheritance, to be treated with critical but affectionate respect. I have also benefited in a very practical manner from the active assistance of Mr. Carrothers in finding books, and tracing references.

But I could not have read so many thousands of lines, if the forgotten and often clumsy old poets themselves had not, now and then, given me, in stanza, couplet, or turn of phrase, some sense of the humanity that was in them, and some feeling that, for better for worse, they were my own people.

Table of Contents

Chapter		Page
—	A Note in Definition	1
I	The Material	6
II	The Social Classification of the Poets	18
III	A Group at Dromore Palace	25
IV	Of Taste more than Talent?	42
V	"It is new strung, and shall be heard!"	49
VI	Landscape and Nature.	56
VII	Some Problems of the Time Lag.	65
VIII	The Belfast Poets	67
IX	Some Belfast Journals and the Poets associated with them	74
X	Private Poets	79
XI	The Belfastman	84
XII	The Vernacular Bards	92
XIII	The Rhyming Weavers	104
XIV	The Bards of South East-Antrim	119
XV	The Bards of the County Down	127
XVI	The Bards of Mid Antrim	136
XVII	The Rhyming Pedagogues	139
XVIII	and Three Odd Volumes	147
XIX	Summary	
	Bibliography	

I The Material.

So far as can be ascertained, in the period 1800–1870, excluding verse-writers of Ulster birth who were not resident within the province during the years of their significant literary activity, there were some 220 authors who published, among them, over 450 volumes of verse while living in Ulster.

There were many others during the same period, how many it is quite impossible to estimate, who contributed verse to local journals but never achieved volume publication; there are many others whose names we know by their having been represented by commendatory poems in the volumes of others, or collaborators, the subjects of published elegies, or alluded to in prefaces or notes.

If we consider that even those verses printed in the journals may often represent a small fraction of the author's work, as in the instance of Samuel Walker from whose manuscript book of nearly 40 poems I can trace only five items which reached print; that James Orr's Posthumous Works (1817) represented a rigorous selection by his executors of a larger quantity of material; that James Campbell had all the verse he had written prior to his fortieth year (1798) seized and impounded by the authorities; that a number continued verse-making for many years – in the cases of Robert Huddleston and Joseph Carson over thirty, after the publication of their volumes, it may be fairly asserted that the book-printed verse of the period can be hardly more than the visible part of the iceberg.

It would be of interest if the relevant information for comparable areas or regions within the British Isles could be made available; for it should then be possible to relate this social as well as literary phenomenon to a broader survey, and decide whether it was a normal development of the time or exceptional in its occurrence here. But until regional literary history has attracted a body of more systematic students we must content ourselves with the narrower scrutiny. The material as it is, is bulky enough to deserve some attention.

The Printing

The printing of these books was largely confined to Ulster towns. Of the volumes examined which bore the imprint of a place of origin, one-fifth came from outside the province; twenty six from Dublin, twenty from London compared with 160 from within. Of these two-thirds bear a Belfast imprint, for this town was, by far, the most important centre of production. The other printing places cover eight of the nine counties, Donegal being missing. Fermanagh, Cavan and Monaghan provide only one volume each. County Antrim with Belfast had also Larne, Ballymena and Ballyclare, the last for the two volumes edited by Samuel Lorry towards the close of the period. County Down had Newry, Downpatrick and Dromore. County Armagh had the City of Armagh, Portadown and Lurgan; Londonderry had the county town, Coleraine, Limavady and Magherafelt; Tyrone, Omagh, Dungannon, Strabane and Cookstown. Of all these, after Belfast, Londonderry with thirteen, and Newry with nine are leaders.

The workmanship in the country volumes is such as might be

expected from small printers; the type setting is often irregular, misprints abound and errors in pagination occur: the binding is normally for the early part of the period in paper boards, with a number of the smaller items in paper wrappers. A very few carried engraved frontispieces or title pages, usually London or Dublin printed; Belfast seems to have had little engraving before 1820. Cloth boards became general after 1830.

The price of bound volumes varied from half a crown (Huddleston) to nine shillings (Stott), but the average figure seems to have been between four and five shillings. Sometimes the price involved odd pence, as with Samuel Burdy, who explained that the increase from three shillings and threepence to four and fourpence was due to the last minute enlargement of his volume Ardglass (Dublin 1802). But the information is too scanty to permit any generalisation regarding the trends of prices over the years.

Method of Publication

For the volumes printed in London, so far as can be ascertained, the cost was usually borne by the author. But in the great majority of other instances publication was by subscription. James McHenry, in the preface to The Bard of Erin (Belfast 1808), writes that he had "determined, after some deliberation, to risk the publication of a few of [his] pieces. This [he] was necessitated to do by subscription, because [his] inclination constrained [him] to publish in [his] own country, where, it is to be lamented, there is no other mode of publication that affords any prospect of success"

It was usual for the names of subscribers to be printed alphabetically; the absence of a list was sometimes excused in such terms as McHenry used, who had, he declared, "a most respectable list. He was, however, dissuaded from it by his literary friends, who were of opinion that the space requisite, to contain such a great number of names would be quite disproportioned to the small size of the volume, and that it would perhaps, give more general satisfaction to occupy it by some additional poems". A similar statement was made in Anne Dutton's Poems on Moral and Religious Subjects (Dublin 1829).

In the absence of a list, it is only from preface or advertisement that the method of publication can be discovered, as, for example, Henry McD. Flecher's Prefatory Note to Poems, Songs and Ballads (Belfast 1866), in which he states that "generous, and, perhaps, too partial friends who have come forward, as subscribers, to guarantee that I shall not be a loser by my publication"

A variant of this procedure is given by William J. McMullan in The Brigand, etc (Belfast 1830), wherein he asserts that "solicitations of his friends led him to issue the prospectus of this work. The success which distinguished it, and the respectable names with which it was honoured were a source of great gratification". One volume can only be classified as owing its origin to this method by an inscription, "Presented to Master R. Birch as a reward of merit by a Subscriber," in the copy in my possession: this volume is Poems (Dublin 1812) by W. A. Bryson. The term 'subscriber' here is, however, ambiguous, and may refer to a subscriber or benefactor to the school.

There are several examples of apologies being tactfully

offered for the unimpressive nature of some lists, as in The Posthumous Works of James Campbell (Belfast 1820) it is asserted that "many most respectable names came too late for insertion": the list printed only contained 246 names. Robert Morrison who, for his Miscellaneous Poems (Belfast 1846), had only 103 subscribers, declared soberly that "publication was not with a view to profit as they will barely realise the expense". William Anderson in the introduction to his Original Poems (Belfast 1841) refers to his earlier volume (1830) of which 600 copies were printed and for which he received 500 subscribers. For the 1841 volume he lists 240 subscribers, and remarks that "a few did not wish to subscribe but paid the half in advance". Robert Huddleston in a note to the subscribers' list for his Poems and Songs (Belfast 1844) acknowledges his indebtedness to friends "who have taken upon themselves the trouble of canvassing (and the reader will find them in italics)," and concludes "while his heart overflows with gratitude towards them, he leaves them, and the brave folks of their gathering, their names along with his own, with a hope that they will survive, when they and he shall be no more". The italicised names number eleven in a list of 398.

It requires little imagination to envisage the whole complex of difficulties involved in this method of publication, but we are fortunate in having a lengthy comment on the problem in the preface to Rev. John Anketell's Poems (Dublin 1793), which, although just outside our period, is of obvious relevance.

This introduction extending to 52 pages, a fact otherwise unparallelled in this type of volume, considers among other topics, the disparity in the incomes of curates and bishops, the inadmissibility of Alexandrines in heroic couplets. On the question of subscriptions, Anketell has many hard things to say regarding the difficulty in securing them, and names the Earl of Westmoreland, the Marquess of Downshire, and Lord Clonmell, as being not merely uncooperative but antagonistic. As a graduate of Trinity College Dublin and a Church of Ireland clergyman, he felt warranted in assuming some degree of approval and support from his fellow clerics, but "In some of my wealthy, beneficed brethren I discovered a total void of fraternal affection, and a full measure of nauseous acidity".

He then solemnly declares "Should I be induced to come a second time before the awful tribunal of the public, which, however, depends upon a variety of circumstances, it shall not be through the medium of subscription: for, though I met with numberless instances of friendship, hospitality, and patronage during my late solicitations in that way; yet I also experienced so much vulgar, unmannerly treatment, from persons whose external appearance alone gave them any pretensions to the appellation of gentlemen; that the certain acquisition of one thousand guineas should not prompt me to engage in a similar scheme. It was, I grant, a perfectly optional matter with those to whom I applied, whether or no they would become subscribers; but surely it would not have been any diminution of their dignity, to signify their rejection in conciliating terms of politeness. To the language of acrimonious invective my mind is strongly repugnant; yet to a person endued with the smallest sensibility of soul, unprovoked sneers, churlish

shyness, or a harsh and haughty denial, must prove unspeakably mortifying and irksome; though, I must confess that my feelings have not, at any time, been so tenderly affected by a genteel apology, as by a sullen, ungracious compliance, which, therefore, I made it a rule uniformly to reject, as I thought it bore the evident appearance of an intended affront. Refined urbanity is not, I own, attainable by all men; but pride, insolence, and incivility should be for ever banished the company of rank and wealth; because they display strong symptoms of ignorance, and a want of real worth; and are productive of hatred and contempt, instead of that veneration and esteem which becoming affability would certainly acquire".

Although Anketell's complaint is vigorous, it must be confessed that he fared very well indeed in assembling a list of 1335, which included the Archbishop, eight Bishops and 232 other clergy, a Duke, seven Earls, and three Viscounts, as well as the Speaker of the Irish House of Commons and 27 members of Parliament.

His book was available in three styles; 'blue paper, bound, and gilt'; for the first the price was five shillings, but for the other kinds we are not told; and so we are quite unable to make any useful estimate of the possible financial return for his venture.

Nevertheless, he kept his word, and when his next volume came out, Essays in Prose and Verse (Belfast 1806), he solicited no subscriptions, simply having it put on sale for two shillings and twopence a copy.

The practice of subscription seems to have fallen off by the end of our period. We have the Fletcher volume (1866) mentioned above, and The Poetical Works of Robert Young (Londonderry 1863), but there are no others about which we can express any certainty until we consider such pious efforts as Poems from College and Country by Three Brothers (Belfast 1900), the verses of Patrick, Samuel Fee, and Thomas Given, which lists not only subscribers, but a new category, Guarantors.

Of the 29 lists I have examined the lengthiest is that for Alexander MacKenzie's Poems and Songs (Belfast 1810) with 2,122 names. Thomas Romney Robinson's Juvenile Poems (Belfast 1806) coming second with 2,045. No other book passed the 2,000 figure. But John McKinley's Poetic Sketches (Belfast 1819) with 1,888, and James Stuart's Poems on Various Subjects (Belfast 1811) with 1,668, are well ahead of the rest. The only other poets to achieve the 1,000 are Robert Young with 1,342 for his Orange Minstrel (Derry 1832) and 1,122 for his 1863 volume; Bernard Short with 1,152 for Rude Rhymes (Belfast 1824), and McKinley again, with 1,167 for the Dublin edition of 1821. The others vary from Robert Morrison's meagre 103 (1846) to David Boyd's Belfast Poor-House (1806) with 930.

MacKenzie's success had notable results. It was asserted by Herbison (1) that MacKenzie, the Bard of Dunover cleared "upwards of £200" by the venture. With this he built himself a cottage which he named "Mount Gaelus", to perpetuate the pseudonym he had used for his contributions to the Belfast News Letter. He also bought a fishing boat. This was wrecked, MacKenzie nearly drowned, and owing to his failure to obtain some security for the funds and deeds he had lodged with the local land agent, he found himself evicted about 1812. No other comparable sum is on record, although it has been declared that the proceeds of their volumes enabled Robinson to maintain himself at Trinity College Dublin, and McHenry to enter Glasgow University.

These lists have an importance which goes beyond the merely quantitative. From them it is often possible to deduce a great deal about the writer: how far his appeal extended; through what levels of society; in some instances, what his politics were, or his religious denomination; and something of his social affiliations, as for instance, whether he was likely to have been a Freemason or not. And sometimes, when the volume bears a Belfast imprint or none at all, from what part of the country the writer hailed. Besides helping us to sketch in the poet's background, the lists throw a useful light on the social life of the community, for the recurrence of certain names or groups of names offers some guidance as to cultural groupings or stratifications. From the occurrence or standing of other writers' names we may be able to discover some hint as to the poet's relative position among his fellows in the craft. Very occasionally a name may appear, the mere recording of which can have intrinsic significance; New Poems by Samuel Thomson (1799) with only 195 subscribers, includes one John McIlwaine, artist, Templepatrick, an artist not given in Strickland's Dictionary of Irish Painters (1913), the standard reference book on the subject.

MacKenzie's list, for example, is drawn largely from the Ards peninsula and from the rest of County Down; but contains 144 names of Scottish subscribers, as well as one each from London and Jamaica. Thomas Percy, Bishop of Dromore, and his friends Dr. W. H. Drummond, Thomas Stott, and Rev. William Neilson demonstrate the poet's acceptance by the Dromore coterie. Archibald Rowan Hamilton appears probably more in his capacity as a Co. Down landowner than as a prominent figure in national politics. James McHenry of Larne and James Orr of Ballycarry shew their approbation of a fellow poet: and Robert Anderson, the Cumberland Bard, who was then living at Carnmoney, who had his name down for half a dozen copies, gives tangible support, not only in his personal contribution, but in, surely, securing the six subscriptions on behalf of the Carnmoney Reading Society of which he was an eminent member. Another Reading Society, that of Crawfordsburn is included, drawing attention to the importance of

(1) Select Works (1886) P.9.

such organisations in the cultural life of rural Ulster at that time. Among the verses in the book there is a set dedicated to The Green Hill Lodge, No. 985, and this body responded lavishly with 50 subscriptions; another Masonic Lodge, Cabra, No. 606 is credited with 4.

But by far most impressive is the list for Robinson's Juvenile Poems. This astounding roll covers the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, Earl Hardwicke, who subscribed for 63 copies; the Lord Chief Justice of Ireland for 42; a Duke, seven Marquesses or Marchionesses, eighteen Earls or Countesses, six Bishops and 129 other clergy. Percy is, of course, among the Bishops, for the young poet and his father Thomas Robinson the painter were among the most outstanding members of the Percy circle. The Revs. Henry Boyd, Samuel Burdy with Dr. Drummond, Thomas Stott and Rev William Neilson displayed their group loyalty. Dr. William Drennan, David Boyd, author of The Belfast Poor House, and James Stuart were other poet-supporters. But a full analysis would necessitate the compiling of a by no means brief history of North East Ireland for half a century. William Ritchie, Scottish founder of Belfast shipbuilding, John Templeton, pioneer naturalist, Edward Bunting, musicologist, James McDonnell, founder of the Belfast school of medicine and much else, Rev. Dr. R. Black of Derry, leader of Tory Presbyterianism, William Sharman (later Sharman Crawford) "the father of Ulster Tenant Right," Master W. H. H. Betty, the Young Roscius, Revd. William Bruce, headmaster of Belfast Academy, Robinson's school, Rev. James Armstrong, Robinson's favourite tutor and close friend, and Signor Fabbrini the art master, all are here, with hundreds celebrated in the story of Belfasts' commercial or municipal development, Bristow, Bateson, Batt, Joy, May. There are also the Reading or Book societies of Drumaul, Portaferry and Dough 2nd., with booksellers in Dublin, Cork and Edinburgh, and John Murray of London himself.

Several of the individual non-Ulster subscribers are of interest: Maria Edgeworth, Henry Grattan, Robert Holmes the famous barrister, George Canning, Dugald Stewart, William Hayley the patron of Blake — he and young Robinson exchanged verses — and William Stanley Roscoe (1782-1843) poet, and father of the better known William Caldwell Roscoe. Two other names are worth mentioning: D. B. Warden "secretary of the American Legation, Paris," — Warden a student for the Presbyterian ministry, had been implicated in the '98 Rebellion and had fled to America, but throughout his career he kept in close touch with his native province: Robert Anderson, M.D. Edinburgh, literary historian, old friend of Percy, and likely canvasser of the Scottish subscribers.

Perhaps it was the ostentation of this remarkable list rather than the actual quality of the verses which made Robinson, a truly modest and goodhearted man, wish later to suppress the book.

James Stuart's list for Poems (1811) while not ~~so~~ socially so overwhelming, is, by comparison of a rather stronger literary character: Mary Balfour, Colonel William Blacker, Lady Dufferin, Drennan, Drummond, MacKenzie, Stott, Rev. John Graham, Rev. A. G.

Malcolm, W. H. Maxwell, the Newry novelist, and Samuel Thomson, offer a wide selection of his versifying contemporaries; and we can add "Thomas Moore, translator of Anacreon" Thomas Robinson the painter, who had just died before the book appeared, Christopher Moore, the Dublin sculptor, Sir John Stevenson, Moore's musical associate - and the man from whom they stole so many airs, Edward Bunting, which show something of the esteem in which Stuart was held by professionals in the arts. Other notable names can be mentioned, William Neilson, once more, John Hancock of Lisburn, co-founder with Drennan of the Belfast Monthly Magazine (1808-1814), Dr. Robert Black, for Stuart was a ferocious Tory, Sir John Foster, last Speaker of the Irish Parliament, and Bruce of the Belfast Academy again. The bookclubs were Ballyclose and Doagh.

By contrast, Robert Young's Orange Minstrel (1832) drew its literary supporters entirely from the Conservative section of the community; Rev. John Graham, Rev. Walter B. Mant, Dean Bagot, and James Stuart. The bulk of Young's 1,342 came from the Counties of Derry and Donegal and included a dozen Orange Lodges - and a number of prominent Tory politicians and landowners, Sir Henry Brooke Best, ancestor of the present Prime Minister of Northern Ireland among them. Young's Poetical Works (1863) appealed to the same part of the country, the North west, leaning even more strongly on the town of Londonderry which supplied 12 Town Councillors and 15 Justices of the Peace, two categories not otherwise eminent in sponsoring the arts. It is not, perhaps, very surprising that Young, a very bad poet indeed, was generally known as "The Fermanagh True Blue", and received a Civil List pension.

Bernard Short's Rude Rhymes (1824) improves upon Robinson in listing not only the Protestant but the Roman Catholic Primate, and the Sovereigns (or Mayors) of Belfast and Armagh. This list somehow seems to aim at a judicious representation of the leading dignitaries of the land: the Lord Lieutenant, Dublin Castle, the Commander in chief, and the Army - give the impression of ponderous official support. Colonel Blacker and William McComb are the only fellow poets to be included, unless the entry "Rev A. Magill, Antrim" should be a misprint for Rev. R. Magill, of Antrim (1788-1839), author of Poems (Belfast 1834)

If we examine the lists of such rural or vernacular poets as James Orr, Samuel Thomson and James Campbell, we realise at once that these are in a different category. Their support is seen to have been strictly local or very nearly so; and their status is clearly that of local bards.

James Orr's Poems (1804) with its 468 subscribers is drawn from his native townland of Broadisland, Ballycarry, from the adjacent ~~Islands~~ of Islandmagee, Larne and Carrickfergus with only 18 individual subscriptions from Belfast - the town's booksellers had more confidence, and took 100 copies - and single copies to Lisburn (Hancock once more) Greyabbey, Co. Down, Dublin, Liverpool. Magheramorne Book Club took 10 copies, and the only other poet is, inevitably, Samuel Thomson of

Thomson's own *Simple Poems* (1806) with 582 subscribers, includes Orr his friend, David Boyd and Rev Henry Boyd - "Dante" Boyd, sole representative of the Dromore folk, the Ballynure Bookclub and the Killead Literary Society. But most of the support comes from South Antrim and Belfast, with a few from North Down. *The Posthumous Works of James Campbell* of Ballynure (1820) only achieved 246 listed names, giving us Thomas Beggs as the sole literary figure. There are three Masonic Lodges, and a single clergyman, a circumstance not surprising in view of Campbell's lively anti-clerical opinions. Again the majority is from the Ballynure - Ballyclare district.

From Robert Morrison's list in his *Miscellaneous Poems* (1846) it seems evident that as 81 of 103 subscriptions have Belfast addresses, we may accept him as a Belfast poet. Among his supporters were Robert Patterson, Rev. William MacIlwaine and William Boyce, three verse-writers who will find place in our narrative, and Samuel Hawksett the leading local portrait painter of the day.

Although the volumes of William Carr, 1810 and 1813, and Richard Benson, 1815, which were published in Newry, drew their subscribers predominantly from South Down and Louth, the respective lists suggest that they were both of a much higher social status than the vernacular bards, as a good proportion of their support called upon local nobility, the Army, Trinity College, Dublin, clergy and medical doctors. Neilson, Maxwell and Stuart who lived in the neighbourhood subscribed to both poets, and Drennan to Benson only. Both Carr and Benson appear later as clergymen in subsequent subscription lists. In connexion with Carr's *Amurath and Zara* (1813), the inclusion of "Mr. Bell landscape painter" who took a dozen copies, offers an additional fact to Strickland's *Dictionary* in which the brief entry for Thomas Bell (fl. 1809-1829) gives no record of any period of residence in South Down.

By contrast with Orr, Thomson and Campbell, Porter, and many other local bards John McKinley ~~Poetic Sketches (Belfast 1819)~~ of Dunseverick is seen by the list in his *Poetic Sketches* (Belfast 1819) to have commanded an amazingly dispersed audience. From Portrush to Portaferry, from Larne to Ballyshannon it ranges, with some emphasis on the north coast of Antrim and Derry, the north and west hinterlands of Lough Neagh, South Down and Belfast. His literary standing is vouched for by Robert Anderson of Carnmoney who was on the point of returning or ~~had~~ had already returned to Carlisle, "Dante" Boyd, Thomas Beggs, Mary Balfour, Dr. Drummond, now of Dublin, Alexander McKenzie (inaccurately described as of Dunover, which he had left about six years earlier), Thomas Stott, and W. H. Maxwell. While Rev Henry Cooke is named there are few other notable Tories among his supporters, and, at any rate, Cooke had not by then come down strongly on that side; on the other hand William and Samuel Tennent, prominent radicals in Belfast, Luke Mullan Hope, son of James Hope, and himself a forthright progressive, and Hancock of Lisburn (how often his name crops up) give more than a suggestion of a left-wing tendency. Six Masonic lodges are noted. One name, J. S. Knowles of Glasgow, recalls the popular Victorian

dramatist who had left Belfast in 1817, where he had taught in the Academical Institution, and had been involved in a St. Patrick's Day celebration the allegedly disloyal consequence of which provoked a storm of protest in the town.

The Dublin edition of this volume (1821) which mustered 700 fewer subscriptions than the first, though still passing the 1,000 mark, obtained its sponsors mostly from the Dublin area: three distinct and interesting sources, Trinity College 100, (Fellows, Scholars), Maynooth, 46 (practically all Roman Catholic clergy), and the General Post Office, 34, providing appreciable contributions. There are no Masonic Lodges for this issue. So the question arises: had McKinley become a convert or perhaps a re-vert to the Roman Catholic faith? The only names of any northern literary association are those of Drummond and Rev. James Armstrong, late of Belfast Academy, colleagues in Strand Street Presbyterian Church, Dublin since 1815 and Rev. Richard Benson, now of Finglass.

The method of publication by subscription was not, of course, confined to Ireland: it had been in use in Great Britain during the previous century when it had reached its greatest effect in such vast enterprises as Pope's Translation of The Iliad of Homer in six volumes (1715-1720) in which while receiving £200 from the publisher for each volume, Pope was supplied, without charge, with the copies for his subscribers who paid him a guinea a volume. 575 subscribers taking 654 copies.(2)

Perhaps the most celebrated volume to be brought out under conditions analogous to those obtaining here during our period was Robert Burns' Poems chiefly in the Scottish Dialect (Kilmarnock 1786), and for this, the type-specimen of verse-publication outside a capital city, the procedure was, first, the issue, in April 1786, of a prospectus "Proposals for publishing by subscription" which offered "one volume octavo. Price stitched Three Shillings. As the author has not the most distant mercenary view in publishing, as soon as so many subscribers appear as will defray the necessary expense, the work will be sent to the press". When 300 subscriptions had been secured, an edition of 600 was printed off, appearing on 31st July 1786. By the end of August nearly the whole impression had been taken up, and the author had "after deducting all expenses, nearly twenty pounds".

In October, when settling his account with the printer Burns offered him a second edition which was refused. And it was only through the influence of Blacklock and other literary persons that in April of the next year the enlarged ("The First Edinburgh", 1787) edition was published. For this there were over 1,500 subscribers, and 3,000 copies were printed.(3)

So, by comparison, some of the Ulster poets fared very well. But for a full picture we should require more information regarding the numbers of copies printed over those for which subscriptions had been received. We have only two references to this.

2 The Life of Alexander Pope: Robert Carruthers (1857) p. 114.

2 Alexander Pope: Leslie Stephen (1880)

3 The Poetry of Robert Burns: Henley and Henderson (1901) Vol. I. p. 311.

These are William Anderson's 1830 volume, of which 600 were printed on the strength of 500 subscriptions: and Ann Hutton's *Poems* (1829) for which 700 subscriptions had been booked and 1,000 printed (4)

The importance of the systems for authors hoping to interest local printers was that means should be forthcoming to cover the cost of paper, which was by far the greatest single item requiring cash outlay, at a time when banking and credit facilities hardly existed.

Socially there seems to have been fairly general acceptance of the usage as an obligation of status; local nobility, landowners, clergymen and doctors seem to have been expected to respond to the appeals, and, in a remarkable way did not fail to come forward.

At this time it was fashionable in cultured circles in Great Britain to foster and encourage what we should now call 'the underprivileged'; the infant prodigy in humble circumstances, the rural or working class poet. Robert Bloomfield, shoemaker-author of *The Farmer's Boy*, and John Clare, labourer-author of *Poems of Rural Life* are still remembered as outstanding examples of this phase. But the vast fame of the Ayrshire ploughman, Burns, and the lesser but still considerable reputation of James Hogg, the Ettrick Shepherd, were even more immediately effective in drawing attention to this kind of work, and, in a measure, in inspiring many county folk to try their hands at it. But this last aspect must not be overstressed as it seems clear that there was, certainly among the Scottish rural and working class, and to a surprising ~~degree~~ extent among the Scottish planters in Antrim and Down, a strong and unbroken folk-tradition of versemaking which did not depend upon the patronage of any other class.

Besides attempting to secure an impressive muster of socially important sponsors, the subscription poet seems to have sought the recognition of established literary figures, and, in Ulster, a few such as W. H. Drummond whose reputation was very high, Stott, and Stuart, reckoned, in addition, to have wide influence as editor of a series of journals in Newry and Belfast, were frequently solicited for their public approbation.

Those poets who were able to interest, in our contemporary phrase, a 'pressure-group' or groups, fared best. Behind MacKenzie, Robinson and Porter the force of Bishop Percy's coterie is apparent. But not less interesting and socially much more satisfactory, is the persistence of certain figures not normally within the obvious categories of sponsorship, such as Hancock of Lisburn and Samuel Luke of Belfast, in giving their support. Others as wealthy, at least, who might have been expected to shew interest, such as the Tennent family and Robert Patterson, to name only two instances, seemed only to have responded when local loyalties were involved. Three poets, Robert Anderson, David Boyd, and James Orr seem, like Hancock and Luke, to have been actuated by a genuine enthusiasm.

But it is a most noteworthy indication of the state of rural literary development that a local bard, without the assistance of any pressure groups or any of the instruments of prestige, should have been able to expect and command the allegiance of some hundreds of his neighbours, as in the instances of Orr, Thomson and Huddleston, even when, as for the last named, the Book clubs no longer provided a stimulus.

4. *Memorials of a Consecrated Life* (1883)

II. The Social Classification of the Poets.

At first glance, so various seem the social levels from which the large body of verse came, it seems impossible to chart or sort out the participants into any kind of order. But an increased familiarity with the material will suggest a fairly accurate stratification which can be used to reduce the study to more easily handled sections. There must always be overlappings. A poet sometimes may fall quite readily into either of two categories; and if a geographical distribution be sought, the problem becomes incapable of any readily grasped solution, save in regard to the rural or, more strictly, the vernacular poets who may in most instances be considered in 'clusters' of greater or lesser density.

A rough social basis will be found to offer the best means for establishing types and kinds of writer: for this involves, among other factors, some indication of educational attainment, a consideration closely relevant to the kind of writing attempted.

The first generalisation must be that, in the period under review, in Ulster the great aristocratic and landowning class can claim little real credit other than as patrons for this volume of verse. The Fourth Marquess of Londonderry, the Tenth Viscount Massareene, the Seventh Viscount Strangford did produce books, but these bore London imprints, and their authors appear to have had little or no literary intercourse with other writers in the Province; Massareene, at anyrate was known to be a popular landlord. Heir to the Donegall Estate, the Earl of Belfast contributed verses to a local magazine, and in many ways demonstrated his interest in the cultural life of the community, but his frequent absences abroad, due to ill-health, and his early death gave no opportunity for any close association with local writers to develop. Lady Dufferin, too, was much away, and although we know of her subscribing to at least one local volume, and can shew one very obvious piece of imitation of her renowned "Irish Emigrant's Farewell" (McEwen), she failed to become either a great patroness or a very influential writer.

Indeed, of the great family names, only that of Blacker of Carrickblacker, has any resonance, and that in the well known ballad on the Battle of the Boyne, by Col. William Blacker: of his class his were the only volumes printed locally, at Armagh and at Portadown. One other landowner, Col. Thomas Dawson Lawrence of Lawrencetown near Banbridge, Co. Down, can shew claim to be considered. His Miscellaneous Works (Dublin 1789) with a second edition (London 1806) published to benefit the local Sunday School, was dedicated to Thomas Percy; and Samuel Burdy in his Ardglass has a poem addressed to him.

But there is here nothing at all comparable to the contribution made by the parallel class in Scotland to that nation's literature. Lady Grisell Baillie, Jane Elliott, Lady Anne Barnard, Lady Nairne, Sir Alexander Boswell, Thomas Stoddart, each of these holds some place, and two or three are, now and then, not far behind Burns, Hogg and Tannahill. Among the reasons for this may have been a more effective tradition of

residence on their estates as opposed to the notorious Irish absenteeism, a closer identity with the nation, and a respect for the language of the country. Scotland had a continuity of history lacking in Ulster, where the Plantations of the early seventeenth century could only find literary expression in Colonial terms.

But if we turn from the aristocracy of wealth to what we may, speaking comparatively and without cynicism, term the aristocracy of the intellect, the picture is altered. A disproportionately large part of English poetry has come out of the rectory and the vicarage; Herrick, Herbert, Crabbe, ~~Warton~~, Mason, Barnes, Hawker, Hurdis, Faber, Tennyson-Turner, Kingsley, and Andrew Young in our own time, are a few of the names which come to mind.

Ulster clergymen of the Church of Ireland supplied an appreciable part of the verse of our period. John Anketell, Henry Boyd, Samuel Burdy, Richard Benson, John Graham, Walter Mant, Dean Bagot, Canon MacIlwaine, have already been mentioned: we can add Luke Aylmer Connolly, J. D. Hull, without counting William Alexander or George Chadwick, both Bishops of Derry, as neither entered into literary relations with their local contemporaries.

With the exception of Alexander, these had all been educated at Trinity College Dublin, the central institution of the Ascendancy, which till early in the century excluded the Dissenters of the North who turned to Scotland, to the Universities of Edinburgh and Glasgow for the higher education denied them here. James Stuart, a member of the Established Church had also been a student at Trinity, as was Thomas Romney Robinson. Later we find Dissenters like W. A. Bryson and William Drennan's two sons there also.

The orthodox Presbyterian ministers make a less impressive shewing than those of the Church of Ireland: due perhaps to a concentration in their Scottish education on more narrowly theological and philosophical concerns; Robert Magill of Antrim was by far their most considerable verse-writer; while from the Remonstrant (or Unitarian) section of the Presbyterians - the severance was not rendered complete till about the middle of our period - Dr. W. H. Drummond was an outstanding personality, to his contemporaries of major significance, and to be ranked with Thomas Moore; and, although lay members of this section not only wrote effective verse - like Drennan and Robert Patterson - but were perhaps the dominant force in the progressive movements which, during the earlier years of the century, promised to make Belfast a decorous and humane ~~city~~ community, ~~only the~~ William Heron of Ballyclare, and W. D. McEwen of Killyleagh are the only other clerical names worth noting. McEwen (1787-1828) a prolific verse contributor to the Belfast press, intended to publish ~~them~~ a selection, but died before his desire could be fulfilled.

Thomas Young while a student

With these Scottish-educated poets we must number besides William Drennan (Glasgow and Edinburgh) and James McHenry (Glasgow) both graduates in medicine. Other medical doctors include John Swanick Drennan, already referred to as attending Trinity College, J. C. S. Corry, Thomas Hancock of Lisburn, A. H. Haliday (1728-1802) who, though he never published a volume, had, at the beginning of the century, perhaps the highest reputation of any Belfast poet. Another of contemporary repute was John Stewart M.D., author of *The Pleasures of Love* (London 1805), son of a North Street shoemaker

and mentioned in The Drennan Letters (P. 401)

With these formally educated writers we may fairly group two students of the Royal Belfast Academical Institution, Robert St. Clair Wright, and Robert McMurray; David Boyd, teacher at the Charitable Institute and later ordained and keeping a classical academy in Long Lane (Belfast Almanac 1836), John Rorke master at Dungannon Royal School, Robert Sullivan Inspector of Schools, William McMechan a barrister on the North-East Circuit, and Henry Bayly, a Lisburn lawyer, and W. B. Bayne, assistant master in the Belfast academy.

These links with the rectory, the manse and the classroom bring in Emma Toke (1812-1872) daughter of the Bishop of Kilmore, Alessie Bond (1841 — ?) wife of a Church of Ireland clergyman, and Mary Balfour whose father had held a living at Limavady, and who later kept a ladies' school in Belfast: while Mary McDermott's My Early Dreams (1832) is addressed from Killeagh Glebe.

Phillott
writer

Rose + ? Rope

Although one dare not be dogmatic, most of the female versewriters seem to come generally from educated ~~and~~ or comfortable ~~hom~~ families; Mrs Aeneas, ~~Miss Frances~~ the Misses Frances and Elish Lamont wife and daughters of a prosperous Belfastman, Mary Ferrar (1806-1889) later wife of Robert Patterson, daughter of a Belfast magistrate, Anne Sutton (1791-1881) and Vincentia Rodgers, daughters of landowners of the squire class; and with these Rose Kirwan, governess to a noble family, Anne Elliott of Armagh, and Mrs. Alice McWatty of Castleblayney, Co. Monaghan. Frances Brown the blind poet of Stranorlar, Donegal, seems not to have been brought up in distressed circumstances. While Eliza Dobbin lacks much of the gentility of, say, Mary Balfour, and although she avowedly published "with the desire to turn to profitable account the production of my brain" (Belfast 1839) one could hardly place her in the working class. Only Sarah Leech of Donegal was positively of the peasant class; her Poems (Dublin 1828) contains an engraved portrait of her seated at a spinning wheel. We have therefore no counterparts here to the folk-song qualities of Tibbie Pagan the shebeen keeper or Jean Glover, the juggler's doxy, who hold their unassailable places in the Scottish Anthology.

The army offers no little choice; General Alexander H. Haliday, grandson of the doctor-poet published a few hymns. Colonel William Read with his Hill of Caves (1818), and Captain Francis Dubourdieu with his Wild Flowers from Germany (1850) ~~have~~ form a tiny company to which we might add Alexander Markham a lieutenant in the militia, and, perhaps, Anthony Semple of the East India Company.

Under the heading of Urban poets, while this must also, in some measure, cover a certain number of the foregoing, such as William Drennan and the Lamonts to name no more, it offers a convenient framework in which to group manufacturers, merchants, shopkeepers, journalists, tradesmen and workers in large industrial

undertakings. William Boyce was a Belfast merchant, Robert Patterson, a mill furnisher and hardware merchant, George Druitt, Thomas Henry and William McComb (sometime schoolmaster) kept bookshops and dabbled in publishing. Samuel Lyons was a printer, George Sibbald a bank clerk; Robert Morrison and Raymond V. Henry very likely clerks. Hugh Leslie Stewart had a spirit store in Arthur Street. Alexander O'D. Taylor was a stockbroker and insurance agent. W. J. McMullan beginning as a printer graduated to journalism, a calling followed by R. A. Wilson, "Barney Maglone", Hugh Harkin, and by Robert Young in Londonderry. Benjamin Lyness was a police constable. Thomas Elliott originally from Co. Fermanagh, followed his trade as shoemaker in Belfast and later in Glasgow. There were also textileworkers in Belfast or its neighbourhood, Francis Davis, muslin weaver, later professional man of letters, James McKowen and Thomas Beggs engaged in bleachworks.

It might indeed be more appropriate to consider the two last under Rural or Vernacular, as most of the material for their verses was drawn from the countryside and both lived ~~at Lambeg~~ outside the town. This same difficulty involves Henry McD. Flecher who had been a country schoolmaster before he became a mill manager in Belfast. So too with John Fullarton of Ballynure who had been a reed-maker until he was 37, then found employment with an engineering firm which removed to Belfast in 1846, where he lived for his remaining 29 years. And how are we to place James McCallen and Henry Picken, the two blind balladmongers? Or Thomas Stott, a very wealthy bleacher of Dromore, Co. Down? He, it seems, must be left unattached in this systematisation, like Andrew McEwen, apothecary of Downpatrick, or George Proctor, solicitor and newspaper proprietor of Limavady.

Rural as a classification submits to easier subdivision into three distinct groupings; schoolmasters, farmers, weavers and other craftsmen. The first provides an embarrassingly numerous list: William Anderson of Saintfield, Hugh Tynan of Donaghadee, Hugh McWilliam from near Newtown-ards, John Williamson who kept an academy at Ardglass, Patrick Quin of Omagh, Peter Magennis of Enniskillen, David Colhoun of Strabane. George Dugall of Newtowncunningham, Donegal, John Getty of Ballymena, John Given of Cullybackey and later Ballymena, the brothers Patrick and Samuel Fee Given of Cullybackey too; and, perhaps, most interesting of all Samuel Thomson of Lyle Hill.

Farmer poets are by comparison rare. Francis Boyle of Comber, Ephraim Allen of Portadown, Thomas Given brother of the two schoolmasters of Cullybackey, and Robert Huddleston of Moneyrea, Co. Down, with the possible addition of Samuel Walker of Templepatrick, Co. Antrim

We can name no more than three rural craftsmen outside the weaver's job, Henry Alcorn, shoemaker of Limavady, Alexander Duffy of Dungannon called by himself 'a tradesman'; and William Bleakley, cooper and textile mechanic, of Ballinaskeagh, Co. Down.

But by contrast the regiment of weavers is considerable: Peter Burns of Kilwarlin, Edward Sloan of Conlig, Andrew McKenzie of Dunover, Joseph Carson of Kilpike, Hugh Porter of Moneyslan, and Anthony Grant of Newtownards, all of Co. Down: James Campbell of Ballynure, James Orr of Ballycarry, David Herbison of Dunclug, Co. Antrim; Robert Donnelly of Portadown and Bernard Short of Armagh County.

This hosting of names and callings may seem rather confusing to anyone not acquainted with the books: but it does in fact represent a clarification, for economic status usually implied educational attainment and this had always a general bearing on manner and style in writing. So we can say at once for those graded as having had formal education, that they would normally use the forms with which they were familiar in their reading of English literature; the heroic couplet most frequently; less often blank verse of the eighteenth century kind derived from Thomson and Akenside rather than Cowper; various stanza devices, usually in quatrains; all heavily loaded with poetic diction, personification, classical reference, with inversions and apostrophes.

It is important in this connexion, to realise that there has always been the factor of 'time-lag' in the appearance and state of any of the arts in Ireland compared to Great Britain. The distance and hazards of travel, the relatively infrequent personal contacts between residents in Ireland and in Britain; the rather less secure conditions of society in Ireland; these had among their consequences a resultant slowing-up of aesthetic practice. It was as if the ripples had had a long way to travel and were sadly diminished in their strength by the time they struck the Irish shore and ran up the loughs and estuaries. So the English 18th century persisted well on into the 19th century among us. And when now and then the time-lag was abbreviated by the fairly immediate import or publication of English books of verse, it was usually those writers like Samuel Rogers and Thomas Campbell who themselves continued the 18th century modes, who were the favoured authors. Even Byron, who had a remarkable influence in due course, offered little difficulty, for his readers seem to have felt, as he himself asserted that he belonged to the Rogers-Campbell sequence.

When Thomas Percy was leaving England for his Ulster diocese he felt somehow as if he were going into exile: he complained later that letters and journals were often eight months in arrears; and

when rebellion threatened he packed up his books and papers for despatch to safety in England.

These somewhat 'frontier' conditions, and the fact that the formally educated, as the Ascendancy class, felt ~~them~~ themselves to be English rather than native, gave us a ~~literature~~ style verse literature which we may fairly call Colonial, for it resembles closely the rather oldfashioned conventional, derivative verse of New England, Cape Colony, New Zealand and New South Wales.

But when an interest in and enthusiasm for Irish studies developed a little later and began to have its effect on the lyrical forms, the Colonial label became less and less accurate, although W. H. Drummond could continue till well past the half century translating his Ancient Minstrelsy in 18th century modes. So while the transition is uneven it seems not inaccurate to allow the term Colonial to be superseded by the even more vague Polite as a general description of the style or styles accepted by the formally educated for their kinds of writing in verse.

Many of the rural poets, particularly the weavers of Antrim and Down wrote in the vernacular; and although originally they had been settlers for the Scottish Lowlands, and in that sense Colonial too, theirs was a folk-tradition, carried with them, growing out of the living conditions, and no mere imitation of remote conventionally-accepted models. This topic will be more fully discussed in the section devoted specifically to the Vernacular Bards. For the present it should be sufficient to remark the existence of that kind.

Between the extremes of the Colonial - Polite and the Vernacular there lies a very large body of writing indeed; the verse, for example, of country schoolmasters who seemed with one outstanding exception, that of Samuel Thomson, to have avoided the vernacular; the verse of urban merchants and workers who had lost or had never possessed the vernacular, but moved less easily among the literary conventions of the Polite, since they had been either self-taught or locally educated. This kind we may term the Popular.

There are, of course, instances in which it is hard to draw the line of demarcation. MacKenzie, in much of his work a vernacular bard, tries in longer pieces to achieve the Polite, but his efforts are more readily acceptable as Popular. So for James Orr, John McKinley and Hugh Porter, each handling the Vernacular with obvious confidence, stiff and uncertain with the attempted Polite, sometimes at ease within the limits of the Popular. Where this diversity in execution occurs, I have taken the poets' most effective or characteristic mode as index to his placing in the context.

References:- The following anthologies have been used as sources of comparative verse.

Poems of the Scottish Minor Poets: Sir George Douglas (1891)
A Book of American Verse: A. C. Ward (1935)
An Australasian Anthology: Percival Serle (1927)
The Centenary Book of South African Verse: F. C. Slater (1931)

III A Group at Dromore Palace.

When John Gamble made his tour in the north of Ireland during the summer of 1812, he paused for a while in Dromore and "clambered over a parcel of pig-sties to have a look at an old castle", peeped in through one of the windows of the Cathedral, "where there was nothing to see beyond the usual ornaments of a parish church", and "walked afterwards to the Bishop's palace ... about a quarter of a mile from the town". There he found "the hedges ... filled with roses, delightful emblem of their late mild and benevolent possessor, the perfume of whose name will long shed fragrance over his sepulchre" (1)

It certainly had been a strange trick of fate that brought Thomas Percy?, kinsman and chaplain to the House of Northumberland, Dean of Carlisle, friend of Johnson, Reynolds, Garrick and Burke, author of the renowned Reliques of Ancient English Poetry, to the Bishop's Palace at Dromore in 1783.

And in truth it took him a considerable time to settle down there. He contrived usually to winter in Dublin while attending the deliberations of the Irish House of Lords, to spend a couple of years at a stretch in England, doing the rounds of Bath, Cheltenham, Windsor and Oxford, and once swelling the crowd at the trial of Warren Hastings. Or again he would have to cross the Irish sea to arrange for the disposal of a deceased cousin's estate, to get his eldest daughter decently married, or to negotiate with the publishers regarding further editions of the Reliques. And when the threat of rebellion in Ireland offered the best excuse of all he took it and fled, edging slowly back to Dublin in April 1798; and only when the Lord Lieutenant bullied the Primate and the Primate bullied his Bishops to go back to ~~the~~ their posts, and when the leaders of the insurrection had been hanged or were in flight, did Percy return to Dromore to inspect "the Pikes used by the Rebbles all bloody" collected for him by Darby his secretary (2)

So although he had made firm friends with a few literary Irish clergymen, like Thomas Campbell, Rector of Clones (1733-1795) or Henry Boyd who helped him with his Goldsmith Memoir, or with a couple of neighbours, Colonel Thomas Dawson Lawrence, veteran of the American wars and philanthropic poet, and Thomas Stott a prosperous linen bleacher in Dromore and an inveterate rimer, it was only after 1800, it seems that Percy began to play an important part in the social and cultural life of North East Ulster. He by no means confined his interests to purely intellectual pursuits. His landsteward pioneered the drill culture of turnips, and "Percy himself introduced the true Berkshire pig at Magheralin in 1801" (3), and improved his groves, opening little vistas with winding walks, and importing a nine foot basalt column from the Giants' Causeway, until "the glen [was] a perfect paradise, ... decorated with three beautiful urns and an obelisk painted by Mr. Robinson. From distant points of view they [had] the happiest effect"

1 A View of Society and Manners in the North of Ireland in the summer and autumn of 1812: J. Gamble (1813) p. 54, 55

2 Percy: Prelate and Poet: Alice C.C. Gaussen (1908) p. 254

3 The Lagan Valley: E.R.R. Green (1949) p. 128

X 4 Gaussen pp. 270-1 Where is "4" in the M/S? X (P. 26 Typed Sheet)

From 1800 until his death in 1811, his own authorship accomplished, his sight failing, he became the centre of the most influential literary coterie Ulster has ever known.

The most representative memorial of this phase is the large oil painting by Thomas Robinson of "A Group at Dromore Palace" (1807), now in the possession of Lord Bangor. It is a spacious conversation piece, with thirteen figures, depicting the reading by Thomas Stott of an elegy on the death of Mrs. Percy which had taken place on 31st December 1806, to the bereaved Bishop and a party of his closest friends.

On the extreme left stands the tall lad Romney Robinson whose Juvenile Poems, dedicated to Percy, had come out in the previous spring. Beside him, his father Thomas Robinson, the painter, holds a portfolio under his arm. Percy himself seated in an armchair, listens, his head bowed in thought. At his left elbow, leaning on the table which occupies the centre of the composition, sits the white haired Rev. Henry Boyd, translator of Dante. Stott sits in the middle facing the spectator, manuscript in his left hand, the raised right hand marking the rhythm. Rev. B. Humphreys, Chaplain to the Marquess of Downshire, stands behind Stott's chair. On the extreme right, Arthur O'Neill the Irish harper sits against the wall. Beside him, Rev Henry Elgee Boyd, son of "Dante", recently appointed chaplain to the Bishop, fingers his flute. The others more difficult, and perhaps not so important to identify, stand or sit on Stott's left: these include Sir George Atkinson, Lord Castlereagh, and the Hon. Edward Ward, heir to the Bangor title. The Bishop's dearest interests are faithfully catalogued: poetry, painting, music, the church and the nobility.

Romney Robinson (1793-1882) had been first introduced to poetry when he was about two years of age, by his father reading Percy's then famous "Hermit of Warkworth". So familiar did he become with this piece that before he had reached his third year, he had learned to read for himself. He had been born in Dublin where his father had been painting portraits at twenty guineas a time. In the year of the poet's birth the family had come north to Lawrencetown, near Gilford, Co. Down, where Thomas painted a series of portraits for Colonel J. D. Lawrence. It seems likely that the painter who came from Westmoreland, had met Percy when the latter was Dean of Carlisle, and his being in the North of Ireland was the chief attraction which drew Robinson thither, to Lawrencetown, to Lisburn, and to Belfast in 1801. (5). So it was natural that when the child displayed his amazing talent the Bishop should do all in his power to further his interests. "The frequent conversations of his Lordship's abounding in elegant criticism and literary anecdote confirmed the boy's poetical taste, and may be adduced as another very powerful concurrent cause of his strong attachment to the service of the muses" (6). It was natural also that the poet should respond with sets of verses "On visiting the Mount at Dromore", in his ninth year, "On Mrs. Percy's liberal Present of Warm Clothing to the Dromore Infantry" in his tenth, and "On seeing the Picture of Hafiz" in his eleventh; Hafiz was the pseudonym of Stott for his verses in the newspapers; Thomas Robinson painted him seated, wearing his hat.

5 Bulletin, Belfast Museum and Art Gallery: Jan. 1949 Vol. I. No. 1

6 "A Short Account of the Author" in Juvenile Poems 1806

Robinson wrote, in his twelfth year, a poem to Robert Anderson, M.D. (1750-1830), the Edinburgh literary historian, who had been physician at Alnwick when Percy was chaplain to the Northumberlands. When at Dromore in 1802 he met Robinson, was impressed with his precocity, and one evening set him a subject for verse, a description of "The Mount", already mentioned.

Robinson's verses are mechanically regular and shew a wide range of reading and familiarity with the poetic diction of the period – as the opening lines of "A Paraphrase on the Tablet of Cebes" exemplify:

> "Where o'er Boeotia Thebes extends her reign,
> Chance led our wandering steps to Saturn's fane,
> Where precious gems with ductile gold combine,
> And votive gifts bespangle all the shrine . . ."

but have nothing to recommend them beyond the youthfulness of the author. Nevertheless the mobilising of such an astonishing volume of support and the launching of the book was a considerable social and economic achievement. The imagination reels at the thought of all the wheedling and appealing letters that must have been written to bring it about.

The success of an infant prodigy set something of a local precedent. *Juvenile Poems* by Robert St. Clair Wright (Belfast 1826) consisted of verses composed between the author's tenth and fifteenth year. I have no means of measuring its success, as the subscribers' list in the only copy known to me is incomplete. Bernard Short's *Rural and Juvenile Poems* (Belfast 1821) were all written between his fourteenth and eighteenth year. Neither volume, it may be said, exhibits the alarming efficiency of Robinson's metre or his command of literary convention. W. J. McMullan's *The Brigand* etc. (Belfast 1830) was the work of 'a boy of little more than 16 years of age', but is altogether a different kind of precocity. William MacIlwaine (1807-1885) while a schoolboy in Dublin, although he had 'from [his] very infancy an intense delight in poetry', admitted his being influenced by the example of Robinson (7).

Robinson, perhaps a little ashamed of the sentimental portrait with which his father had embellished the book, though later he was probably amused by the charming engraving of himself which adorned William Hayley's *Life of George Romney* (1809) – tried, afterwards, as I have said, to have his book suppressed; but its phenomenal dispersal set him an impossible task; and *Juvenile Poems*, while not common, is certainly not among the rarer items of our northern literature.

Henry Boyd (1749-1832), one of Percy's oldest Irish friends, close companion, and Chaplain for many years, wrote a good deal of occasional verse, but again displays the mannered frigidity of the convention. It is notable that his contemporaries tend to stress his work in translation. A manuscript poem, very likely by Stott, attached to the back of the Robinson painting of the "Group" refers to Boyd:

7 MacIlwaine Family Papers: unpublished.

"There sat, deeply read in the foreigner's lore,
Deeply read in the languages written of yore,
The learned translator of Dante's high song,
Which in vision sublime bears the fancy along:
Befitting companion in talent and mind
For the Prelate and poet and scholar refined" (8)

Boyd, in the Belfast News Letter, 32d January 1811, had some "verses on the close of the year" in which he saluted his old friend and benefactor,

"Sleepst! that venerable form behold,
To common eyes it bears the marks of time,
But the free spirit, active, uncontroll'd,
Still shews its native energy sublime."

These may serve as an indication of his verse; of his verse-drama, of which he wrote a good deal, this is not the place to speak, beyond remarking that, with Gorges Edmund Howard (1715-1786) of Coleraine, he is one of the pioneers in this kind among us.

Of Percy's closest friends, Thomas Stott (1755-1829) is, by far, the most interesting. He was writing verse before Percy came to Ireland, having contributed verses on the town of Banbridge to the Hibernian Magazine in 1777. It is not likely, however, that the Bishop and he, for all the former's tolerance, had much in common long before 1800, for Stott had been an extreme radical, writing for The Northern Star (1792-1796), and hailing the French Revolution in such verses as "Liberty and Equality or Dermot's Delight", which concluded with

"More and more may the tree of French liberty flourish,
And shield with its branches the nations around".

But, like Wordsworth, though with no desertion of Annette to rationalise, ~~critics aver~~, Stott underwent a change of heart, and changed his tune, patriotically lamenting the deaths of Nelson, Cornwallis, Collingwood, and Pitt, saluting Wellington, and advising Erin to

"Look at ill-fated nations, torn
By Discord's unrelenting reign,
By Tyranny oppress'd and shorn —"

but still greeting insurgent nationalism in "The Signal Successes of the Greeks against the Turks"

Like Robinson, Stott wrote his verses on "The Mount of Dromore". He also wrote a sonnet, he was fond of sonnets, to the Lord Bishop, presenting it as a New Year's Day gift, 1st January, 1805. When Percy died in 1811, Stott sent his elegiac stanzas to the News Letter, in which he asserted that the deceased prelate had

"Cherished the germs and the blossoms of Genius,
For genius, and judgment and taste were his own".

The last stanza read —

"Be mute now, my harp! thy dull duty is ended,
Begun with reluctance, concluded with pain,
Since he, who thy humble exertions befriended,
Is gone, I'll perchance ne'er invoke thee again" (9)

8 Fragments That Remain: Alec Wilson (1950)

9 A Collection of Poems on Various Subjects Volume II (Belfast 1810)
[This volume must on internal evidence have come out in 1811]

This tribute provoked a reply in the columns of the same journal by "Florus, Cottage Vale" (Query: Was this William Drennan, Cabin Hill?)

"Quite pensive I stood, with a heart fraught with sorrow,
To think that green Erin should have to bewail
Great Percy today, and bright Hafiz tomorrow,
Whom head, heart and pocket enrich'd our green vale.

Ye banks of fair Lagan, where often together
The Prelate and Poet have wander'd along,
Again a new Bishop may deck your gay river,
But I fear you'll ne'er find such a master in song"

Stott further demonstrated his loyalty to the house of Percy, by "Stanzas on seeing a beautiful Infant" in honour of the first born of the Bishop's younger daughter the Honourable Mrs. Pierce Meade. Several of his poems are redolent of the period, "The Birth of Sensibility", and "To an Aeolian Harp placed in a Window at Dromore House", being two obvious examples. He also announced his enthusiasm for Canova, William Collins and Izaak Walton; and was forever producing New Year Odes; in a letter to him (19.1.1804) Thomas Robinson writes "I hope you sent your New Year's Ode to London. There was some fine touches in it, but you can never write a better than the one for last year". (10)

At almost any time in his adult life he could have afforded to pay for the publication of a book as he was a very prosperous businessman, and an important figure in the textile industry. But he kept putting it off until his seventieth year. When he did publish Songs of Deardra in 1825, he stated that it had been his intention to dedicate it to Percy, but that in compensation he had had a little monument erected 'in a park belonging to himself' to the prelate's memory; an engraving of this formed the frontispiece.

He was not a polished writer even in the sense that Robinson or Boyd were, being liable, now and then, to be forced by the exigencies of rime into somewhat unusual treatment of words, as for instance in "The Harvest Crocus"

"When swallows on the housetop meet
And now to take prepare
From northern climes their voyage fleet
To warmer fields of air — "

And he was addicted to quotation, acknowledged or unacknowledged, as in his Sonnet to Mr. Coleridge,

"That strain once more! It had no dying fall:"

and, though prone to large commonplaces on world events, seems at his happiest in simple lines which give a lilt to unoriginal observation:

"The gooseberry's gone, but the cherry grows mellow;
The corn, lately green, now turns rapidly yellow.
The meadow its russet-robe yields to the mower;
The toil of the reaper rejoices the sower.
The lammas-flood muddies the river and fountain;
The tube of the fowler resounds on the mountain."

(October)

At one time Robinson and he were considered "the two best poets that Ulster can boast of" (11), and many tributes in verse were offered to him.

10 Bulletin B.M.A.G. I. 1 (1949)

11 History of the Town of Belfast: G. Benn (1877-1880)

James McHenry (Bard of Erin 1810) wrote an ode after a visit to Dromore House in May 1808, in which Percy, the Robinsons and William Cunningham were eulogised. Of Stott he wrote

> "Lo, through yon glade I see from far,
> The Bard who weaves in rapid strains,
> The tyrant's doom, the spoils of war,
> The carnage of embattled plains;
> And oft he makes the numbers flow,
> Where streamlets glide and meadows grow,
> And bids each lawn, and grove, and glen,
> Yield twice their native sweets to men!
> With rapture, Lagan's stream I view,
> Smooth roll his classic tide thro' fairy scenes he drew!"

Samuel Thomson in Simple Poems (1806) in a, for him, very poor "Epistle to Hafiz" complains of his own poverty and wretchedness, concluding

> "To Hafiz, however, this will not apply,
> For I'm told he has plenty to eat, drink and wear,
> A competence long may he live to enjoy,
> That pipes to Hibernia, so sweet and so clear".

The whole Dromore Group were the targets of many bitter attacks, perhaps once in a while from persons who had failed to secure their patronage and support, but certainly from some on purely aesthetic grounds. "During the latter years of [Percy's] life, he formed a small circle of poetasters around him; he praised them, and they in return for his compliments, and his discernment of their merit, were bound in politeness to praise his literary talents. They derived consequence from being patronised by him." Thus, the Belfast Monthly Magazine in January 1812. John Gamble was less explicit. "His lordship was blind for several years before his death. Afflicting as this circumstance was to himself, it was a fortunate one for many young men, whom he took into his house as readers, and afterwards brought forward in life. I had the honour of dining with him some years ago.... I shall never forget with what pleasure, on our going to the drawing room, he listened to a young lady singing his own beautiful song of 'O Nanny wilt thou gang with me'. The piano was not in the best tune, nor was the young lady's voice the most harmonious. But, ah! what discord ever reached a poet's ear, whose works were sung or said before him.

Dromore was likewise then, and probably is still, the residence of another poet, not of an humbler name, but of an humbler rank in life — Mr. Stott, a linen merchant, better known by the name of Hafiz, who never has allowed the dazzling coruscations of the imagination to seduce him far from the sober round of his bleach-green." (12)

Of the group none received more savage condemnation than Stott. He was attacked variously for his bad poetry, his plagiarism, his alleged sycophancy, and his apostasy to the cause of Irish freedom. The Belfast Monthly Magazine article already quoted, went on. "This poet formerly ranked in the numerous list of the friends of liberty — he once more contentedly wears his chain"

(12) A View of Society and Manners pp. 55, 56.

Joseph Carson, the Banbridge weaver, in an "Epistle to F. W. H—, Esq. 1823" (Poems, odes, etc. 1831) wrote

"No venal bard, with sugar'd lays,
Has tun'd his harp your ear to please,
Or say there harbours in your breast
Such virtues as you ne'er possess'd.
I never court the Muse for that,
I leave such fulsome stuff for Stott,
(To scribble with his honied quill
And carry up to Bishop's hill,)
Who lately chang'd his crippling song,
To crush the weak and back the strong;
For me, I've other 'tow to teaze'
Than strive the great folk's ear to please"

And in a very outspoken and short-lived radical journal The Rushlight, which was edited by Luke Mullen Hope, the eldest son of James Hope, there was an editorial note on Stott;

"Was shrewdly suspected, in his youth, of going after a wench of loose character, in France, called 'The Goddess of liberty,' and of making baddish verses against tyranny. Made amends afterwards by vehemently impotent rhymes on the other side. Latterly, however, quite harmless. As Mistress Quickly says of Falstaff 'his nose is grown sharp as a pen, and a' babbles of green fields'... Been reading Wordsworth's floral trifles, and thinks, because genius can sleep, that sleeping shows genius. But while genius dreams, dulness only snores. Greatest thing he has done for five years, is now ready for press - an ode to that poetical pair of flowers, the suck-a-diddy and the cuckoo clover. Sure of insertion in the poet's corner" (17. XII. 1824)

In addition to this, The Rushlight ran a serial review in nos. 29-31, 33 (17th June - 15th July 1825) under the heading of "Works of the Least Importance", in which very close attention was given to Bernard Stott's Rude Rhymes (1824) and The Songs of Deardra. From the last number one paragraph referring to Stott, reads: "We would have him look to his posthumous fame. Yet probably as great men as he have got leave to slink under the Arian doctrine of quiet annihilation. But for the malaprop activity of Dr. Byron Hafiz might have 'bidden the critics go whistle'. But by that one malicious line in the 'English Bards' he is 'damned to everlasting fame'. Oblivion will protect his works, but his name is imperishable".

There had been more than 'that one malicious line' in English Bards and Scotch Reviewers (1809). There had been the couplets;

"Some leaden calf - but whom it matters not,
From soaring Southey down to grovelling Stott.

As for the smaller fry, who swarm in shoals,
From silly Hafiz up to simple Bowles_

Let Stott, Carlisle, Matilda, and the rest
Of Grub-street, and of Grosvenor-place the best,
Scrawl on, till death release us from the strain,
Or common sense assert her rights again"

There had also been the notes: "Stott, better known in the 'Morning

Poet' by the name of Hafiz. This person is at present the most profound explorer of the bathos – "; and " – Stott of Dromore, the most impudent and execrable of literary poachers for the daily prints"

This should have been enough to crush any man. It may, indeed, have accounted for the delay in Stott's publication; for, as we have seen, he had intended to offer the dedication to Percy sometime before 1811: perhaps he thought that the lapse of sixteen years should have dimmed public recollection.

It has been asserted, on what authority I cannot trace, that "when Byron realised that Thomas Stott wrote for the love of it, and not for money – he did apologise" – I quote from a letter from Commander R. P. Martin, husband of the senior representative of the Stott family, 18.2.1951 – "but the letter has unfortunately been lost track of".

In the verses already mentioned, attached to the back of the canvas of "A Group at Dromore Palace", Stott characterises himself;

"And now comes the Bard. But who can describe
One who seems an exception to all of his tribe
A bleacher of linen, sometimes till its rotten,
A weaver of rhymes, and a spinner of cotton,
Not Apollo himself or the Father of Thunder,
Since the days of Prometheus é'er saw such a wonder,
Nor will they, peradventure, in time's future sequel
On earth's rolling orb again see his equal"

Robinson, in his twelfth year, wrote a poem on the death of William Cunningham (1781-1804), which reminds us of perhaps the most tragic of all Percy's protégés. Cunningham, son of a poor linen-lapper, when he was eighteen came to borrow books, and stayed to become a pupil of the diocesan school. He learned quickly and began the writing of verse. His profile had to Percy an uncanny likeness to that of Oliver Goldsmith. The official story was that the Bishop in due course "recommended him as an assistant in the classical department at the Belfast Academy"(13). But from the letter to Hafiz from Thomas Robinson already mentioned gives another colour to the narrative of his departure: "There has been dreadful commotion, on the ground floor of an Episcopal Palace. I long since foresaw an erruption; for there is a remark made by a witty comic Poet, that when a Great Man's Butler is gloomy and shakes his head, things are in a dangerous way indeed. This I often advertised Cunningham of in vain, yet I find that neither the Maid of Parnassus, nor the influence of More solid Charms could enable him to keep his ground but after a bloody conflict was obliged to give up his position, and retreat to Belfast, where he is engaged in Dr. Bruce's Academy".

Cunningham died of a consumption in December of the same year; and in 1808 a volume of his posthumous Poems was published at Dromore. His most highly praised poem "The Queen of the May" could have been by Robinson himself or Stott – or almost anyone else.

"From yonder arch refulgent shines
The God that guides the golden day;
Maria benign a wreath entwines
To crown the lovely queen of May."

13 A Short Account, etc. Juvenile Poems

If Cunningham had had his troubles at the Palace, so had Rev. Samuel Burdy (1754–1820). Curate of Kilclief, Co. Down, Burdy, son of a Dromore merchant had the temerity to fall in love with Percy's younger daughter. The Bishop as a kinsman of the Percys and as a conscientious snob, had other plans for her; so the unfortunate Burdy was forbidden for a full year to approach the Palace. In the end, Elizabeth married the Hon. Mr. Pierce Meade who, although he had no expectations until his father's death, was at any rate, a descendant of the Earl of Clarendon, and as such more likely to attract preferment in the Church, than a mere biographer.

Burdy seemed born for trouble. His Life of Philip Skelton (1792) provoked a gale of attack, both on account of its subject and its treatment, for Skelton had been a holy terror, and Burdy's prose did not disdain the telling dialect word. His book of verse Ardglass (1802) with a mezzotint view after Thomas Robinson, had less than 300 subscribers. Percy, Boyd, Stott and the senior Robinson appeared in the list. Its publication had hung fire, and the price had to be put up. Even among the verses themselves there are reports of personal hardships and boycott by local residents. Yet though he did not possess a highly poetic mind, or a leaping imagination, and was, at best, only a moderately competent craftsman, he had watched the gannet offshore;

"With vent'rous wing the gannet mounts on high,
And darts strait downward from the vaulted sky,
Pierces to wondrous depth the liquid plain,
Seizes his prey, and then ascends again."

And sometimes his personal feeling burns along the rigid bars of the couplets:

Mere petty boys with ignorance o'erspread,
Oft when I see exalted o'er my head,
My service treated, and my studious pain,
With cold neglect, or insolent disdain,
No friend t'assist me, and no patron smile,
No gifts to soothe my literary toil,
Then in soft strains I lull my cares to rest,
And calm the troubled anguish of my breast.
("His Complaint")

Stott seems to have been his closest friend at Dromore, where Burdy must have stood rather at the perimeter. So, somehow, one is glad to discover that Blackwood's (June 1820) at least carried a generous obituary "His manners were unassuming and his heart void of guile .... and in the various relations of life, his conduct evinced that he possessed the principles of an honest man". The Life of Skelton, praised by Macaulay, has been reprinted in the present century, and within a narrow circle is regarded as a minor classic. So, although an insensitive critic like Stevenson, may once in a while attack his memory, at any rate Samuel Burdy is not quite forgotten (14)

As has already been pointed out Alexander Mackenzie's list of subscribers for Poems and Songs (1810) overtopped Romney Robinson's. For this too, the Dromore coterie must have been in a large part responsible: Percy, Stott, Drummond, Neilson, Henry Elgee Boyd were to the fore, and we remark the less usual names of Percy's son-in-law, the Hon. and Rev. Pierce Meade and the Hon. Edward Ward. And for Poetical Attempts by Hugh Porter (1813) which reached 649, Percy is posthumously listed for 4 copies, Drummond and Boyd

14 Two Centuries of Life in Down 1600–1800: John Stevenson (1920)

appear, while the editorial work had been carried out by Rev. Thomas Tighe, who, in the "Apologetical Address to the Reader", paid tribute to the late Bishop, for "he fanned into flame the humblest attempt of the weakest muse". Porter, in "The Muse Returns", saluted the literary eminence of Hafiz, Drummond and Boyd, and included verses to the memory of Percy.

But a more notable instance of Percy's using his influence to some purpose is to be found in his securing for Drummond an honorary doctorate in divinity from Marischal College, Aberdeen. William Hamilton Drummond (1778 - 1865), although physically a little, shortsighted man, was a tornado of energy: called to minister to the Second Congregation of Dissenters in Belfast, he preached special charity sermons, served on hospital committees, ran a boarding school for boys, gave public lectures, helped to found the Belfast Literary Society, translated Lucretius, and wrote long works in verse.

He had encountered the Dromore group, very likely through his friend Rev. James Armstrong, tutor to Romney Robinson who had attended and been much impressed by Drummond's series of lectures on Natural Philosophy. In 1804 Thomas Robinson painted a large canvas, now after much vicissitude and some repainting, called "A Military Procession in honour of Lord Nelson". Among the multitude of portraits of local people in the watching crowd, to the extreme right are likenesses of Drummond, Armstrong, Stott, Thomas, Romney and Mrs. Robinson. Drummond was, of course, a subscriber to Juvenile Poems, and in "A Short Account of the Author", there is included an "Address to J. R. R. previous to his entering the University of Dublin", in octosyllabic couplets by him.

Percy praised Drummond's Battle of Trafalgar (1806), and in The Giants' Causeway (1811), Drummond eulogised the Bishop, Henry Boyd, and his friend Armstrong; but his high tribute was to Dr. Robert Anderson of Edinburgh:

> "Friend of the lyre and guardian of the bard;
> Thou, formed by heaven, to act the critic's part,
> With truth, taste, judgment, and a feeling heart"

Drummond had attended Glasgow University, where he was junior to Thomas Campbell, but had been compelled to leave without taking a degree, through poverty. He came ~~home~~ back to Ulster Ireland, kept himself by tutoring, published three little books of verse of a rather nationalistic nature, studied hard, and was called to Belfast in 1800. He likely met Anderson during one of the latter's visits to Dromore, for my copy of Trafalgar is inscribed "To Robt. Anderson, M.D. with the best respects of the author". [margin: 1809 J.T.]

At any rate, Anderson was also a friend of Lawrence Brown, Principal of Marischal, and in 1810 Drummond received his D.D. (15) He left Belfast for Dublin in 1815, to join Armstrong, as has previously been mentioned. Thereafter, although much of his next book of verse Who Are the Happy? (Dublin 1818), had been composed during his Belfast years, his further fifty years of literary activity, translating, biographising, indulging in religious controversy, had much less local impact than the two long poems referred to.

Drummond was a correct poet, very much in the XVIII th

15 Sidelights on Belfast History: S. S. Millin (1932)

century mode, with little or no lyrical gift; but he remains readable even in considerable stretches, for if his emotion was at low charge, his information was extensive.

Trafalgar, which runs to 1287 lines, in two books, - opens with a not unpleasing splash of colour:

"Fair from her ruby throne, with roseate smiles,
The morn in glory clothed the sparkling isles;
Light o'er the billow's glassy concaves rolled
The playful radiance of her fluid gold;
The silvery surges drank the purple day,
And rainbow-colours tinged the dashing spray;
The milk-white foam along the pebbly strand
Danced on the surf, or fringed the rustling sand;
While round and round the sportive sea-fowl flew,
Or dipped their plumage in the briny dew."

There are many examples of the extended simile, a device for which very few of our poets, Polite or otherwise, ever had enough breath. These, sometimes, as in 'Fierce as a lion' (Book 2 line 302) run on for ten full lines, or eight, as in 'So burning Aetna-' (Book 2 line 411). The poem's chief defect is, however, in the utter inappropriateness of the form and diction, even of the poet's temperament, to the harsh contemporary theme. But sea-fights or any violent marine action, have seldom been handled adequately at length in English verse, the form chosen being usually too rigid for the fluid, fluctuating movement. Perhaps the Canadian poet Edward J. Pratt's "The Titanic" and "The *Roosevelt* and the *Antinoe*" (*Collected Poems*: Toronto 1946) are the best in this kind with Cecil Day Lewis' "The Nabara" (*Overtures to Death* 1938) just behind.

Drummond frequently misjudged the mood, as in his description of one death:

"And low in death the gay Parisian bleeds.
So falls a lily, lopt in sportive mood
By rod of schoolboy sauntering through the wood." (Bk. 2. ll. 285-7)

or, as a mild little man trying to whip up the emotion, overreached himself:

"The trunk with hollow echo falls supine;
Starts the hot marrow from the fractured spine;
And round the slippery deck, with ghastly glare,
The rolling visage trails the clotted hair." (Bk. 2 ll. 190-3)

The Giants' Causeway, in three books, approximates to 1,900 lines, and is altogether a more convincing performance; for in this Drummond found a subject closer to his hand, eye and heart; the topography, the natural history, the legends he knew thoroughly: the geology, and much of the poem was an exposition of contemporary geological theory, was imaginatively realised to a degree which permitted it, now and then, passing over from verse into poetry.

The invocation to the Genius of the Shores is as fine a heaping and piling together of the romantic emotive fragment as one could wish:

"Yet save such scenes can Dalriada boast,
As please the painter and the poet most;
Swift torrents foaming down the mountain side,
Rocks that in clouds grotesque their summits hide,
Gigantic pyramids, embattled steeps,
Bastions and temples nodding o'er the deeps,

Aerial bridges o'er vast fissures thrown,
Triumphal arches, gods of living stone,
Aeolian antres, thunder-rifted spires,
And all the wonders of volcanic fires (Bk. I. p. 6)

The tension continually changes from ornate rhetoric to direct statement of place,

Where Margy's walls, unroofed and mouldering stand,
Mid the long rye-grass rustling o'er the sand (Bk I. p. 27);

to description of activity, birdsnesting in cliffs, salmon fishing, or of things observed, gannet, eagle, the brightly tinted Fata Morgana at Bushfoot. An interesting passage of geological significance, displays what seems the norm, the middle style, the spine upon which the load of learning and information is carried without sagging so disastrously as in Trafalgar:

"From teeming craters, gushing dense and strong,
The black basaltic deluge pours along,
O'ertops the chalky cliffs, the valley fills,
Binds the loose soil, and links the severed hills.
Here the red torrent, by the rapid shock
Of frigid waters, changed to pillared rock;
Or pent in caves till thrilled by tardy cold,
Shot into columns of gigantic mould.
Thus in the chymic vase, attraction's law
Bids each fine atom kindred atoms draw:
Close and more close the crowding seeds combine,
Till crystal forms in fair arrangement shine.
For all the various forms which nature breeds
Spring from the union of organic seeds,
Which, by attraction, form their compound frame,
In shape, in nature, and in laws the same:
Hence, in fair crystals falls the flaky snow,
And hence the facets of the diamond glow." (P. 83)

Much of this poem clearly belongs to the period of Erasmus Darwin, but the texture is more masculine, and the machinery unobtrusive. It is not surprising, however, to find Drummond share in the age's fumbling approach to the concept of evolution in nature.

"Life with the shelly tribes its course began,
Thence rose to insect, bird and beast and man;
Rank upon rank in fair gradation joined
'Till linked to heaven by the chain of mind." (P. 85)

~~Drummond also~~

John Gamble, after meeting Dr. Drummond, glanced at this poem, and set down his observations. "He has published a long work in verse on the Giants' Causeway, of which I know not the success. He does not appear to me to have been judicious in his choice of a subject. Topography cannot be made interesting, even in rhyme — it is like hanging a garland of roses round the neck of a skeleton. I have taken but a cursory view of his work, yet it appears to me, that Dr. Drummond emits, at times, a spark of true poetry." (16)

16 A View of Society, etc p. 67

But when Gamble started out on the Antrim Coast Road, his opinion of the poem was altered. "I advise the traveller to carry with him Dr. Drummond's poem on the Causeway. The notes contain much valuable matter. As a specimen (not an unfavorable specimen) of his versification, I give his account of Dunluce Castle" (17)

The passage selected reads:

> "Thou too, Dunluce, proud throne of feudal state,
> Hast bowed beneath the withering arm of fate;
> For time has been, when girt with martial powers
> High waved thy banners o'er thy sea-girt towers;
> When deep and awful rose the battle's roar,
> And War's artillery shook thy trembling shore.
> Then rude magnificence adorned thy board,
> And valour steeled thy lord's victorious sword;
> Then loud was heard the voice of festive glee,
> With dance, and song, and heaven-taught minstrelsy.
> Wide to the storm now stand thy echoing halls;
> Time saps the base of thy basaltic walls;
> In ruin lies thy bridge's narrow pass,
> Sunk in the fosse, and clothed with waving grass;
> The sea-pink blooms upon thy turret's height,
> There the lone bird of ocean sits by night;
> While far beneath, thy wave-washed cavern moans —" (B.R.T. pp. 28-9)

This quotation is not only interesting as an example of Drummond's topographical style, his treatment of a rather obvious 'set-piece', but as a fair indication of contemporary taste.

Drummond returned to the theme of the Giants' Causeway as a starting point for the poem "Contemplation" in Who Are the Happy? This, in 72 Spenserian stanzas, rimes and scans with the utmost regularity, but never flickers into the gentle honesty of

> The curlew's whistle echoes o'er the strand,
> And shrill-piped sea-larks print the yielding sand ("Causeway" p. 97)

17 A View of Society etc. pp. 83-4.

John Gamble during his week's stay in Belfast was so "highly gratified with Mr. Bunting's execution on the piano-forte", that he "went to the meeting-house at which he performs, to hear him on the organ, but as it was only a common psalm he accompanied, I had no opportunity of judging his powers"; in compensation for this, he "heard a very rational discourse from Dr. Drummond, minister of the congregation". Parenthetically, it is rather ironical to think of Bunting's being organist for Drummond, since the bustling Doctor, who was tone deaf, must have had little appreciated the musician's true worth. After remarking on Drummond's versatility, Gamble went on, "I know of no other literary man in this town, or neighbourhood, except Doctor Drennan – He is principally, or indeed only, known as a writer of politics ... He is a little smart man, between fifty and sixty years of age. I have no acquaintance with him; but I learn he is a valuable member of society, and an exemplary character in private life".

The link of Drummond with Drennan is logical enough, for, although the latter had no use for the Dromore 'poetasters', had, indeed, little use for the good Bishop himself, while he did not oppose his nomination as one of the Honorary Life-Visitors to the Academical Institution to which Percy had presented a hundred guineas, for the Institution was one of Drennan's major causes, Drummond and he were intimate friends. And while, as we have seen the Belfast Monthly Magazine, jointly run by Drennan and Hancock, could be ruthless with Dromore pretensions, it found space for long and favourable comment on Drummond's verse.

William Drennan (1754-1820), a graduate of both Glasgow and Edinburgh Universities, had perhaps the liveliest and best-trained mind of his generation here. A prolific pamphleteer, author of the test of the Dublin Society of United Irishmen, in which city he was in medical practice, he was so prominent a republican leader that in 1794 the authorities had him arrested and tried for publishing a wicked and seditious libel. He was acquitted, and thereafter dropped out of revolutionary politics, though still anti-Union and till the end active in the cause of Catholic Emancipation. But his withdrawal from leadership remained to him perhaps the most significant act in his life; for in his verse self-portrait, written in 1806, he declares:

"Still shrinking from praise, tho' in search of a name,
He trod on the brink of precipitate fame;
And stretch'd forth his arm to the beckoning form,
A vision of glory, which flash'd in the storm
Independence shot past him in letters of light;
Then the scroll seem'd to shrivel, and vanish in night;
And all the illumin'd horizon became,
In the shift of the moment, a darkness, – a dream!"

Too liberal, and too much aware of the many sidedness of things, he lacked the ruthless concentration, not to say, the thick hide of the successful politician. So, when a lucky bequest freed him from medical practice, he became truly a freelance engaged in many a skirmish but avoiding pitched battle, and always taking time to turn a nimble verse.

Few of our Ulster poets have evidenced his deep self-knowledge, and his quiet irony is not of the most easily remarked traits in our conventional picture of the Ulsterman.

"Most social, alone; but alone in a crowd,
With candour, reserved, and with diffidence, proud;
His manners so cold, so repulsive, so shy,
One might think that the fountain of feeling was dry . . .
Man of taste, more than talent; not learn'd, tho' of letters;
His creed without claws, and his faith without fetters . . "

It is clear that he realised why he could never become more than a minor poet: but knowing his limitations and working within them, he was, one feels, as good as he could be. So with Drennan, though strongly conditioned by his period, his words have meaning; not for him the the muffled diction, the quatrain farced out with cliché, or the somnambulant reflex of sour noises which sounded like poetry.

The overanthologised lines beginning

"When Erin first rose from the dark-swelling flood"

and "The Wake of William Orr", though among the very best examples of Irish patriotic verse, have done his reputation a disservice, not only in the disproportionate emphasis on them, but in the tendency forced upon more scrupulous anthologists, such as Geoffrey Taylor in his Irish Poets of the Nineteenth Century (1951), to represent Drennan instead by brief and graceful lyrics; for these too are inadequate to display his very personal quality. It is, of course, not to be expected that those who approved his patriotic ardour should also care to be reminded that the same poet had referred to his fellow Irishmen and his native land in such terms as

"A nation of abortive men,
That dart – the tongue; and point – the pen.
And, at the back of Europe, hurl'd –
A bare Posterior of the world"

Drennan in 1800 placed his "Imitation of Juvenal" as the peak of his work till then. This, based on the Eighth Satire, is the best thing of its kind among us; colonial still, obviously glancing over the shoulder at the sword-play of greater executants, but with its own sense of life, its acceptance of style, rather than mere manner.

"Puppies well-bred, are Caesar'd into fame
And Tommy Townsend takes great Sidney's name.
Still as the name grows soil'd, and gathers dirt,
They shift their title, as they change their shirt;
Some newer honour makes them white and fair,
Sidney soaps Tom, and Jack is cleans'd by Clare!
But how could wash of heraldry efface
The name of Burke and dignify disgrace?
Could peerage blazon o'er the pension'd page,
Or give a gloss to ignominious age?
Himself the prime corrupter of his laws,
Himself the grievance which, incens'd, he draws;
Not to be blam'd but in a tender tone,
Not to be prais'd but with a heart-felt groan,
He lives a lesson for all future time
Pathetically great, and painfully sublime"!

So too his "Religious Poems", or hymns, strike a resonant note in which their tolerant charity utterly transcends the customary jigging of thread-bare texts.

This consistent concern with precision in words sharpens

easily into wit.

What's wealth? Enough, and somewhat over;
Of this I own myself the lover,
And who is not's a ninny;
Of what avail the sungilt cot,
Without a pullet in the pot?
What's life without a guinea?

To youth and industry and health,
She comes, the sov'reign good of wealth,
And ev'ry blessing bears:
But to enjoy her golden mean,
It must be felt, it must be seen,
And save it from our heirs.

Drennan's range can thus be seen to be quite creditable, and if, in his various kinds, he only seldom achieves the illumination of poetry, the verses are sufficiently well-made and the self to be expressed sufficiently vital, to defy 'the soft sepulchral dust'.

In the preface to Fugitive Pieces (1815) Drennan wrote, "I am well aware of the wide distinction between a poet, and a maker of verses", and to his children he did not "hesitate to recommend the art of versifying, as, at all periods of life, an amiable, and even useful recreation; although, except in some rare instances, a painful, precarious and very profitless vocation". And both his sons, William junior, and John Swanwick took his advice.

In the Polite mode some of the best work came from women. Mary Balfour (c. 1780-1819) had some reputation in her day, and one or two lyrics maintain an intermittent life in anthologies. A country-clergyman's daughter, by indigence compelled to keep a ladies' school, haunted by the dread of consumption, and by literary ambition, she seems a rather pathetic but brave figure. Her sentimental lyrics have a quiet, somewhat faded, charm, like the silk behind the fretwork on an old piano: one of her sonnets has a sort of defiant courage. Her heroic couplet is rather above the average for time and place, and sometimes the vowels weave a pattern which cannot have been accidental:

"Thy rapid flight outstrips the lagging sun,
To grasp the sickle ere the plough has done" ("Hope")

And her invocation to the disease to which she fell a victim, for all its strangeness to our ears, has its pitiful validity:

"O blest disease! to man in mercy given,
To steal from earth, the favourite of heaven,
Thy call, the young, the lovely, and the gay,
The happy and the innocent obey;
The child of genius, more securely thine,
Keeps too his vigils at thy fatal shrine ..." ("Hope")

Of Hannah Monson, who published her Poems on Various Subjects (1817), in Newry, we know no more than that she contributed one poem to Stuart's Newry Magazine, that Stuart, Henry Boyd, William Carr, Sheridan Knowles and Colonel William Blacker were among her 350 subscribers, most of whom were drawn from South Armagh and South Down.

She wrote on the death of Robert Burns, produced an allegory on education, "The Mental Tour," in Spenserian stanzas, told a story in heroic couplets which leans heavily on Campbell's "Gertrude of Wyoming", treated such themes as Melancholy, Seduction, Memory, and, rather

surprisingly, on the Portadown Hunting Club, and "A Freemason Song". One poem "Poverty of Spirit", proves her to have been an enthusiastic abolitionist. Many of her pieces run to a hundred lines in length. But there is little or no sense of locality in her work.

One brief poem, "Beauty" shews a nice feeling for the slightly unusual word, or image.

"Beauty's the slight farina of a flower,
Flies with the wind, or melts before the shower;
A trifle dulls the bloom of Beauty's glow—
But like the honey in the valves below,
A virtuous mind's a treasure that remains,
By winds uninjured, and unhurt by rains;
Fair virtue's found in never fading prime,
And stands unshocked upon the rock of Time."

More clinched upon place and time, a satire, The Ulster Synod (1817), was probably written by Rev. William Heron, non-subscribing Presbyterian minister of Ballyclare, Co. Antrim. This, over 500 lines long, for its full appreciation, requires a fairly detailed knowledge of the domestic affairs of the Presbyterian Church over the previous half century. For, without this, what can be made of

"Stewart, Montgomery, Porter, Cook and Reid,
Bankhead and Black, come sign this cordial screed;
The leading points (Nay come - your hand and seal)
"Death to all party, and the Church's weal" ?

Each of the names is that of a vigorous participant in the struggle which was, more than a decade later, to drive the liberals out of the fold.

Yet many couplets have a life beyond the polemical.

"Talk is not eloquence, nor keenness wit,
A snarl's no satire, for it ne'er will hit."

Or the brief evocation of a period church interior;

"Nor varying whine that rises in a shout
To drown all snorers and turn swallows out."

Or:- "Many there are with traveling phrases flush,
Fit for all sides, a soft and saintly plush,
That changes with the light in which 'tis seen,
And like cameleon in the grass is green:"

though even the last hinges upon the italicised word, "light", involving the harsh dissonance of all the clashing overtones of "Auld" and "New", which shuttled across the deliberations of many a synod, pointed the quips in many a tavern, and broke more than one heart in a lonely manse.

The only other clerical satire, The Thinking Few, by Rev. Robert Magill (1788-1839), carries more weight in its title than in its nearly 1000 octosyllabic couplets. This reads The Thinking Few, a Poem; Dedicated to the Right Worshipful Grand Masters of the New Arian Lodge, No. 666. Under the Patronage of the Incorporated Joint Stock Company of Thinkers in Ireland, commonly known by the name of The Free and Fearless Thinking Few. By a Non-Subscriber to Arian Plate. (1828)

It was issued anonymously and offered for sale at the 1828 meeting of the Ulster Synod, just when the cleavage was about to be effected, and was castigated, in open session, by Dr. Henry

Montgomery, the brilliant orator, and leader of "the thinking few" (the non-subscribers to the Westminster Confession) Magill sketches the geneology of the free thinker from Cain, by way of Jezebel, Simon Magus, and Mahomet, and makes his hits directly without any fuss about poetry.

"And we possess and will maintain
The liberality of Cain;
And we will offer in due season,
At nature's shrine, the fruits of reason ..."

"Or if your Euclid be in use,
The square of Paine's hypothenuse
Is equal to a square that's Arian
And also one that's Unitarian."

One couplet, in particular, has a sharper edge, with part of its effect turning on the diverting rime; for Henry Montgomery, by all accounts and by his portrait, was a handsome figure.

"In fact he was another Haman,
A powder'd - portly - new light layman".

It is worth noting that satire, which might conventionally be supposed to have come readily to an Irishman's tongue, had, in fact, few exponents among us. Apart from the theological debate, which threw up no more than the two examples I have given, the only piece remotely comparable to Drennan's is another imitation of Juvenal, "Religious Animosity", by William A. Bryson (1786-1814). Bryson, son of the Non-subscribing Presbyterian minister of Antrim, studied at Trinity College Dublin; the clever son of a scholarly line, his Ode on the Jubilee of King George III was awarded the University Prize. He graduated in 1812, but disappointed of a Fellowship, drowned himself in the Sixmilewater, near his native town.

Bryson, like Charles Wolfe, wrote an elegy for Sir John Moore, the Peninsular hero; but the lines have no merit. He also lamented the death of Hofer, the Tyrolean patriot, and celebrated the Battle of Busaco in rather thin rhetoric. His lyrics owe something to Scott, but the fingering is even less meticulous than that of his master. Only once, in his satire, did he give his words any relevance to this country

"On festive days when hot with zeal and wine
(Just like our ~~Lodges~~ days when Lodges meet to dine)
Forth march the Ombrians with their flags display'd
(Just like our yeomen marching to parade)
Woe to the Tentyrite, they chance to meet!
'Long live the Crocodile!' resounds each street;
While barbarous music strives these shouts to drown
With their loved tune of 'Tentyrites lie down;'
Now tired of shouting, and by wine opprest,
The loyal Ombrian staggers home to rest.
Beware, proud Ombrian, how ye walk by night!
Beware, I say, th' insulted Tentyrite!"

IV. "It is new-strung, and shall be heard!"

The Belfast Harp Festival of 1792 fits into the general pattern of the Romantic Revival in these islands; not more important in its antiquarianism than in its symbolical significance. It inaugurated the researches of the musicologist into the Irish past almost at the last practicable moment; it fell neatly within the scope of the newly stimulated cultural philanthropy of the intelligentzia; and it provided a symbolism which contributed to the later activities of the Gaelic League and Sinn Fein. The Society of United Irishmen seized upon the last aspect as an inspiration, in their device, the Crownless Harp, and the slogan "It is new-strung, and shall be heard".

Edward Bunting, then only nineteen, a Belfast organist, was engaged to note down the melodies of the competing harpers, the last small company of their craft; and with this impetus started his great career as collector, embarking on field-work himself in Derry, Tyrone and Connaught, and stimulating ~~and enlisting~~ others to similar exertions. This first phase resulted in his assembling 36 airs, arranged for the piano, in A General Collection of the Ancient Irish Music (London 1796)

Thomas Moore came upon the volume, and with the assistance of John Stevenson, his musical collaborator, plundered it. When their Irish Melodies was published in 1807 of sixteen items eleven had been lifted without acknowledgment from Bunting; and Moore's lyrics to ~~Stevenson's~~ Bunting's stolen ~~bars~~ airs in Stevenson's sugared arrangements swept over the drawing-rooms of the Three Kingdoms.

Bunting, naturally outraged, decided that he could only compete on even terms by ~~supplying~~ equipping his melodies with verse accompaniments which might prove as popular as Moore's lyrics. To this end he sought to interest a number of Irish versewriters in the project; ~~Robert Emmet and Thomas Russell, the Belfast librarian, better known for their~~ approaching Drennan, 'Dante' Boyd, Stott and Mary Balfour. Dissatisfied with the verses furnished by these, he made a valiant effort to draw in Thomas Campbell whose British reputation was at least equal to that of Moore. These songs were to be based on Irish originals collected by Patrick Lynch, an Irish scholar and schoolmaster.

Bunting's second collection was published in 1809; of the twenty verse adaptations, only three were by Campbell; Mary Balfour, at this point about to set up school in Belfast, contributed nine.

Another indication of the recently awakened interest in the native culture was the publication in 1808, of An Introduction to the Irish Language, by Rev. William Neilson, Presbyterian minister at Dundalk. Neilson has previously been referred to as a friend of Percy and subscriber to a number of books of verse. This grammar was based on the Irish dialect of Co. Down, and some of the preliminary work had been done by the same Patrick Lynch who had helped Bunting. There were also several students of Irish then living in Belfast; Dr. James MacDonnell, chief sponsor of the Harp Festival, and Samuel Bryson who had a collection of Irish manuscripts copied. When Dr. MacDonnell died in 18   an Irish poet then living in Belfast, Hugh MacDonnell, wrote an elegy in the old tongue, probably the last poem in that tradition to be written in the town.

Part of the same general tendency was the foundation in Belfast, on St. Patrick's Day, of the Irish Harp Society, thus antedating

by a year the formation of a similar organisation in Dublin. Percy was offered the Presidency but declined owing to the increased disabilities of age, but his enthusiasm had never been in doubt. The Society elected Arthur O'Neill (1734 - 1816) the blind harper from Tyrone, as teacher. He had played at the 92 Festival, and was well known in the North as one of the last wandering minstrels. His pupils were nine blind children; as the conscientious Belfast organisers thought that this offered an obvious means of vocational training. The Society also ran classes in Irish, using Neilson's grammar as the text-book; but in 1813 the Society collapsed. A few kindly and responsible members paid O'Neill an annuity of £30, until his death.

To this Society James McHenry dedicated his Bard of Erin (1808). In the title poem when the Bard laments the neglect into which the practice of his art had fallen, "the Genius of his darling Isle" appears in the guise of "a Virgin harper of an angel mien" who bids him be of good cheer, for

"Lo! o'er Belfast already bursts the morn".

There is also "An Ode on hearing Mr. Arthur O'Neill the Harper".

"Tis O'Neill with ardour bold,
Such as warm'd his sires of old
That resounds in hallow'd lays,
Erin's Harp to Erin's praise ....
Happiest Minstrel of thy age,
Born thy country's grief to 'suage ...
Thine the hand her Harp shall save
From extinction's fatal grave;
And to glory, as before
Shall her pride and joy restore!

The volume includes "Panegyrical Stanzas on Miss Owenson's 'Lay of an Irish Harp'". Sydney Owenson (1783-1859), later Lady Morgan, ~~(1783 - 1859)~~, daughter of a Dublin singer and actor, had bought her first harp in 1805 out of the proceeds from her first novel. She became a famous drawing room exponent of Irish music, and had much to do with the contemporary fashion of young ladies playing large gilt harps; but she did encourage the Dublin Harp Society in a practical manner, and had a marble bas-relief put up to the memory of the famous Turlough O'Carolan. "The Lay of an Irish Harp" published in 1807 had been a selection of a dozen popular Irish melodies, with words by Miss Owenson

John Murphy in his Wild Flowers of Erin (1811) had verses to Arthur O'Neill also, and to Patrick Quin, the Harper of Portadown who had been a competitor at the Festival. O'Neill figures in a further volume, William McComb's The Dirge of O'Neill (1817), "a tribute to the lately deceased harper," written, McComb remarked later, "when the heart and head were full of the then inspiring subject - the Irish Harp"

Murphy had a "Song to Miss Balfour";

"O silver tongued Songstress! the lyrists of fame
Shall long round your brows bid the laurels to smile;
And long shall your genius, your merit and name,
Resound in the strains of the harps of our Isle."

His most interesting reference to Irish music, however, is in his "Ierne, An Ode", in which he asserts a claim which must be accepted as the barest truth.

Ye Bards whose fingers sweetly thrill
Ierne's harp with matchless skill ....

For you has Bunting from the cell
Where cold neglect and languor dwell,
Call'd forth those renovating lays
That charm'd our shore in former days.

O Bunting, long shall Erin's lyre
Record your fame in song,
And many a sweet responsive wire
Shall bear the theme along.
For thine it was with parent hand to save
Our ancient melodies from Ruin's grave."

Madden in his Literary Remains of the United Irishmen (1887), gives "An Ancient Irish Prophecy (from O'Neill the Blind Harper)" by Miss Balfour, and in Mackay's second anthology (1810), the same poet is represented by "Lines addressed to the Gentlemen of the Irish Harp Society". As she does not seem to have settled in Belfast before 1810, it is very likely that Bunting had visited her family in Limavady during one of his collecting tours in Co. Derry. We have references to her verse in his correspondence with Mary Ann McCracken; and in Mary Balfour's own volume Hope (1810) there are sixteen songs with titles in Irish or from the Irish, "Ceann Dubh ~~Dealish~~ Dilis", "Eva Delish", "Ellen a Roon", "Joyce's Tune", "Carolan's Receipt", "Nancy of the Branching Tresses", among them: one, "The Maid of Brocah", is described as 'a translation from an Irish original, in the possession of Mr. Bunting".

Something of her difficulty, and Bunting's difficulty, may be guaged from a letter by him to Mary McCracken (21.XII.1808), "I think Miss Balfour's 'Fairy Queen' very good. 'The Fairy Queen' of Carolan, however, was not intended by him for words, but as a piece of music for the harp; therefore, it would not answer to have it now set to words". It is, I believe, a legitimate exercise of the imagination, to picture the deserted school room in the old rectory after the children have been called for, with the tense young woman strumming out an air from Bunting's first volume, racking her wits to find elegant phrases to fit a complicated tune that 'was never intended for words'.

Writing again to Miss McCracken from London (8.III.1809), Bunting reports on his interview with Thomas Campbell - "I have been these two days with Mr. Campbell"; and then, "I shall let you know by tomorrow what Campbell thinks of Miss Balfour's songs". Unfortunately, that information has not come down to us.

We must be careful here not to confuse two closely related yet distinct problems: the adaptation of original verse or verse based on the Irish to Irish tunes, and the translation of Irish verse into verse in English without reference to any musical setting.

While Drummond's efforts in translation must have owed their inspiration to the interest in the language in Belfast in the years prior to his departure, it was only after his going to Dublin that they began to be published, when he contributed to Hardiman's Irish Minstrelsy (1831), to Montgomery's Specimens of the Early Native Poetry of Ireland (1846), and issued his own Ancient Irish Minstrelsy in 1852

Stott, introducing the Songs of Deardra, in the volume of that name, (1825,) states his indebtedness to his friend Neilson for furnishing him with a prose translation; the versified passages are very uneven in quality, but from Deardra's Lament a few quatrains may be selected to make up a passable poem, with, to my ear at any rate, behind it a note which seems non-English in its cadence, if not Irish.

"Sad and long to me now seems the slow-footed day,
Since Usna's brave sons in the silent grave sleep;
Their converse was pleasant; like lions were they
On the hills of Emana so rugged and steep.

Their dogs and their hawks, ah! who now will attend;
Connal Cairnie's stout youths are no more on the hill.
The hunter's sweet music, as swift they descend,
No longer the echoing valley shall fill.

My heart still in dismal forebodings abounds,
Nor can it help heaving sad sympathy's sigh,
As I look at the collars that coupled their hounds;
Oft I fed them, but weep now to see them draw nigh."

This Irish note or mode is a most elusive quality. Scholars, such as Farren, have declared its presence in Drennan's "Wake of Orr", largely through the heptasyllabic measure. When that poet included a lyric as "Translated from the Irish", in his Fugitive Pieces (1815), although with its own merits, it reads as English as any of Landor's album verses.

"Branch of the sweet-excelling rose
That in such pomp of beauty blows
So passing sweet in smell and sight,
On whom shalt thou bestow delight?

Who, in the dewy evening walk,
Shall pluck thee on thy tender stalk?
Whose temples, blushing, shalt thou twine
And who inhale thy breath divine?"

In the same volume, his "Verses for an old Irish Melody supposed to be sung by the females, after the event of an unfortunate battle"; save for the place name there is nothing to suggest their origin:

"Alas! how sad, by Shannon's flood
The blush of morning sun appears!
To men, who gave for us their blood,
Ah! what can women give but tears?"

James Stuart, too, in his Poems (1811) has one poem, "Evelina", a translation from the Irish", anapaestic in its flow of 16 quatrains.

It is, I believe, demonstrable that the Irish note is, for us, first heard in the broadsheets of the itinerant balladmonger. One or two of the rural bards display more than a hint of the lilt and the involved assonances characteristic of Irish prosody, precisely where they come closest to the balladsinger's technique.

Francis Boyle in Miscellaneous Poems (1811) has, in "The Comber Maid", an example of the form already accepted as a convention by the balladist;

"Her smiles are enticing, her beauty's surprising,
Her breasts gently rising can vie with the snow,
Her hand, like the lily, which causes young Willy
To praise Comber Molly, above all Drumbo."

And from Co. Antrim, James Campbell of Ballynure tries his hand at the same time ("Molly Hume", Posthumous Works, 1820)

"Come each gay sporter, or maiden courter,
Hear Alex Porter his love declare,
Of a farmer's daughter near Sixmilewater,
Whose hopes did flatter his love sincere...
Though she was deceiving, for her I am grieving,
And when I am weaving, I oft times say
Though my time I wasted, some love I tasted
When locked within her sweet arms I lay."

There is a peculiar echo of this characteristic interweave of rime in "Reflections", from Hannah Morison's Poems, where the normal beat and sway of her blank verse is suddenly interrupted

"The neatly-fashioned glove, whose whiteness proves
The purity of love with innocence — "

But apart from the folk-bards, very little which we may detect as Irish came into our verse, until twenty years after the foundation of the Harp Society, when, in Belfast, three young men formed themselves into a close and serious study-circle for the native language. These were Samuel Ferguson, George Fox and John O'Hagan; the first shortly after to help his Bunting with his third and final volume, The Ancient Music of Ireland (1840), and to become one of the greatest translators of Irish poetry, the second to hold a secure place in the anthologies with a single poem.

One other important effect which this vogue for the Irishry had, was in turning poets to Irish historical or legendary themes. Before this any Gaelic basis had come by way of Macpherson — Stuart in two of his blank verse poems introduces Irish stories, one on the death of the Oneill, "founded on well authenticated facts"; the other, the story of Orra and Aiorna, in a few lines of which he imitates "the catastrophe of a beautiful poem inserted in the last edition of Macpherson's Ossian".

From now on we can find Richard Benson's Morni: an Irish Bardic Story (1815), Vincentia Rodgers' Clathain and Malvina (1823) Alexander Markham's MacDonald, or the Avenged Bride (1833) — this a story of the Antrim Glens —, John Fullarton's O'More, a Tale of War (1867), and William MacIlwaine's Heotha and Melech (1870); but only in Ferguson's Lays of the Western Gael (1864) do we find the resources of Irish scholarship thoroughly employed.

References:—
The chief sources for this chapter are
Annals of the Irish Harpers: C. Milligan Fox (1911)
Irish Literary and Musical Studies: A. P. Graves (1913)

VI Landscape and Nature

For English poets Thomson had, with *The Seasons* (1726-1730) proposed a new area of activity, the description of landscape and weather as subjects proper in themselves, and had applied to the problem the instrument of blank verse. Cowper, with his *Task* (1785) carried both form and content a stage further, and was fellow of or followed by a flock of descriptive writers: James Hurdis, whose *Village Curate* (1788) considered an individual legitimately integrated with his visible world; Thomas Gisborne, whose *Walks in a Forest* (1795) narrowed the somewhat generalised landscape to a particular kind; William Holloway whose *Scenes of Youth* (1803) dispensed with the tedious machinery and over-discursive method of Cowper, asserting his right to evoke his own experience on its own merits; each of these modifying, more or less, the blank verse instrument.

Others before Cowper, Dodsley, Moses Browne and Stephen Duck, had chosen strictly rural themes, and so also many contemporary with him or younger, John Scott of Amwell, William Crowe, Charlotte Smith, Noel Carrington, even Wordsworth in his *Evening Walk* (1793) – some in couplets as well as blank verse – took the landscape-man-and-mood as 'the main region of their song'. These, owing something also to the topographical trend, ~~of which~~ (Pope's *Windsor Forest* (1713) was an early, not fully realised example) which is, at times, difficult to distinguish from the more generalised descriptive kind, seem, viewed from a distance, to form something like 'a movement', 'a working-party', examining the face of England and reporting back their findings.

This phase of English verse had strangely little influence on Ulster, or any part of Ireland. Thomson was read here, and Cowper too, if rather less: but neither nearly so widely as Pope, Young, Shenstone, Gray. This cannot have been due to the time-lag, for James Montgomery, Campbell, Scott and Byron made their impact with little delay. I have not found a single reference to any of the purely descriptive or topographical poets in any of the local volumes I have examined. We must seek for the reason on a deeper level. It may be that it requires a closer identification of man with place, man, the culmination of many rooted generations, with place, a rich compost of associations legendary, historical, interpenetrated and interwoven. Samuel Ferguson has an appropriate quatrain in "Mesgedra";

> "No rootless colonist of an alien earth
> Proud but of patient lungs and pliant limb,
> A stranger to the land that gave him birth,
> The land a stranger to itself and him."

Ferguson came later, and the fact that he faced this problem shews that it could only have reached the point of being solved by the middle of the century.

Drummond and McKinley in their long poems dealing with The Giant's Causeway, and Burdy in his *Ardglass*, certainly had something of the topographical intention, but, all three, lacked the immediacy of response to place, and had little skill in acute observation and precise description, permitting their concern with archaeology or the natural sciences to come between them and the object.

The vernacular or rural poets, often enough, delighted in the place-name and the local reference, but usually remained narrowly local: they seldom looked beyond the *causey* or the village street; if they did, their brief glance took in no more than a single field, and so never focussed for long on a single object.

It is surely relevant to note that in Ireland the

naturalist appeared very late. We had no Gilbert White. John Templeton (1766-1825), the first man with an eye sufficiently trained to discover *rosa hibernica* on the slopes of Cavehill, was a close friend of Drennan, and wrote the weather reports for the *Belfast Monthly Magazine*. As a field-worker, he remained a rather lonely figure. The Natural History and Philosophical Society (founded in 1821) took some time to breed a generation like William Thompson (1805-1852) and Robert Patterson.

Indicative of this retarded development, *Wild Flowers of Erin*, by John Murphy of Belfast (1811) mentions only the wild rose and the geranium. This poet had a vocabulary which none of his fellows attempted to emulate. He invited the muse to leave a local hilltop in these terms;

"Leave now Ulterpe, Divis, and descend
To predial lowlands, and thy cadence lend
To scrip of villes and irriguous lawns
Where each bright morning eminently dawns"

("Morning Scenes")

From the same poem, another couplet has its obscurities:

"To pluck the wild rose from its surcle stem,
Nor thought youth's picture was the semble gem?"

Where one might expect direct topographical statement, as in William Read's *The Hill of Caves* (1818), the 1167 lines, largely in Spenserian stanzas, are chiefly used to tell the stories of "King Ahod's Daughter", and of "The Druid's Shrine". Local references go little beyond the evocation of the Cavehill as

"The sleeping semblance of a giant face"—

and

"Far to the northward, peaks are tipped with snow -
Where vast Benmore delays the passing cloud,
And Rathlin's surge-lashed rocks roar to the storm aloud".

Even in his description of the Easter Monday festivities on the hill, with fiddlers, pipers, pedlars, the drinking and the dancing, his most vigorous writing is reserved for political comment. One snatches with relief and delight at his drunkard,

"Shoe down at heel and kibe-betraying hose";

for its ready use of a word now obsolescent among us; and for his observation of the folk-custom still current, that of dyeing the children's eggs with whin blossom,

"— cull the first-born blossoms of the dell
Wherewith to die for many an urchin peer
The snowy egg."

One respects his literary discretion when one discovers in his volume *Sketches from Dover Castle, etc.* (1859) that the, by now, Lieutenant-Colonel William Read offers "The Cavehill" which is an abbreviated version of "The Hill of Caves" to 270 lines with much besides the narratives omitted.

Hannah Monson in her *Poems* (1817) has, in blank verse, "Reflections occasioned by a ramble in winter" which recalls Holloway's *Scenes of Youth*, but in its vagueness of reference it might be set almost anywhere in the British Isles.

The only large scale descriptive and topographical work

is William Carr's Rostrevor (1810): this, in nearly 1600 blank verses of a regularity relieved only by a few alexandrines, belongs entirely to its period.

> "In gothic grandeur rais'd, see farther hence
> Yon ivy-mantled pile."

He covers the landmarks and uses each as a springboard for elegant diversions on Infidelity, the Deathbed of a Wicked Man, the Pleasures of Contemplation, Astronomy, Education, and the values of the waters for curing rheumatism. His storm-scene is properly realised,

> "Mark where yon maid with wild dejected air
> And tresses discompos'd, the darken'd rock
> Despondently ascends, and o'er the main
> Wide flings a hopeful look"

He variously salutes Herschel, Boyle, Priestly, Franklin 'the fam'd Columbian', and Davy, 'chief of philosophic arts'. One line in particular epitomises its essence;

> "O Rousseau, wert thou seated on yon rock"!..

Another topographical poem of a later date is Henry Bayly's Lisburn (1834); this seems even for us a very old fashioned piece.

> "The various bleachgreens, decked in robes of white,
> Enrich the landscape o'er, and charm the sight."

It contains salutes to Lancaster the educational reformer, to the landlord, the Marquess of Hertford,

> "Whose noble lineage did ne'er refuse
> Such patronage as season'd Thompson's muse";

to Stannus his agent,

> "The trophies of thy sterling worth are found
> In all thy numerous tasteful works around."

only coming really to life in the satirical section, on The Maze, the race course just outside Lisburn.

> "Who loves upon the bounding steed to gaze
> Hie to that spot of gayest sport - the Maze.
> There may be seen the rich, the titled great,
> And snug-plac'd lordlings, paupers on the state.
> The starched-up lackbrain, and the wealthy cit;
> The homeless scapegrace, living on his wit —"

Only one of our poets attempts description beyond our shores: Anthony Semple, "formerly of the Hon. East-India Company's service," whose The Voyage (1815) in 1136 lines of blank verse, describes the passage to and from India. Of the author all we can say is that he presented a copy of his book to John Templeton, that it is dedicated to a William Legg Esq., of Malone House, Co. Antrim, that one of the subsidiary poems was written at Greyabbey, and that another refers to 'the silver Lagan' where 'in thy sweet bowers, Malone, Eliza lives'.

Legg was Templeton's father-in-law

Semple in his Advertisement declares that "the incidents that I relate, have all been witnessed by myself; and the scenes that I attempt to pourtray, have been examined with attention, and (I trust) described with fidelity."

The whole narrative is in very flat blank verse, of so

even a texture that it is difficult to disengage a thread for quotation without causing the fabric to 'run': it is, perhaps, by consequence, easy to read and hard to remember in detail.

In port before the launch,

"High o'er the taffrel-rail, the British flag
with furtive undulations courts the breeze."

But, becalmed in mid-Atlantic,

"The flagging sail against the creaking mast
Now beats as useless as the yellow leaf
That loosely hangs in winter from the beach!"

The 'Line' is crossed with due ceremony, in which the part of Neptune's Queen is played by 'young Chips the carpenter', "blushing by the force of pure red lead'. Brazil is visited, with shocked comment at the multitude of religious effigies. There is a great storm, and the pumps are brought out. Eugenio, the hero-captain, then declares his preference, above the colours of flowers,

"Give me the dying Dolphin's varying tints,
Where lilac, silver, azure, purple, gold,
Each other chasing through the shining skin".

Ceylon is sighted; a cannon shot disposes of a waterspout, thus demonstrating the use of science in mastering nature; here tribute is paid to "learned Davy, first of Britain's sons!". The Ganges' mouth is reached, where self-torturing devotees are seen and deplored. The return voyage to England, passing St. Helena, is without incident, and Eugenio is reunited with his Emma.

The only poet at all comparable with the English descriptive writers was James Stuart (1764-1840). Son of an Armagh gentleman, he graduated at Trinity College Dublin in 1789, was called to the bar but never practised. We find trace of him again as a subscriber to Robinson's book in 1806, where he is given as 'of Armagh'. His own <u>Poems on Various Subjects</u> came out in 1811; and thereafter he becomes editor of journals in Newry and Belfast, historian of his native city, and a polemical writer of great vigour in the Tory interest.

In the preface to <u>Poems</u>, he writes "The blank verse compositions interspersed through this volume, are selections from an unpublished descriptive poem, written a considerable time ago. In the detached form in which they are now presented to the publick, some of them may probably be found deficient in unity of design". That this poem was never published in its entirety is greatly to be regretted, for it would have been unique in our local literature, and, judging from the fragments printed, no negligible achievement.

'The blank verses compositions' are "Noon" (357), "The Setting Sun" (74), "The Quakers" (191), "Morna's Hill" (328), and "Rama's Island" (288), which give us a total of 1238 lines. One can hazard the guess that this 'descriptive poem' was the labour of the years from he left Trinity College, about 1790 to 1810, set out to be a full scale treatment of Armagh, that he worked at it in pieces and sections, failed to finish it to his own satisfaction, published the fragments, and used some of the factual material he had assembled in his <u>Historical Memoirs of the City of Armagh</u>, for which he found adequate subscribers and a publisher only when he was established in Newry for some years (1819). Another hypothesis is that the 'poem' was conceived as a bye-product

of the history, and then abandoned as an interruption in the heavier labour of research, for he did take some trouble to master his subject – so much so that his Armagh has not yet been superseded, was indeed reissued in 1900. Perhaps the latter is the more accurate guess; and we may blame the historian for stifling the poet, for he never again published a volume of verse, although he printed at least four of his own poems in The Newry Magazine in 1815 and 1816.

It is in these blank verse passages that his best work is to be found. "Noon", the longest, has a pleasant description of the ploughman's respite, as

> " .. idle rests
> The glitt'ring ploughshare in the ridgy mould".

This is followed by haymaking of a gently arcadian kind

> " Here, rural maids,
> Flushed by the sunbeam, toss with active hands
> The perfume-shedding grass; and swains alert
> Ply the toothed rake, and draw in circling wreaths,
> The tedded hay, or build with rustick skill
> The lofty cock."

The lake with its attendant birds, gives Stuart a chance to indulge in more precise observation and in appropriate classical allusion.

> " There with joy
> The feathered nations sport: the dapple duck
> Dips for the finny fry: there float the teal
> And widgeon, streaked with undulating lines
> Alternate black and white. King of the lake,
> The stately swan, of snowy plumage bright,
> Majestick sails; high-curved, his silver wing
> Collects the passing gale: his downy neck
> In arch elliptick bends; beneath the wave,
> He plies his ebon feet, and bold he floats,
> In conscious beauty proud, as if aware
> That Jove himself, to win the bashful maid,
> Had wrapt ~~his~~ the godhead in his graceful form."

Birds always ~~attracted~~ interested Stuart.

> " Hoarse caws the rook
> From the tall fir-tree; and the pieter pie
> Garrulous chatters; while the raven croaks
> Harsh dissonance."

In "The Setting Sun", the bird is the corncrake.

> " The groves are silent, till the creaking rail,
> From the close covert of the waving grass,
> Breaks through the stillness of retiring eve,
> With endless clamour."

"The Quakers", by contrast, makes no concessions to the visible kingdom, being concerned with the Society of Friends' settlement at Moyallen:

> " In elegance and ease, a gen'rous race
> Of mild philanthropists, whom bigot zeal
> Hath nicknamed quakers."

An appreciation of their high moral tone, the absence of debauchery or mendicancy among them, their pacifism, their Anti-Slavery attitude, leads to a eulogy of William Penn, and a suggestion that, instead of engaging in profitless wars, the rulers of Europe should seek out uninhabited areas in the world and plant them with redundant populations who could there establish happy and peaceful communities.

"And busy crowds shall bless you, as they raise
The publick edifice, or temple vast,
Corinthian or Ionick".

"Morna's Hill" is the most purely topographical section, although Stuart still has room for "the lark, self-poised". But the presence of Niall's Mound leads him on to a long historical diversion. To the ruined abbey the transition is easy. This is completely conventional –

"– The gothick arches bend
In awful desolation. There the owl
Hides moping from the glaring face of day;
Or when the moon-beam, through the parted wall,
Tinges the prostrate tombs with silver light,
Shrieks forth his sorrows; and the sombrous bat,
On wandering wing, flits o'er the solemn scene."

It should be remarked here that these are by no means the only echoes of Gray's Elegy. Contemplation of the ruin evokes the images of other past civilisations, architectures, of Babylon, of Thebes, and the prophetic warning that

"thus shall fall
Those lofty cities, that on later days
Lift their aspiring heads."

"Rama's Isle" (Ram's Island, Lough Neagh) is sparse of bird life, but the horticultural efforts of its owner compensate the poet.

"There in festoons,
Laburnum waves his boughs; and ere the heat
Of summer glows intense, his yellow flow'rs
Wave pensile in the odour-breathing gale.
There blooms the lilach; there the mountain ash,
The variegated holly's prickly boughs,
And laurel ever-green. ..
.... the rose's glowing cheek,
The lily pale, the balmy violet,
The yellow-eyed auricula, deep-flushed
Its velvet breast with purple, spicy pinks,
Carnations rich, the gaudy piony,
The gorgeous tulip ...
The turncap lily that in beauty blows
With leaf reversed, and droops its scarlet head,
Pregnant with yellow seed;"

narcissus, sunflower, lily of the valley fill out the bright herbarium of the time. The rest of "Rama's Isle" tells the tragic story of Orra the maid and her lover Sioia.

Stuart's talent is seldom lyrical, although "A Morning Scene in the Spring Season", which is built on an elaborate

stanza, here and there, offers a batch of lines, in which simplicity, forced upon the author, achieves a pleasing result.

> "Now blithe upon the furrowed plain,
> The ploughman sows the golden grain,
> Soft-whistling as he moves along.
> In hungry groups around him rove
> The glossy crow, the silver dove,
> The sparrow pert with chirping song."

or,

> "Low flits the gliding swallow o'er the lake,
> The martin skims the surface of the plain;
> The vocal quail bids every echo wake,
> Hailing with triple note the coming rain:
> From the low marsh, the snipe delighted springs,
> And the glad mallard claps her supple wings."

The last excerpt demonstrates clearly that Stuart was a very deliberate worker, a conscious literary artist. Therein lay one of his chief dangers, for the verbal artistry is often liable to compel him to accept a literary convention, even if this involves him in falsifying his natural history. In a quotation already given, he asserts that ducks consume 'the finny fry'. He has also, in his book, an early poem "On the Nightingale", although that bird has no place in Irish ornithology – a common enough mistake for the man whose knowledge comes out of English poetry, but a little surprising in Stuart who was almost alone among our local poets in paying any consistent attention to the world around him. His "Night" carries on the Miltonic influence so obvious in much of English XVIII th century; and he has his stanzas on "Sensibility".

Stuart, then, is, far more than any other of our poets, the man of letters, his small talent at its best nourished by books, his taste disciplined by literary decorum. He stands with Drennan as the best of our Polite poets.

References:

The following anthologies are useful for the introductory paragraphs of this chapter:-

English, Scottish and Welsh Landscape 1700 – c. 1860 chosen by John Betjeman and Geoffrey Taylor (1944)

The Poets of the Nineteenth Century, selected by Rev. Robert Aris Willmott (1869)

VII. Some Problems of the Time-Lag.

As has been remarked earlier Hannah Morison in 1817 published "A Tale", which, in the heroic couplet, dealt with adventure among the Red Indians, the setting for which was probably suggested by Thomas Campbell's "Gertrude of Wyoming". Campbell's poem had been published in England in 1809; but Mackey who issued his second Collection of Poems on Various Subjects in Belfast in 1810, included a reprint of "Gertrude" together with half a dozen other Campbell items; so it is not unlikely that Miss Morison was familiar with this volume, her friend James Stuart had several poems in it, and would surely have had a copy on his shelves.

Vincentia Rodgers in Cluathan and Malvina, an ancient legend (1823) tells a story of Ulster and the Western Isles: ~~Cosgrath~~ Cosgrach, an Irish outlaw, living in exile, captures an Irish chieftain, Cluathan; while prisoner the latter falls in love with Malvina, Cosgrach's daughter. They escape together to Ireland, but Malvina's brother pursues the lovers, slays Cluathain, and Malvina dies of grief. The narrative is put into the mouth of an aged minstrel, and in its 500 lines rimes irregularly, employing octosyllabic and heroic couplets, with interspersed lyrics, often of an anapaestic beat: ~~a~~ typical couplets run:-

"Loud roared the tempest and dark was the night;
But bright was the beacon on Craiggorm's height. . ."

"The gloomy night around the hero threw
Its drearest shades, the wind still louder blew"

One can say at once that the influence was probably that of Walter Scott: there had been plenty of time for his Lay of the Last Minstrel (1805) or Lady of the Lake (1810) to become effective across the Irish Sea.

So too, Richard Benson's Morni, an Irish Bardic Tale (1815) though written in six line stanzas, has something of the same quality.

And when William J. McMullan's The Brigand etc. (1830) offers two stories showing strong Byronic influence, one can accept the delay as not excessive, for Byron's spate of narrative poems had been from 1813 to 1816.

"The Brigand" is a tale of banditry and revenge, set in the Rhine country, 2050 lines in the heroic couplet:

" On the bleak summit of a craggy steep,
Mark a rude pile o'er which the wild weeds creep:
A ruin'd heap, high o'er Rhine's monarch flood - "

"The Death of Gerstein" in the same volume, 1800 lines of blank verse, is a story of the Napoleonic wars, and involves the tragic fate of Rupert and his sons Wilhelm and Gerstein.

McMullan's susceptibility to Byron's example is further emphasised by such shorter pieces as his anapaestic "Lament for Jerusalem," which obviously echoes "The Destruction of Sennacherib".

But Amurath and Zara, an Ottoman Tale (1813), by William Carr, author of Rostrevor three years earlier, with the

adventures of Osmyn, a Turk, his daughter Zara, and Achmet the Persian leader, who was in reality, Amurath, Vizier in Byzantium, has, at once, the flavour of Byronic orientalism. But this is surely a much too immediate reaction, for *The Giaour* was published in May, *The Bride of Abydos*, early in December, and *The Corsair* late in the same month in 1813.

It seems likely – I have not yet investigated the matter – that Byron himself was participant in a wider 'Oriental' trend, which he did not initiate, and that Carr obtained his inspiration from that, some time before Byron's narratives appeared. What may support this view is that the verse of *Amurath* is not emphatically Byronic, and that unlike McMullen, Carr nowhere else in his volume gives any evidence of Byron's influence.

References: -

Byron's Works (1837)

The Poetical Works of *Sir Walter Scott*

VIII The Belfast Poets

If in 1812 John Gamble could only name two Belfast poets, Drummond and Drennan, in thirty years time the scene had changed. Gamble had missed David Boyd whose *Belfast Poor-House* (1806) had been published when the author was teacher to the boys in that institution. Later he came head of a classical academy in John Street, voting Tory in 1833. His book reached 930 subscribers, including Drummond, the Robinsons father and son, and James Orr of Ballycarry. In heroic couplets, the 1,300 lines are exceptionally flat and prosaic; there is a certain smugness in the writer's attitude to the inmates, and the work is utterly lacking in any trace of Crabbe's bitterness or pity, for, although Crabbe's *Borough* was not yet published, the subject should have called for a not wholly dissimilar expression of emotion.

"Each morn, at nine, the breakfast call is given,
They dine at two, and always sup at seven;
Happy the peasant, who, when business fails,
Could thus have wholesome and such well-tim'd meals."

There is however an interesting reference to the wooden water-pipes in the town, and to the strange circumstance by which the Charitable Institute was responsible for the town's water supply, and, theoretically, to be supported by the revenue from this source.

William McComb's second volume, *The School of the Sabbath* (1822) is interesting as a companion-piece to Boyd's work. It too is in the heroic couplet, is much more pretentious, is weighty not to say flatulent, with piety, and, for one so deeply involved in the actual organisation of the Sabbath School, has very little local reference, save for improving anecdotes hidden away in the copious notes.

McComb (1793-1873) is a rather enigmatical figure. Beggs could say of him in his *Rhyming* ~~Pedag~~ *Pedagogues* (1821) that

"[his] life and lay so nicely blend
The man, the poet and the friend;
In whom it may be understood,
A bard may be both wise and good;
That pious prudence yet may be
Allied to parts and poetry."

We know that he befriended MacKenzie in his last miserable years, assisted his widow, and erected a suitably inscribed tombstone to his memory, and that he, at least, performed this last service for McMullan. But in an Election squib, 1838, re-issued 1841, by the Whigs, satirising the Tories under the guise of an advertisement for a Horse-Sale, McComb is described as "Will Honeycomb, a sly mischievous and treacherous animal, got by Cant upon Dissimulation out of Knavery", and that he "is about fifteen hands high, lean, raw-boned and hard-favoured". This last remark accords well enough with the rather Wordsworthian portrait in *Poetical Works* (1864).

McComb began as a teacher, but became a bookseller and publisher, and was busy with a host of committees of a philanthropic nature, hitching his wagon firmly to the ascendant star of Rev. Henry Cooke, the apostle of Presbyterian orthodoxy, and of the union of that denomination with the Tory party.

McComb published Cooke's propagandist journal, took the chair at the Doctor's debates with unitarians and malcontents, and generally earned the title of "The Laureate of Presbyterianism". He produced about half a dozen volumes which were issued in collected form in The Poetical Works, included in which are set-pieces on the ~~Atl~~ Atlantic Cable, the Visit of the Channel Fleet, the Revival of 1859, and the Bi-centenary of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland; he deplored prize-fighting and infidelity. One of his very few poems which have no theological or partisan content is "Wild Flowers of the Cavehill", in The Voice of a Year (1849). I have had this scrutinised by an eminent botanist who pronounces its statements, in the main, accurate: but the fact that in a note the botanical name of the broom-rape is given as oroban cheruba when it should read orobanche rubra, and that this misprint went uncorrected in Poetical Works suggests that McComb pretended to a more exact scholarship than he really possessed.

Throughout his volumes, the versification is even and correct, but the result is completely pedestrian and uninspired. It is probable that his being a publisher kept his work in print. His estimation of the poetic character and his technical attainment may fitly be represented by a couple of stanzas.

"And oft the Poets' lot,
Like to the winter flower
Unknown -- unheeded by the world -
Has many a chilly hour.

But he has hours of Joy,
The rugged steep he braves,
Hold high communion with the hills,
Wild fellowships with caves.

Soars on the wings of thought,
Where orbs unnumbered roll,
And, in his high imaginings,
Traverses pole to pole."

— 'The rugged steep he braves,' probably in search of oroban cheruba.

McComb's long writing career from 1817 to 1864, serves to demonstrate the changes, even perhaps, the decline, in taste, from the ~~decorous~~ disciplined couplets and diction of the early century to the more careless forms of the later century, when no authority existed in matters of literary decorum.

In the same Election ~~squib~~ squib another item reads:- "Friend Tom - a sleek, well-fed little horse, who did not strike fire with his heels some time ago and set his own stable in a blaze, in order to cheat the Insurance office". This refers to Thomas Henry Gilmore, whose Norah O'Connor, the Factory Girl (1859) bears the imprint of three local publishing houses, Aitchison, Phillips, and McComb.

This poem is of very great interest it is unique in dealing with contemporary industrial conditions. The weaver-poets frequently referred to the old cottage craft in their verses: only Gilmore writes of a textile factory.

The verse runs irregularly, varies from eleven syllable anapaestic batches to sections in octosyllabic couplets. It tells the

story of a girl in Tyrone, whose lover, Arthur O'More, goes away to seek his fortune. She is left an orphan and is evicted. Travelling to Belfast she finds work in a factory, and a home with a kindly widow; but the long hours of labour sap her strength; she falls ill, then, providentially, a stranger calls - It is Arthur O'More, to make himself known and to bid her share his good fortune.

Melodramatic, longwinded, turgid, if you like, often clumsily rimed, it does communicate some feeling, some sympathy.

"It is the breakfast hour, - a short release, -
The belted wheels, the whirling bobbins cease.
See, through the gateway, how the workers throng,
And in the streets all hurried fly along.
They reach their doors, and hurry o'er their meals,
For soon they'll hear those backward summoning peals.
Again, that bell is ringing loud; once more
Is opened wide the iron factory door;
Fathers and mothers, daughters, sons, and all,
With hastening steps are answering the call.
Again at work the rattling engines fly,
The steam, the heat, the dust and din arise,
Each hand is busy, and each watchful eye, -
But the employer still in slumber lies . . ."

"Was that the bell, mother, was that the bell?
Listen, it is, sure I know it too well.
Oh, it sounds drearily, drearily, drearily,
Tyrant-like, sullenly, comfortless, wearily,
Not like the Sabbath bells' music so cheerily,
Stirring its melody up in my heart.

Hand me my shawl, darling mother and say,
Will you pray for your daughter when she is away;
Mother, I wonder how long I'll be going,
How dark, and how dismal, how cold; it is snowing -
Look out here, dear mother, how wildly it's blowing,
Yet I know it is long past the time to depart."

Certainly Norah O'Connor has its place as a social document; and even if the sleek little ~~Quaker~~ Quaker did burn down his stall, one would forgive him for his remarkable social conscience.

In The Belfast People's Magazine for February 1848, there is a poem entitled "The Engine Stands", which was "suggested by a contemplation of the many hundreds lately thrown out of employment by the suspension of several factories here, and the 'half time' reduction of many others".

The engine stands! alas and woe!
Its iron limbs all day are still
That caused so merrily to go
The little wheels within the mill;

And little hearts around my hearth,
That found rejoicing in its din,
Have lost the buoyancy and mirth
That gladdened me when I came in.
. . . .

The morning bell's unwelcome peal
We deemed we should be glad to miss,
That would not suffer us to steal
Another hour of slumber's bliss.
But ah! it was a lucky bell,
As now, too late, we're forced to learn,
Whose brazen tongue had tales to tell
Of certain bread and gold to earn.
. . . .

A heartsome factory once it was,
Whence I and mine had bread so long;
We never dreamt that any cause
Could put old master's matters wrong.
The kind old man! . . . . .

William John McMullan (1813–1863) who wrote this, had never worked in a factory. He had been a pupil of McComb's at the Brown Street School: McComb secured a free place for him in the Academical Institution, but the boy, after a short time, ran off to sea. When he was fifteen he was apprenticed to a Belfast printer, and set up ballads of his own making which proved popular in the streets. This precocity at verse attracted the attention of James Stuart, at this time, editor of *The Guardian*; he obtained a present of £20 for the lad from a local nobleman, to whom McMullan's volume *The Brigand*, etc. (1830) was dedicated. This gave an astounding display of boyish Byronism, already alluded to. With his broadsheets, it must have struck popular taste, for it gained for its author a reputation which he failed to maintain. After this he became a newspaper man and worked on many journals, always losing his job through pride or personal irregularity; and being for a long period, reduced to general hackwork, producing almanacs, religious leaflets, comic or serious verse, petitions, articles on a multitude of subjects. He was a good prose writer; a selection of his best work might have been a useful compilation. Some of his verse recitations under the pseudonyms of "Hector Oge", or "Paddy Scott the Piper" had some currency; but his satire *The Heir of Avonmore* (1861) an exercise in topical verse-journalism fell flat. His last years were pitiable, for his irregular habits had ruined his health, and in a strenuous endeavour to provide for his wife and daughters, he worked himself to death, leaving a memory of goodfellowship and lively wit. So McComb who had schooled him, paid for his headstone.

The years 1830 to 1850 in Belfast produced a series of volumes to which brief notice should be given. This begins with *Visits of the Muse* (1830) by James Russell English, a friend of Beggs and Herbison; is followed by *Songs of Leisure Hours* (1833) by George Druitt, again a friend of Herbison; this contains "Lines on the death of Mrs Felicia Hemans", or "The Murderer", "The Exile", and "The Missionary's Widow"; and is pious, sentimental, and sad in its total effect. *Wanderings by the Abbey* (1833) by John J. Mulholland

aims rather higher than either English or Druitt, and is out and out
romantic, with the conventional properties:-

"For I had dreamt of hidden graves,
Where restless spirits nightly cry -
Of skeletons in lonely caves,
That ne'er were seen by human eye;
I've fancied, in the wild dark night,
I've seen a pale mysterious light
Flit slowly o'er a grass-green spot,
The home of someone long forgot ..."
("A Fragment")

Lays of the Feelings (1839) by Eliza Dobbin is unpretentious, but leaves the reader with a kindly feeling for the aged author, not for her war songs for the Greeks or the Poles, but for her innocence of statement:

"The redbreast-loved, with swelling throat,
Tho' clouds should lour, in silvery note,
Perched on the very topmost spray,
To prophesy a sunny day .."
("The Woodbine and the Weed")

Samuel Lyons, a printer, published his *Pieces of Original Poetry* (1843), and, in an ode to his trade, saluted Cobbett who

" with wondrous skill
Did wield his thousand-pointed quill"

His radicalism is further emphasised by the remark in the preface that "Wealth is sometimes very much out of proportion and unequally divided in the world".

Robert ~~Moss~~ Morrison, *Miscellaneous Poems* (1846), on the other hand, is more conservative in his loyalties, but perhaps more strongly aware of his urban background.

" The little village now attracts our view,
Excites our pleasure, yet our envy too,
Who in our shops the whole long day must be ...
The morning come, we dress ourselves once more,
The selfsame task to do we've done before.
Ye simple swains, how soon I'd change with you
My situation, and my salary too ... "

Christmas Rhymes, or Three Nights' Revelry (1846) by Frances and Elish Lamont (1800-1870), a once celebrated miniaturist who won the approbation of Ruskin, begins in romantic key with its obvious echoes:-

"The Baron's hall was large and old;
The Baron's heart was good and bold;
And Christmas there was kept full well,
As this old rhyme doth soothly tell ... "

Later than these, Shades of Reason; Features of Modern Society (1857), by Raymond Varo Henry, went through three editions, a very unusual event in Belfast. In this, "The Song of Kanehela" is an imitation of "Hiawatha"; there are also imitations or parodies of Thomas Campbell and Charles Wolfe. The dedication to William Sharman Crawford is further supported by an item commending Crawford's support of Tenant Right. Henry's political confusion is demonstrated by his eulogy of Henry Cooke and Hugh Hanna, who make strange bedfellows for "the Father of Tenant Right". The most important item, "Features of Modern Society" is a broadside at the class newly enriched by Belfast's industrial and commercial progress, and, though now and then slack in its heroic couplets, is not without force.

> "Your worth is prized - why not contest the county?
> And so you do - but then Lord Noodle's heir?
> "My Lord, the Borough?" - Well, next year you're Mayor.
> Well done, Sir John - for in the chair you're knighted ..."

describes an event for which historical parallels might be quoted, and probably gave the poem topical point to account for the three editions.

XI. Some Belfast Journals and the Poets associated with them

The Rushlight which ran from 3rd December 1824 to 9th September 1825, has already been quoted in reference to Stott; its comment was lively and hard-hitting; indeed, no local radical journal has since struck so effective a note as "The Last Will and Testament," printed in the final issue – One can hardly refrain from quotation, though only apposite to our purpose in providing background material. Hope, the editor, published little original verse, most frequently filling up with pieces by Moore, Byron, Hemans, and "Rejected Addresses". The outstanding local contribution was "Stormy Rathlin", by Thomas Beggs under the pseudonym of "Ollar". One of its distributing agents was Samuel Corry of Ballyclare, who towards the end of our period, edited and published *The Poems and Songs of James Campbell of Ballynure* (1870) and *The Poetical Works of Thomas Beggs* (c.1866), two of our more radical poets.

The nationalist cause was also supported by *The Ulster Monthly* which appeared from January 1830 until March 1831, under the editorship of Charles H. Teeling (1778-1850) who had been arrested at the age of eighteen as a United man, whose brother Bartholomew had been hanged in Dublin for assisting the French, and who later wrote his wellknown *Personal Narrative of '98*, one of the most important documents of the period. It contained little verse, and that under pseudonyms, or initials or unsigned. A couple of poems, one with a Canadian theme, by "T. C.", were probably by Thomas Charles Stewart Corry, since among the subscribers are included members of his family, he had been to Canada, and the views of the magazine were largely held by him forty years later. The most interesting item is "An Ulster Ballad: The Rescue of the Mare" (January 1831) which is unsigned. This is the famous "Willie Gilliland" by Samuel Ferguson, a ballad which proved perhaps the most popular of Ferguson's verses locally. David Herbison replying to Ferguson's gift to him of *Lays of the Western Gael*, wrote "It has long been my opinion that Ulster has produced no other poet so capable of handling our legendary lore as you, nor have we one whose ballads are so deservedly popular: they are written in a style so simple and yet so pleasing, that many of them have long since become favourites with the Presbyterians of this locality, in particular 'Willie Gilliland' and 'Una Phelimy'."(1)

With *The Belfast Penny Journal* (19th July 1845 – 16th May 1846) we are on more profitable ground. By its title one might take it as an imitation of *The Dublin Penny Journal* or *The Irish Penny Journal*, but although these carried a good deal of verse and creative prose, they both leaned heavily on antiquarian interests, on history and topography and made features of their copious illustrations and architectural supplements. *The Belfast Journal* was more popular and more local, and offered generous hospitality to the poets: Thomas Beggs, David Herbison, John Getty and James McKowen from the country, Thomas Henry, Francis Davis, and Thomas Elliott from the town.

Thomas Henry was a printer in Belfast, and wrote the Irish Prize poem for the Burns Centenary Competition in 1859, but even the

(1) *Sir Samuel Ferguson in the Ireland of his day*: Vol II. p.196

titles of his volumes, of which there seem to have been a couple, have been lost. He lived long enough to be one of H. L. Stewart's circle in 1868.

Frances Brown (1816–1879) of Stranorlar, Donegal, contributed a good deal of verse and prose, and James McHenry is represented by a short story. Miss Brown published three volumes of verse and several novels, and had something of a vogue as "The Blind Poetess", across the water, earning a Civil List pension; but apart from her work in this journal can hardly be considered as participating in the literary life of the province.

James McHenry (1785–1845) from Larne, had verse in *The Belfast News Letter* under the anagrammatic pseudonym of "McErin", and first came forward as an author with An Essay on Knowledge (1804); this was, unintentionally, a rather amusing performance.

> "For where the brute, that, anxious to be wise,
> Will study Nature and explore the skies? . . .
> Show of the apes a Shakespear's rambling mind,
> Or of the elephants a Milton find;"

His *Bard of Erin* (1808) has already been noticed. From the profits of this he was enabled to enter Glasgow University and graduated M.D. While in Scotland, he wrote *Patrick, a poetical Tale founded on incidents which took place in Ireland during the unhappy period of 1798* (Glasgow 1810). In 1817 he forsook his apothecary's shop in Belfast and emigrated to Baltimore; and in the United States he became an influential critic, a popular novelist and an unsuccessful playwright. Two of his fictional works, *O'Halloren, the Insurgent Chief* (Philadelphia 1824), and *The Hearts of Steel* (1825) long maintained their hold on the humbler sections of the reading public in Ireland, being repeatedly reprinted. These set in the Larne district and dealing with civil strife, are the first novels known to me which introduce historical personages as minor characters. A play based on O'Halloren was produced in Belfast in 1842, without mentioning the author's name.

His chief poem *The Antediluvians* (London 1839) in 7,000 lines of blank verse, deals with the pre-Noah world and the wars of the Cainites; it was praised by Poe and savaged by *Blackwoods'*, and remains eminently readable, for McHenry took a great amount of trouble with his versification. The preface is the most serious literary document of its kind we possess, assessing the blank verse of Thomson, Akenside and Cowper, and attacking the newfangled Wordsworthian school. But the epic had no imitators in Ulster.

McHenry returned to Ireland in 1843 as American consul at Londonderry, dying two years later at his birthplace, Larne. The editor of *The Penny Journal* in an obituary (26. VII. 1845) referred to his last meeting with the poet, "He was a very little man, with a pale emaciated visage", a very gentle way of reminding us that McHenry had been a hunchback.

That footloose Ulsterman, Andrew Nicholl (1804–1886) the painter, is represented in this journal by a single poem; and another who never achieved volume-publication, Samuel Walker of Shane's Hill, Templepatrick, Co. Antrim, contributed five poems and two stories.

The journal contains useful biographical notices of James Orr, Andrew Mackenzie, and Eliza Hamilton, and reviews a little

book of verse by Thomas Elliott, not otherwise recorded.

In its effort to be 'interesting to all, offensive to none', the journal failed to present a very positive or coherent attitude, and it is difficult to imagine what kind of an audience was aimed at.

About intention there can be no doubt regarding The Belfast People's Magazine which lasted from January 1847 to March 1848. This carried as its motto "The elevation of the labouring portion of the community - this is our subject". This sets its tone, for as a twopenny monthly, it was directed precisely to that object, incorporating many reports on public health and sanitation in the town, on bills relating to hours of work, and on illustrated schemes for public wash-houses. It was sponsored by the "Belfast Society for the amelioration of the condition of the working classes", of the committee of which Robert Patterson was a member. For its last two issues it had the additional title of "and Health of Towns Journal".

It is not strange that the more purely literary side was much weaker than in The Belfast Penny Journal. Several lyrics from "Lambeg" are obviously by James McKowen. There were favourable reviews of Francis Davis' Miscellaneous Poems, and of William Carleton's novel The Black Prophet, and the advertisement pages included announcements of shilling editions of McHenry's O'Halloran and The Hearts of Steel. W.J. McMullan contributed three or four poems, and a fair quantity of prose, over the initials "McM". Altogether, with its tables of statistics and surveys, its articles on "The Great Eastern", and on astronomy, it is a very worthy and dull example of the Victorian social conscience at work.

I have seen only one issue of The Northern Magazine, that for December 1852. This has some prose by the Earl of Belfast, using the signature of "Campana", and an unsigned sonnet "To the Redbreast" which later appeared in Poems (1866) by Alexander O'D. Taylor.

The Ulster Magazine (January 1860 - December 1863) took a strong Tory line, though not involving itself in the day-to-day political struggle; its approach may be judged from a single editorial quotation; "The ranks of the rich are ever being recruited from the toiling masses; and one class merges into another, as dawn into day, without disturbing that beautiful harmony which exists over the external surface of society".

It contains much descriptive prose by McMullan, and the invaluable series of biographies of the Ulster poets by John Fullarton; these cover Orr, MacKenzie, Beggs, Drummond, Herbison and Campbell. The 'Beggs' and 'Campbell' lives were later used as prefaces to Corry's editions of these poets' works.

Fullarton also has a handful of poems, McMullan a couple, Herbison a quiverful; Thomas Henry, Joseph Carson, Thomas Elliott, Robert Huddleston and Hugh Leslie Stewart also contributed.

Of these, John Fullarton (1806-1875) had come to Belfast in 1846 from Ballynure, working in the office of an engineering firm. Although he had been born in one prolific vernacular centre, his verse is all in standard English, and while correct is rather uninspired, without fire. His O'More (1867) which is prefaced by a useful autobiographical memoir, is in Spenserian stanzas;

"For Night rode darkly up the distant hill,
And round the northern skies her mantle drew;
And breathing Nature's every voice was still,
O'er all the earth, the air, and ocean blue.
Far up among the craggs the white sea-mew
Leaned on her young with warm and feathered breast;
And where the boldest cliff arose in view,
The sullen eagle slumbered on his nest,
And by their rocky shore the Danes have sunk to rest."

(Canto 3)

Besides David Herbison, two other rural bards are included; Joseph Carson who, when of Kilpike, near Banbridge, Co. Down, had published his Poems, Odes, etc (1831) which contained the attack on Stott already quoted, now writes from Ardoyne, near Belfast, where he probably followed his trade as weaver in Michael Andrew's Royal Manufactory; and Robert Huddleston of Moneyrea, Co. Down, whose volumes had been published as far back as 1844 and 1846.

Thomas Elliott (1820 – ?), although born at Ballyhobridge, Co. Fermanagh, can hardly be ranked among the country poets, for he came to Belfast in 1836. As we have seen he contributed to The Belfast Penny Journal, nine poems in all from various addresses in or near the town. Sometime after 1846 he settled in Glasgow where he worked at his trade of shoemaker. Ten years later he published Doric Lays, and was included in several Scottish anthologies. To the Ulster Magazine he sent a stream of articles, stories and verse; one article on a Glasgow working class poet, McFarlan, gives some idea of the literary underworld with which he was there familiar. He came back to Belfast in 1867, but we lose sight of him afterwards. His Scots verse is more of the Whistle Binkie kind than we find among our own vernacular bards, and he does not seem to have employed the traditional stanza-forms of "The Cherry and the Slae", "Holy Fair" or of the rimed epistles.

Our knowledge of his return to Belfast we owe to the important manuscript journal of Hugh Leslie Stewart (1843-1871), one of the youngest contributors to the Magazine. Stewart, a highly successful spirit merchant, was a very different person from most of the Magazine poets. Reversing the usual procedure, he went into business and made enough money to retire and enter the Queen's College when he was twenty six. His own verse is in no way remarkable; but this journal which he kept for the years 1867 and 1868 provides us with much otherwise unrecorded information. He was friendly with Thomas Henry, Henry McDonald Flecher and Francis Davis, gives copious and invaluable notes on the last, describes a visit with Flecher and Davis to Huddleston at Moneyrea, and comments on William MacIlwaine and on Dr. Thomas C. S. Corry. In one interesting passage he describes how he came to write a topical song for a music hall singer and how it was received – the girl's phrase was "It went down immense"!

The Magazine which had printed one of Davis's poems, was quite critical of this poet, largely, it seems, on political grounds, but reserved its heaviest censure for MacIlwaine. It also contains a touching obituary notice on W. J. McMullen.

Private Poets

There were several other writers of verse in Belfast who do not seem to have belonged to any of the groups associated with the magazines or journals, who were prominent in the community not at all as literary persons.

Of these, Canon William MacIlwaine (1807-1885) had come to St. George's in 1835. Of him McMullan had written in The Ulster Magazine (November 1861) "We leave St. George's to its monuments, its dolorous and ill-hung bell, and its equally dolorous parson, who affects intimacy with the Muses, and is one of the most weakly, twaddling poets who ever drank of Helicon". The Magazine later complained of his being commissioned in 1862 to compose the ode for the inauguration of the Mulholland organ in the Ulster Hall. This set of verses is included in his Heôthâ and Melech (1870), and, it must be admitted, is not a highly exciting work, as a quatrain from the recitative shows:

> "Hardy son of toil,
> Sage of soaring reason,
> Brothers, cease to moil,
> Rest ye here a season."

He is happier in the not contemptible blank verse of the title poem than in the lyrical forms. His anthology of religious verse Lyra ~~Sacra~~ Hibernica Sacra (1878) includes pieces by many of our Ulster writers, but the dates given in the biographical index are thoroughly unreliable. His friend Samuel Ferguson gave him some help in the compilation. MacIlwaine was addicted to Church practices of a suspiciously Romanist tendency, candles and chanting and the like; he was also a member of the Literary Society, of the Natural History and Philosophical Society, and was, for a time, President of the Naturalists' Field Club. During the years of his office, he attended the conferences of the British Association, and reported back in his annual presidential addresses on the horrors of Evolution and Spiritualism, to overflow audiences.

Among his fellow members of the B.N.H. and P.S. were Robert Patterson (1802-1872), Alexander O'Driscoll Taylor (1832-1910) and Joseph John Murphy (1827-1894).

Patterson, heir to a long-established ironmongery business, is still remembered as a naturalist. He was one of the first of the Ulster versewriters to be affected by the Wordsworthian example, and as one should expect from a field-expert is accurate in his observation and description.

First the Wordsworthian element.

> "Here let us stop; this glorious scene demands
> Our more minute observance. The hills around
> Have girt us in - their lofty heads enwrapped
> In misty wreathes, permit the mind to dream
> Of more aspiring summits than the truth
> Might offer to our gaze.."
>
> ("Gap of Dunloe, Killarney")

Then the accurate observation.

"But stay! O'er yonder lake the while
What bird, about that wooded isle,
With pendent feet, and pinions slow,
Is seen his ponderous length to row?
'Tis the tall heron's awkward flight;
His crest of black, and neck of white
Deep sunk his pale blue wings between . ."
("An October Day's Ramble")(1)

But, busy with his societies (54 papers to the B.N.H. and P.S from 1821 - 1870), his text books and charts on zoology, his business, his public offices of Town Councillor and Harbour Commissioner, his good works in public health and sanitation, his large family, he had no time or room to assume the rôle of poet. Although his verses even got into the school-readers, ~~books~~, they were not to be found in book-form until a small selection was made ~~and published~~ printed with a larger number by his wife, Mary Elizabeth Patterson (1806 - 1889) for private circulation, in 1886: and apart from subscribing to Robert Morrison's book in 1846, and corresponding with John Gwin - Voices from the Rostrum (1860), he does not seem to have entered into any serious literary relations with fellow writers.

Taylor, his fingers in many financial pies, textile agency, insurance, stockbroking, accountancy, was member and twice President of the Literary Society; he was also secretary of the B.N.H. and P.S. from 1878 to 1881. He wrote an obituary on Patterson which included reference to the latter's verse. As has been mentioned, he contributed at an early age to The Northern Magazine, and ~~he~~ had his Poems issued privately in 1866. This contained a Sonnet on the Death of Moore, lines on the Cavehill, and on the Giants Causeway, and some unrimed lyrical measures.

In 1881, however, he became bankrupt and emigrated to Rhode Island, U.S.A., where he died nearly 30 years later.

Taylor's financial débacle dragged down his friend Joseph John Murphy, who, however, stood his ground and accommodated himself to his reduced circumstances. For ten years President of the Literary Society, for twenty President of the Linenhall Library, and a voluminous reader of papers (41) to the B.N.H. and P.S., Murphy, in his Habit and Intelligence (1869) and The Scientific Bases of Faith (1872) made important contributions to the Darwinian controversy. He is asserted to have written a considerable quantity of verse, but his only publication was Sonnets and other Poems (1890): this shews a strong Tennysonian impact, but remains well constructed and sonorous minor verse of an, often, memorable kind. His was probably the finest mind in ~~nine~~ 19th century Ulster.

William Drennan had urged his children to practise the art of versifying. His eldest son William (1802 - 1873), a student of Trinity College Dublin, and ultimately a barrister, under

(1) Field Naturalists' Journal, December 1833

the influence of Thomas Davis, wrote historical ballads for The Nation, one of these "The Battle of Beal-an-atha-Buidhe" enjoyed a wide popularity, appeared in many anthologies, and was often mistakenly ascribed to his father. John Swanwick Drennan (1809-1893), active in the medical life of Belfast, had received his M.D. a year before the publication of Glendalloch (1859); this reprinted most of the verse in Drennan's Fugitive Pieces (1815), and added a liberal selection of the younger William's ballads, translations and imitations - several of these, of the Lake School -, and a much smaller group of poems by John Swanwick.

The younger brother had also contributed to The Nation, and for a long life kept up the writing of verse, very much in the manner of Frederick Locker Lampson. After his death, the family brought out his Poems and Sonnets (1895), which, while reprinting some of his earlier patriotic verses, included pieces which shew his political views to have become strongly Unionist.

John Swanwick Drennan is unique for us in being a consistently good light versemen. His epigrammatic neatness, his gentle wit and his unerring literary tact deserve a greater degree of recognition than he has been accorded.

The small-scale nature of his work makes quotation easier than for most of our other writers.

"With nought to hide or to betray
She eyed me frank and free.
But, oh! the girl that looked away
Was dearer far to me."

("L'Amitié et L'Amour")

The quatrain "On ~~reading~~ the Death of a Young Girl" has more than a hint of the quality we associate with Emily Dickinson.

"A soul seraphic early fled
From mortal grief and strife;
Men of her death 'how sudden!' said,
And angels - of her life"

The stanzas "On reading some old letters" offer a delicate tribute to the correspondence which later provided the substance of The Drennan Letters. He wrote his own epitaph in "A Rhymer's Wish".

"When Death, with no unwelcome touch,
Shall free my weary sprite,
I would not be lamented much,
Nor yet forgotten quite.

Let Art devise no sounding mask,
Affliction's voice to aid;
The softest sigh is all I ask
To soothe my wistful shade....

While Memory, from her grassy seat,
Might now and then ~~decline~~ incline
O'er the mute rhymester to repeat
A verse of his - a line.

With such memorials to endear
Some lone sepulchral spot,
I should not wake too sad a tear
Nor yet be quite forgot."

Another doctor, Thomas Charles Stewart Corry (? - 1896), not to be confused with Thomas Hughes Corry, the botanist-poet (1859-1883), had contributed a couple of poems to the Ulster Magazine and, probably, to the earlier Ulster Monthly Magazine. He was something of a character, sold his own patent medicines, and ran a Panorama in Queen's Square, Belfast, which was visited by H. L. Stewart. Corry was also an admirer of William Carleton, and during the latters visit to Belfast in 1864, with Francis Davis was one of the novelists supporters. Corry's Irish Lyrics, Songs and Poems (1879) was dedicated to Dr R. R. Madden, the historian of the United Irishmen, and contains ballads rather of the old Nation kind; it also includes the verses published in the Ulster Magazine. A number of his poems were written 'at the request of musical friends, who have honoured my lines by wedding them to very charming lyrical compositions'; and have the qualities and defects of that kind of composition.

It seems by now obvious that at a period when the town of Belfast was making remarkable industrial progress, the opportunity and leisure for, the social acceptability of devotion to literary expression had been drastically diminished, compared with fifty or thirty years earlier.

Robert Patterson is perhaps a symbolical figure; we know from family records that both he and his wife read a great deal of poetry - he memorised passages of Shakespeare while shaving - and wrote a considerable amount of verse; but as a leading citizen, although politically non-partisan, poetry played no part in his public character. There is a parallel to this, reported of Samuel Ferguson - admittedly, not in Belfast but in Dublin - by Standish O'Grady who wrote "I knew Sir Samuel Ferguson and was often his guest, but knew him only as a kind, courteous and hospitable gentleman; no one ever told me that he was a great Irish poet" (2)

In Belfast those who ~~publically~~ publicly admitted their interest in poetry, or practised the craft, tended to be journalists, booksellers, publishers or printers; and, apart from the intermittent sojourns of Robert A. Wilson, "Barney Maglone", (1820-1875), bohemian in his vast cloak, and Francis Davis, doggedly asserting his status, none of these assumed the public rôle of poet; so Robert Patterson, J.S. Drennan and J. J. Murphy who, in another more sympathetic atmosphere, might have contributed to the deepening and enrichment of the communal cultural life, and might have drawn much from it themselves, remained strictly, very good, but private writers, hardly known outside their family circles. Indeed, it is significant that the notice of Patterson in the Dictionary of National Biography makes no allusion to his interest in poetry or his practice of it, and that this notice was the work of one of his sons.

2 ~~Stan~~ Selected Essays and Passages: Standish O'Grady N.D. p. 3

XI The Belfastman

Of all the poets active from the middle forties to the end of our period none had better or more consistent right to the title of The Belfastman than Francis Davis (1810 – 1885).

Whether he was born in County Cork or in County ~~Antrim~~ Down is not of any importance, for there is no doubt that he grew up in the North, in the Hillsborough district. He came to Belfast in 1825 to work at his trade as a muslin weaver, but for the next twenty years we cannot be sure of his movements. Sometime during this period he worked and starved in Glasgow and Manchester.

By 1846, at any rate, Davis was back in Belfast, at his trade, and sending verses to The Belfast Penny Journal, the editor of which shewed some pride in having him among his contributors; this suggests that Davis already enjoyed some sort of reputation. He also sent verse to The Nation the Dublin journal of the Young Ireland movement; this caused a little confusion, for on one occasion the editor of The Belfast Penny Journal apologised for having printed a poem which, the week before, had appeared in The Nation. Davis has described how his poems were "thrown up like hurried accounts during my hours of toil, amid the monotonous din of the workshop... and in very many cases the same hour which gave them birth also saw them away to push their fortunes in the columns of The Nation or some other journal, and never perhaps more than a look at them afterwards" (1). The editors of The Nation suggested that he should use "A Belfastman" in addition to his name, to distinguish him from the better-known Thomas Davis. This he also used for The Penny Journal, but very shortly afterwards it became "The Belfastman".

In 1847 his first book was issued, Miscellaneous Poems; this consisted largely of his Nation pieces, historical ballads like "Kathleen Ban Adair", lays of labour like "Weaver's Song", the lament for Thomas Davis, "The Minstrel of Mallow", and lyrics like "The Re-united".

A stanza from "Weaver's Song" displays his nimbleness.

> "'Tis sweet to see the shuttles play,
> And hear the flighters speak,
> On little silvery Saturday,
> When well we've spent the week:
> Aye, that's the day can tell who slept
> With sunlight on his eyes;
> But we have leaped, ere day has swept
> The ravellings from the skies:
> Then, as ye weave, and time the stave,
> This maxim keep in sight —
> The little done, with Monday's sun,
> Is much on Friday night."

It is interesting to note in this a similarity to The Cherry and the Slae quatorzain, particularly in the internally riming "bobwheel"; and to record that the reviewer in The Belfast People's Magazine while offering generous praise, comments on the carelessness of the rimes, "weave" and "stave" (2)

(1) Preface to Miscellaneous Poems and Songs (1847)

(2) B.P.M. (7th August 1847) p. 177

For this indicates a date for the transition in local educated speech of the pronunciation of this vowel from the traditionally "Irish" form.

An excerpt from "The Re-United" shews his feeling unvexed by politics or economics. It also suggests, to my ear, something of 'the Irish note'; the adjective 'altered' was a stroke he seldom equalled. I have preferred the line-arrangement of the 1847 volume to that used in the 1878 version.

"Girl of my bosom! thou
Pale cheeked and lowly,
Come to my pillow now,
Softly and slowly!

Fain would I hear thee speak
Kindly above me;
Girl of the altered cheek!
Still I do love thee."

From Miscellaneous Poems, owing to a muddle in the negotiations with his publisher, Davis made nothing. For his second book, Lispings of the Lagan (1849), he received £20.

In the preface to his first book he had come forward as a self-educated workingman, a little apologetic, and stating his purpose as that of creating 'true and universal feelings of national love'. For his second, the stance is modified; the verses are no longer journalism with a propagandist purpose, they are 'wild flowers'; the emphasis is on 'nature or natural feelings'. "I believe that poetry is the truthful, though impassioned, representative of nature, or natural feelings. I believe that Nature is as perfect in the emmet, as she is in the elephant; and if so, as worthy to be faithfully represented in the one case as in the other. I believe that the simple country girl, who makes her hay, milks her cow, and spins her wheel, may be the subject of poetry as genuinely pure, as the hero of a hundred fights, or the lord of a thousand hills; with this difference, the sublimity of thought and expression which may be necessary in the one, may be uncalled for, though not inappropriate, in the other."

So in "The Sisters" we find the hint of a new quality:

"We sat beneath a straw-roofed shed,
A hoop of muslin, pencill'd blue,
Her white hands held, o'er which her thread
To snowy buds and flow'rets grew... "

This element never developed in Davis' work. He might have learned precision from his reading of Tennyson; but it was on other elements in that poets' style that Davis drew. An example of this, from "A Lay" – an attack on pedantic critics, is an early demonstration of the Tennysonian influence which gained in force in later publication.

"But let them frown, 'tis all the same,
For me, I know, and for my lays,
I'd rather bear such creatures' blame
Than crawl beneath their grove of bays!
Poor fangless vipers, con your Greek,
But soul and sense are not so vain
As sit, where every fool may seek,
To change his ounce of slime to brain."

Although a further edition of Miscellaneous Poems was called for in 1852, the economic position of the poet remained precarious. He tackled prose, began a short-lived Belfastmen's Journal, worked as proofreader to a firm of printers, became, later, secretary to the Reading Room of the newly established Workingmen's Institute.

The review in the People's Magazine had remarked that Davis' poems had first appeared "during the late great political excitement which has, to a considerable degree, been merged in the common calamity, which has fallen on our country". "The Famine" set up vast changes in the Irish scene. One of its consequences was that it shattered the Young Ireland movement: men thought less of national aspirations and more of self-preservation, by caution or flight. So Davis' war songs had become 'wild flowers'. Not that one would suggest a conscious withdrawal, a playing for safety; but the temper of the time was all away from militancy, and in the North there had been a sharpening of sectarian feeling as Daniel O'Connell's and Henry Cooke's deliberate equating of politics with religion became the effective pattern. In all this Francis Davis as a Protestant patriot and nationalist, found his position difficult.

We find him, while still producing 'socialistic' verses of some vigour – "Labour yet shall ease this chain or rend it link from link", "Your yesterday's slave is the lord of today", (In 1851 Samuel Smiles ranked him with Ebenezer Elliott and Gerald Massey as one of the more remarkable 'intensely political' workingclass poets (3)) (3), tending more and more to assume the functions of the 'public' poet, the laureate of the community.

In 1855, the Lord Lieutenant, the Earl of Carlisle, came to Belfast to unveil the statue to the late Earl of Belfast, the popular young heir of the local landowner, the Marquess of Donegall. Frederick Richard Chichester (1827-1853) had been enthusiastic about the arts, had written verse, a short novel, composed songs and sold them for "Famine" relief, and had given a series of lectures "On the Poets and Poetry of the Century". After his death in Italy, a rather Keatsian tragedy, a public fund had been raised in Belfast, and a statue commissioned from the Belfast-born sculptor, Patrick MacDowell, R.A. (1799-1870).

For this occasion Davis issued Belfast: The City and the Man (1855) in pink paper covers, a poem in twenty stanzas of an interesting character, each being rimed ababcdcdccdee, in iambic octosyllables. The shortness of the line and the strictness of the measure, for once imposed a welcome discipline on the rather verbose poet. Here again the Tennysonian influence (specifically of "In Memoriam") is obvious.

> "For me, – I sang a song of grief, –
> I sang it softly and alone;
> I wailed for our departed chief,
> Yet scorned to make my wailing known."

While formally a rhetorical statement, the personal feeling does not allow the structure to become rigid, or the language chill.

(3) In Eliza Cook's Journal, 1851; quoted in The Ballad of Babe Christabel by Gerald Massey 5th ed. 1855

"My city sits beneath the hills
Where wandering sea-waves lap and loll,
And when this heart knew less of ills,
Ah me! what music made they all . . .

Ah! thou of many masts and spires,
Shall arch and column scale thy skies,
And genius shed her holiest fires,
Unnoted 'mongst your merchandise?"

The couplet concluding stanza XVII

"And lo! the form that saints this shrine
Was chiselled by a child of mine!"

admits the only careless note; the statue is, in fact, bronze.

Other local poets, Raymond Varo Henry and Alexander O'D. Taylor wrote poems on the same subject; but it was the Ode by a Dubliner, Denis Florence MacCarthy (1817-1882), which was publicly recited at the unveiling.

Three years later, in 1858, Palmerston granted Davis a Civil List pension of £50 per annum.

The Tablet of Shadows (1861), Davis' next book, though locally printed, bears also the names of Hamilton, Adam, and Co., London. The title poem, a phantasy in blank verse, with lyric interludes, was the poet's most ambitious work of a philosophical nature, and rather shews him trying to stretch beyond his grasp. In a review The Ulster Magazine warned him to "abandon the construction of blank verse." A poem in the same volume "Kabooti, or Musings over a Mummy," although not reprinted in his Earlier and Later Leaves (1878), is of much greater interest. The initial inspiration of this, his presence at the unwrapping of a mummy in the Belfast Museum, College Square North, had been due to William Thompson's kindness in 1847, in making the facilities of the Natural History and Philosophical Society available to him: and, although Davis does not seem to have made any close friends among the Society's literary members, Patterson, MacIlwaine, Taylor, Murphy — this may have been due to Thompson's early death in 1852 — it did broaden his experience.

In The Tablet there is no diminution of the lyrical flow; a new departure can be seen in the translations from the French of La Fontaine. But only in "Progress," and "To the memory of a Man" does the 'Democrat Bard' speak out as of old.

"He left the wars of sect with sect,
To loveless hearts — to straighten'd minds!
His Freedom — shewn by word and act —
Was world-embracing as the winds;
His Christian views were Heaven broad:
He would not dare, whoe'er might blame,
To fix the mercy of his God
Within the circle of a name" (St. VII)

"One weakness, haply, to him clung:
His heart was far too near his tongue"

(St. III)

"He walked the world - his greatest crime -
He worshipped Right, before the time"

(St. IV)

The death of Albert, the Prince Consort, was another public event which evoked elegiac verses from many local poets - we may instance one specimen, by Robert Young in Poetical Works (1863). Davis wrote a sequence of fourteen poems, which, through the good offices of George L. Craik, Professor of English Literature at Queen's College, where Davis for a time was employed as assistant librarian, was published as Leaves from Our Cypress and Our Oak, by the house of Macmillan. This was issued anonymously in 1863, and is Davis' only purely London volume, and received the ~~appro~~ approbation of Rev George Gilfillan the authoritative Scottish literary critic of the day. The Queen acknowledged the tribute with the gift of a gold medal, and the citizens of Belfast gave the poet a public banquet.

Leaves in form varies from the Petrarchan sonnet to blank verse, and ranges through heroic quatrains, couplets and stanzas in great variety. As a public donning of the singing robe this was no mere rhetorical gesture.

"There is a love that loss may not make less -
Whose constant lamp draws light from loneliness -
Whose heart of fire and cheek of snow remain,
Brightening and whitening through each dark of pain -
Not even that angel, whose cold finger tips
Imparts his own dread silence to the lips,
Can shut its beauty from the widow's night,
Or veil the mourned one from its searching sight"

(Part II: section 5)

This was the period of his greatest reputation. Anthologists like Hayes (Ballads of Ireland, 1855) and Lover (Lyrics of Ireland 1858) gave him his place among the poets of Ireland, and he was contributing to journals in Dublin and London.

But bad times came again. His Rambles and Gossips along Highways and Bye-ways round Belfast ran to only two numbers in 1866. A well loved infant daughter died in 1869. He seems to have lost the cottage on the Malone Road where he had been very happy.

When his last book appeared in 1878 he was living in Holywood, Co. Down, and had, it seems, become a Roman Catholic, and had made, at the request of Monsignor James O'Laverty, the

Parish Priest, "a rhymed version of the Altus Prosator" (4)

We know from his conversation with William Carleton in 1864 that he had retained a nostalgic affection for his early sponsors, the Young Irelanders of The Nation, in spite of the Ulster Magazine's assertion (September 1861) that he had come "out from the connexion a wiser man, purged of all grossness occasioned by contact with an unscrupulous clique". This final volume Earlier and Later Leaves or an Autumn Gathering runs to 623 pages of verse, and is sometimes referred to as his Collected Poems; but while it contains much material not previously between covers, it omits two poems from Miscellaneous Poems, five from Lispings, "Kabooti" and one other from The Tablet, the Altus translation, and, more significantly, The City and the Man and Leaves from our Cypress in their entirety. This is to be regretted, for the two last must be considered if Davis is to be estimated fairly. He would have been better served by a rigorous selection from all his books.

Earlier and Later Leaves, however, contains in "Minnie Blair", a unique poem. This is a novel in blank verse extending to nearly 3,000 lines, and clearly contains some autobiographical material. While, by the nature of its subject and its form, much of "Minnie Blair" is flat and pedestrian, the narrative is very well sustained, the tone conversational, and the commentary occasionally memorable.

A fair sample from Part I gives the feeling and the texture.

" This Minnie Blair and I were playmates, once;
We went to school together — often ~~fo~~ fond
Of linking fingers as we trudged, zig-zag,
Along. Near neighbours lived we, she and I.
A glen, a stream, a hill, and two short fields
Where nibbled sheep, were all that lay between
Her father's house and mine. We went to school,
I've said, and every morning, neat, at nine,
We met at ~~Harr~~ Harry's ~~stile~~ stile — 'twas not arranged
Our meeting so; but silent, secret will,
Or custom, one might kindlier suppose,
With both, inclined the one who reached it first
To wait upon the other; hence, along
A path — a short cut through the fields — we strolled,
With wondrous waste of walking towards the school.

Ah, then, how often were we late! We had
You see, so much grave matter to discuss:
She had a world of printed cottons — odds
And ends, of finger length and breadth — which came
Of her good mother's work in making robes
For rustic belles. Then I, it was presumed,
Had such a nice perception as to tint

(4) X History of the Parish of Holywood: Rev. James O'Laverty (1903)

X This reference not shown in M/S?

And pattern, and the fitness of this shred
Or that, to match the fresh complexion – soon
To fade! – of Minnie's last new doll. For me
I had more marbles far than books, and, then,
Was no great judge (which Minnie was) of which
'Twere best to make a taw. Besides all these,
Were Minnie's flowers and mine, fresh plucked – a bunch
Of daisies each, with, maybe, here and there
A sprig of southernwood or thyme – "

But this must suffer from losing its context; for the overtones and memories are skilfully wrought into the story, to draw, for all its diffuseness, the threads into a whole fabric.

Francis Davis, in his last years, a bearded man in a clothcap living in the Crumlin Road district of Belfast, might, in a more sympathetic atmosphere, have been a very good poet. But just as the amateurs were stifled, a workingclass poet burdened with a load of ideas and beliefs at variance with those carried by the majority of his fellows stood little chance of attaining full growth. Society could do little more than invite him to compose odes for the Temperance Bazaar.

XII The Vernacular Bards.

I

Discussing "The Legend of Stumpie's Brae" by Cecil Frances Alexander, Robert Farren in his Course of Irish Verse in English (1948) remarks: "Why did our poets so long leave this individual speech unused in poetry? It is strictly the only dialect in the English of Ireland: for the special savour of the tongue in the rest of our country is not of wholly English origin; it is half at least the Gaelic herb flavouring the English meat; for the rest it is Tudor English, with hints of Norse and of Norman. The North has the only dialect and it pokes through the rest like a bare big toe through a sock. Yet exhaustive anthologies, like Cooke's, and Brooke and Rolleston's, have no early example of its use in verse excepting a feeble song by James McKowen (1814–1889) .... Ferguson has no trace of Northern idiom; Allingham's Irish-English is such as we hear in any part of Ireland; and, ironically, Sigerson, so proud of the things of the North, left the racy Tyrone vernacular out of reach of his pen for a very long lifetime.

The fact is doubly odd; first because the Ulsterman is very assertive and prone to prize what is his; and second because Robert Burns, whom Ulstermen claim as a poetical first cousin, sang like a bird in a speech very like their own." (pp 55, 56)

Now there was, as I have already suggested, a large body of work in this idiom, particularly in the first half of the century, and it was still being used with fine effect until more recent times. Thomas Given (1850–1917) in what may fairly be called the folk tradition, and Rev. Charles Knox Pooler (1860–1937) on a more artificial level, are by no means negligible figures; the latter, indeed, with his "Hokin' o' the Prittas", and "Bowrke", has given us the only ballads comparable to Mrs Alexander's single effort, in harshness of effect and in narrative power.

Reading this passage in Farren one might be tempted to point out the dangers of drawing conclusions from popular anthologies; a wider acquaintance with less-well-known anthologies should have shewn, in Ralph Varian's Harp of Erin (1869) for instance, nine poems by this same James McKowen, as well as half-a-dozen by Francis Davis, most of which are in dialect. Further, Read's Cabinet of Irish Literature (1880) contains a fair excerpt of James Orr's "Cottier" ("Cottier")

It seems, however, that the many anthologists of Irish verse in the 19th. century, either were unaware of the bulk of material, or simply ruled it out of order because it seemed so alien to the rest of the verse they were examining. Or it may be due to the rather monotonous habit of self-propagation so general in collections of this kind. As a matter of fact Farren did not discover "Stumpie's Brae" in an anthology at all, for it lay embedded in Mrs Alexander's Poems (1896) until discovered a year or two ago, most probably by Dr. M. J. Craig: it was brought to my own notice as late as 1947 by Mr Austin Clarke. This circumstance might have led Mr. Farren to search, not merely anthologies, but the standard editions of the most famous poets, which should have led him to find Samuel Ferguson's "Epistle to Robert Gordon" which is, without question, in the vernacular, and consequently modify his assertion that "Ferguson has no trace of Northern idiom".

But in all fairness, one ought not to be too censorious. Verse in "the peculiar semi-Scottish dialect spoken in the north of Ireland" has not been easily accessible. The books, with one exception (James Orr), are out of print, scattered in different collections. And beyond a few superficial notes in the Ulster Journal of Archaeology and The Irish Book Lover nothing has been published by way of description or analysis of verse in this medium.

II

"The dialect poets too often slavishly imitated Burns"
D. J. O'Donoghue: Ulster Poets and Poetry, U.J.A. Vol I. p.20

"Andrew McKenzie, of Dunover, one of the innumerable 'bards', as they called themselves, who sang only because Burns had sprung from the soil, and sung before them"
Alex Riddell: A Little House in the Ards, Irish Statesman, 4.9.1926

"The Weaver Poets of Ulster were derived mainly from Burns".
J. S. Crone: report of a lecture; I.B.L. Vol 2, 1911.

By contrast with students like Mr. Farren, who may be unaware of the material, those who have opened a volume or two of the verse of the northern rural poets, have too often delivered themselves of unconsidered judgments. These may be variously phrased, but, upon analysis, narrow to an abrupt and emphatic declaration that Burns was the mainspring of the whole movement, that what verse there was in the mode was entirely derivative, and that had there been no Burns there would have been no Ulster makars.

There are certainly many facts which seem to support this hypothesis. Robert Burns is a name one comes upon often in the little books. During his lifetime folk from Ulster went on pilgrimage to salute the master. Samuel Thompson of Lyle Hill made the journey in the spring of 1794, and in 1799 published a blank verse poem on the event:

"O yes, Hibernians, I beheld the Bard"

Luke Mullan, brother-in-law of James Hope, the celebrated United Irishman, and himself a member of the Four Towns Book Club, "had the pleasure of being introduced to the bard, I think, in Edinburgh ... He was greatly delighted with Burns' company during the few hours spent with him". And when the poet died there were elegies galore (for example James Orr, Francis Boyle).

For those not privileged with personal acquaintance, the poets' works were readily available. Apart from importations upon which no information can be found, the eager Ulster market was appeased with sixteen editions of the poems and three of the Letters to Clarinda, all locally printed in the period 1787 to 1826: of these five were before the poets' death. It should be noted that the first Belfast edition was published in the same year as the first Edinburgh (1787), the year following the Kilmarnock.

Consequent upon this it is not surprising that we should find poems like "The Author's Address to his Old Gelding" by Francis Boyle, a close imitation of "The Auld Farmer's Salutation to his Auld Mare"; or John McHarg's "Epistle to Francis Boyle," or James Orr's "Epistle to N— P—", or Joseph Carson's "Epistle to Mr. Hugh M'Call, a Brother Poet" or a dozen others, similar in intention to Burns' "Epistle to J. Lapraik". And while Robert Huddleston's "Doddery Willowaim" must inevitably bring "Tam o' Shanter" to mind, the parallels to Boyle's "Address to the Cuckoo", Thompson's "To A Hedgehog", and Orr's "To A Sparrow" are not far to seek. Campbell's "Epicure's Address to Bacon", Orr on "Tea", or Thompson on "Tobacco" have their affiliations with "To A Haggis"; and Boyle's "Elegy on the Death of Edward Mills" with its refrain "Ned Mills is dead", is, in all conscience, like enough "Poor Mailie's Elegy" with its refrain, "Poor Mailie's dead". Burns' "Twa Dogs" has its imitation in Samuel Thompson's poetic contest of Allan, Damon, Sylvander, and Edwin, in which Sylvander's winning contribution could hardly be more exact. Boyle also imitates this; his title I cannot give since the earlier part of the poem is missing from his sadly abused little book. "Man was Made to Mourn" evoked the deliberate composition of Orr's "Man was Made to Smile", and Beggs' "The Medium", the last being designed to keep a middle course between these; while Huddleston's "Man's a Prey to Care" gives us a stanza:

> "Burns sang that 'Man was made to mourn' —
> Orr, 'Man was made to laugh;'
> That Orr was right, and Burns was wrong
> I own, but, not to scoff.
> 'Twas Man's for to be happy still
> And spotless late and air —
> But 'fore the good, he chose the ill,
> And so shook hands with Care"

Both Burns' "Cotter's Saturday Night", and Orr's "Irish Cotter's Death and Burial" are in the Spenserian stanza; and many lyrics from their very titles establish their allegiance — "The Lovely Lass o' Creevy Ha'" (Huddleston), "When Landy Lived Langsyne" (Beggs), "The Green Was't Awa'" (Orr), "Willy's Farewell to Whiskey" (Thompson), "The Bonny Weaver" (Boyle), "Molly Hume" (Campbell), "Sally Law" (Carson).

The stanza form of "The Holy Fair" with its two quatrains and bob-wheel was used by Huddleston ("Lammas Fair"), and by Orr ("Donegore Hill"). And, as instanced by the epistles already enumerated above, and by many other items, e.g. "A Winter Night in the North of Ireland" (McKinley), "Address to the Rev. J. J." (Porter) "By the Braid" (Herbison), the characteristic Burns stanza was generally practised. The elaborate, technically as well as typographically, stanza of Burns' "Epistle to Davie" was also attractive to Orr ("Epistle to S. Thompson"), to Thompson ("Ode to Poverty") and to Huddleston ("Epistle to a Friend, 1846")

With this cloud of witnesses it would seem there was very little more to say; but the problem is not so deceptively simple.

Let us take, for example, "the characteristic Burns stanza". This six-line stave had come from the Troubadours, had been used in English in the 13th century, and in Scots by Sir David Lindsay in 1540. Thereafter it had a busy history throughout the 17th century in Scotland, till adopted by Allan Ramsay and called by him "Standard Habbie", from its use by Robert Sempill (1595? – 1660?) for his "Life and Death of Habbie Simson". It was part of the technical kit-bag of many 18th century Scots poets, till Robert Fergusson passed it on to Burns.

Now, a broadsheet bound in a volume of the Dublin Weekly Journal for 1733/5 in the Halliday Collection, Royal Irish Academy, reads:-

"An Elegy on the much lamented Death of / Quarter Master Brice Blare / who died at Strabane. By a Northern Bard". Of the elegy a typical stanza runs:-

"Sheriard they say, foul fa' his head
Three twal months sine fatall his deed
But ah! it was ne out of feed
He lo'd him weel –
And bid him mix wi' carefu heed
His Maut wi' Meel"

"The Northern Bard" may have obtained this form from an imported copy of Ramsay's anthology The Evergreen (1724) or it may have been brought over by word of mouth of some of the Scottish planters who came to Ulster during the previous century. At any rate "Standard Habbie" was sufficiently acceptable to the folk of Ulster to be used in the most popular type of verse-publication; before Burns was born (1759), at least twenty four years before he was born. So, it should follow that folk poets in Ulster had the right to use, by 1800, a verse form traditional for a couple of generations at least.

Further, the elaborate stanza referred to above, Burns' "Epistle to Davie", had been the quatorzain used by Alexander Montgomerie (1540? – 1610?) for "The Bankis of Helicon" and "The Cherrie and the Slae". This latter poem had been reprinted in Belfast circa 1730, and in Londonderry in 1812: this should suggest that this poem ^ its popularity quite independently of any Burns association; indeed it is utterly unlike any of that poet's work. Montgomerie was kin to a family of the same name which planted the Ards, Co. Down, during his lifetime; and this may have established his poem among us.

Burns had, as I have said, obtained "Standard Habbie" from Ramsay and Fergusson; so too, the stanza for his "Holy Fair" had come from the latter's "Leith Races"; this developed from "Christ's Kirk on the Green" traditionally ascribed to James I (1394 – 1437) and had been used by Alexander Scott and others until taken up by Ramsay. Therefore, it seems that, if borrowing of technical device be the test, it is fair to suggest either that the Ulster vernacular bards were in much the same relation to Burns as he had been to his predecessors, or that the Ulster bards were working legitimately within the same tradition; and just as Burns took freely, and without any sense of the guilt of plagiarism, stanzas, lines, themes, from the vernacular literature of his folk, so the Ulster bards cannot be blamed for following the normal practice.

Burns' status can only be understood when we grasp his relation to this vernacular literature. As Henley wrote in his essay for The Centenary Edition (1901), "It [(i.e.) Scots folk literature] culminated in him, because he had more genius, and genius of a finer, rarer, and a more generous quality, than all his immediate ancestors put together. But he cannot fairly be said to have contributed anything to it except himself. He invented none of its forms; its spirit was not of his originating; its ideals and standards of perfection were discovered, and partly realised, by other men; and he had a certain timidity, as it were a fainéantise, in conception – a kind of unreadiness in initiative – which makes him more largely dependent upon his exemplars than any great poet has ever been."

Although this view has been described by Gregory Smith as "another heresy or half-heresy", W. A. Edwards in his scrupulous study, Plagiarism (1933) has no hesitation in asserting "that Henley's rather sweeping claims in his Introduction to the Centenary Edition can be accepted without difficulty," and ~~this view~~ it has also been adopted by John Speirs in The Scots Literary Tradition (1940).

It can further be argued that although Francis Boyle may seem to be imitating Burns in his "Address to his Auld Gelding", Boyle had had a gelding, the factual element in the verses makes that clear; just as James Orr had seen an Irish cottier die and be buried – this is a very interesting comparison, for Burns' "Cotter" poem, not to go so far as Speirs, who declares it "an obvious fake", is admittedly in Anglo-Scots, while Orr's poem employs a far richer and denser canon of Lallans. So it follows that the Ulster bards, using forms which they held in common with or had derived from Burns, employed these to express the realities of their own existence. Coming from the same stock as he, they had passed into a physical environment hardly at all dissimilar to that of their original region. The same climate, flora and fauna, the same pattern of rural industry and agriculture obtained in the areas of their settlement as in their former homeland.

Another factor not to be overlooked is that Burns was by no means the only Scottish poet whose works were known here. In the poetic contest of Samuel Thompson to which I have already referred, while Sylvander was Burns, Allan was Ramsay, Damon, Fergusson, and Edwin, James Beattie, and the verses put by Thompson into the mouths of each were skilfully devised in their individual manners. I have also mentioned that Montgomerie's work had currency here. We can add that Allan Ramsay's Gentle Shepherd had four Belfast printings from 1730–1770, as well as appearing in 1764 as the first Newry printed book; and that the poems of Sir David Lindsay were printed in Belfast in 1714, with Blind Harry's Wallace in 1728

From Boyle to Herbison there are references either by direct quotation or worked into the verse, to Ramsay, Fergusson, Bruce, Hogg, McNeill and Tannahill. Joseph Carson (1831) has an "Epistle to Mr. James Hogg," and David Herbison was emphatic in declaring the Ettrick

Shepherd his favourite above all others (1841). Of Herbison, it is worth recalling that the first poetry he ever heard was Ramsay's, that this so impressed him that he walked from Ballymena to Belfast to buy a copy of that poet's verse with his first wages. John Fullarton, a countryman but by no means a ~~vernacular~~ vernacular poet, has recorded that during his childhood, spent in a farmhouse near Ballynure, the only books to hand "were the works of Burns and Ramsay, Robin Hood's Garland, and a collection of songs and ballads". It is not, therefore, surprising that one may still, now and then, pick up in the second hand booksellers such anthologies as The Cabinet of the Scottish Muses (Edinburgh 1808) which contains Ramsay, Fergusson and McNeill, as well as Burns, or Ramsay's The Evergreen (Glasgow 1824), for these were probably part of the remarkable volume of Scots verse so surely read not only by the bards but by the rural population at large.

That there was something of a two-way traffic between the verse-writers of Scotland and North East Ulster seems probable, especially with the seasonal flow of agricultural workers; Robert Huddleston of Moneyrea, Co. Down certainly made the journey once at least. Burns in his remarks in an interleaved copy of Johnson's Musical Museum states of one item, "To a Rose Bud" that it "is the composition of a — Johnson, a joiner in the neighbourhood of Belfast".

III

The more detailed examination of one particular stanza form may, at this point, prove illuminating.

In "The Jolly Beggars" Burns writes:-

"I am a son of Mars, who have been in many wars,
And shew my cuts and scars wherever I come;
This here was for a wench, and that other in a trench,
When welcoming the French at the sound of the drum . . . ".

From the fact that it is written in English, and was not often otherwise used by Burns, and yet is frequent among the Ulster bards, this raises an interesting problem.

This form in the hands of James Campbell (1758 - 1818) ("Molly Hume") or of Francis Boyle (born circa 1730) ("The Comber Maid") already quoted, where the rimes are much rougher, even barely approximate, suggests the folk-quality of "The Lament of Hugh Reynolds", an Ulster street ballad:

"Young men and tender maidens, throughout this Irish nation,
Who hear my lamentation, I hope you'll pray for me;
The truth I will unfold, that my precious blood she sold,
In the grave I must lie cold; she's a dear maid to me."

We find it also in "The Land of Potatoes, O!" [Crofton Croker's Popular Songs of Ireland (1886)]

"Had I in the clear, but five hundred a-year,
'Tis myself would not fear, though not adding one farthing to 't.
Faith, if such was my lot, little Ireland's the spot
Where I'd build a snug cot, with a bit of a garden to 't."

And there are many variants among our street ballads, in which it seems that assonance replaces rime ~~entirely~~ to a large degree.

"If you seen young Katey dress'd out so gaily
For pleasure facing along the street
She appeared the sweetest and most modest creature
And was admired by all who did her meet
Her golden fair locks in ringlets waving
Down on her waist like fine ringlets shone
And in every feature the pride of nature
Was lovely Katey of Liskeehan" [Deen King Coll. B.M.A.G.]

"The farmer like a noble squire will come these servants for to hire
And ask them what they do require with board and entertainment
They feed you well with bread and tea if you comply to work sincere
Your dinner will have no delay of butter spuds and bacon"

New Song of the Hireing Fairs of Ulster [King Coll.]

These examples quoted, in which the assonantal pattern depends upon a traditionally Irish pronunciation, have far more a tang of this island than of Scotland or anywhere else. Writing of them, William Power, that excellent Scots critic, in Literature and Oatmeal (1935), says:- "It was the attempt of hedge-schoolmasters to render in English the rhythms and assonances of post-bardic Gaelic poetry .... that resulted in a new kind of Irish-English poetry, halting in its first essays, and cruelly parodied in "The Groves of Blarney", but handled later, with increasing success by poets like Mangan, Ferguson and Douglas Hyde, and giving the characteristic Irish note to the poems of A.E., Yeats, and other well-known writers" (P.11)

So it is surely not accidental that in the ~~verse~~ poem of James Campbell, "The Prescription", the following couplet should occur:

"Each gay rustic bard, it is hard he should be denied
Of his darling reward, that his pipes well with oil be supplied".

This which may begin by hinting at the street-ballad form, may be seen, on reflection, to be much closer to one of the early adaptations of Gaelic prosody into English, like Owen Mac Intire's elegy on his friend, Fiachra Mac Bradaigh (Anthologia Hibernica, December 1793)

"I remember Mac Brady, no lady or village queen
But wished on a May day or play day his choice to have been;
To a barrel of liquor none quicker to run was seen,
Nor at fairs had a stick or club thicker or brogues more clean"

So when Campbell pens his "Devotion", it seems to me to have been possible in no other part of these islands, and in no other language than English following very dextrously some half-remembered Irish tune, and sensitive to the intricacies of assonance.

"On a fine dewy morning, in the sweet month of May,
My duty performing, I went forth to pray:
'Twas at that prayer-meeting this maid did I see,
And, though Church was my notion, my devotion got she."

With lines like these we recognise at once that we are confronted with no mere Burns-imitation, no recent importation, but with something rooted in the Irish soil and carrying in its shape and rhythm a native quality.

In this connexion, it is of interest to remember that Campbell came (1758) originally from Cairncastle, the southern fringe of the then-Gaelic speaking Glens of Antrim, and that, though in all other respects, he seems typical of the Lallans speaking weaver-bards, in these lines he may be remembering the wavering beat and the assonances of the older tongue.

IV

What has, I believe, influenced those critics who assert the Burns dominance of our vernacular verse, has been largely the physical appearance of the words in the books. To those not extensively acquainted with the range of Scottish verse, almost any stanza in Lallans since the 17th century, looks very like the work of Robert Burns.

It has happened, however, that because of the Plantation in Ulster of large numbers of Lowlands Scots since the early 17th century, Lallans speech in varying degrees of density has been current in the North East of Ireland, more particularly in the counties of Antrim and Down. Samuel Ferguson, quoting a stanza from his "Epistle to Gordon, New Year, 1845," wrote in a letter to John O'Hagan (1884), "so sang I, my dear O'Hagan, in our native Doric, forty years ago"; and in another letter (1885) to the same correspondent, he used the phrase, "in our own dear North Country dialect". James McKowen, the Bard of Lambeg, in a note to Ralph Varian the anthologist (1869) wrote, "There is a kind of Scotch dialect spoken in these parts of County Antrim". Mrs Alexander's phrase, "the peculiar semi-Scottish dialect spoken in the north of Ireland," has been quoted earlier: and that other fine ballad writer, C. K. Pooler described (1900) his <u>Idylls of Ulster</u> as "written in a very variable dialect, once Scotch, now spoken in parts of the North of Ireland".

It must be emphasised that generally, this 'dialect' was more commonly current among the peasantry. Members of higher social categories recognised this. Anne Lutton, in a letter to a friend from Bushmills, Co. Antrim (1831), wrote "Do you admire the Scottish dialect? I am greatly amused with it, and here little else is spoken": she then transcribed a conversation with an old countrywoman with great fidelity. Thomas Stott, a prolific versifier, used dialect only for humorous purposes; only a couple of examples were included in his single volume.

James McHenry in his two novels <u>O'Halloran</u> (1824) and <u>The Hearts of Steel</u> (1825), both set in the Larne district, carefully differentiated his classes, the peasantry being given a strong and accurate dialect, while 'the gentry' spoke an absurdly inflated literary English. It is true that Samuel Burdy in his <u>Life of Philip Skelton</u> (1792) used dialect words here and there in an otherwise standard prose, but throughout the century, novelists and prose writers treated dialect most often as broad comic relief. And, although, unfortunately, no Ulster prose writer emerged to work in the gentler vein of John Galt's <u>Annals of the Parish</u> which

contains scarcely a word not current still in the County Down, in the present century, W. R. McDermott's Foughilotra (c. 1906) was a strenuous attempt to use accurate dialect for serious purposes.

Some of the bards themselves were conscious of the social difference implied in the use of dialect. James Orr, in his "Address to Noah Dalway" (1817), has the couplet:

"My rude Scotch rhymes the tasteful justly slight,
The Scotch-tongued rustics scorn each nobler flight;"

and in his "Irish Cottier's Death and Burial" (1817), he describes how, when the minister comes in, the cottier's family

" try
To quate braid Scotch, a task that foils their art."

Other bards adopt a more confident attitude. Hugh Porter in Poetical Attempts (1813), of his verse remarks:

" in the style appears
The accent o' my early years
Which is not Scotch nor English either,
But parts o' baith mixt up thegither:
Yet is the sort my neighbours use,
Who think shoon prettier far than shoes"

Thomas Beggs, in the preface to The Second Part of the Minstrel's Offering (1836) writes: "Should the reader of the following effusions suppose, that in some parts the Author has imitated the Scottish dialect, — he would wish to correct the idea, by alledging that he has written in his own style — in the language of his native glen — not constrained, but spontaneous as the lispings of our first speech"

Robert Huddleston goes even further in his preface to Poems and Songs (1844) "In Ulster-Irish (which some in their unmeaning eccentricity may term Scotch; to tear even the credit of language from its mother home) I sing my songs." He then argues that as Ireland was formerly known as Scotia, and emigrants from here first gave Scotland her people and her name, we have first claim to the language! He is on firmer ground, emotionally if not syntactically, when he describes himself as "one more to the numerical number of road-side ditty singers, rhyming in the broad dialect of his country," and, a little later, as one who uses "the language which nature brought him to his door, and handed to him at the first dawn of prattle, and bade him wear through life".

So, as the bards were using their own language, a right we cannot deny them, there follows the consequent privilege to claim the full traditions of verse in that language, and in the strongest element in that, the Scottish, the Lallans.

In summary it may be asserted then, that Robert Burns, writing in a speech the same as, or closely kin to their own, taught them to do better what they should have done anyhow, that the Ulster bards were no mere derivatives but existed in their own right, within a sub-region of the same folk-culture

The study of the Ulster dialect or dialects has only recently risen above the very general or the narrowly-localised word-

– collecting stage, of which P. W. Joyce's English as we Speak It in Ireland (London 1910) and William Lutton's Montiaghisms (Belfast 1924) may be taken as examples. When the surveys of such students as G. B. Adams with his Introduction to the Study of Ulster Dialects; Proc. R. I. A (1948) are extended and deepened the verses of the vernacular bards will be found to provide guidance on historical pronunciation – as well as vocabulary; but even this service must not be allowed to exhaust their value for us.

References:— in addition to those mentioned in the text;

Anderson, John. Catalogue of Early Belfast Printed Books [1694 – 1830] with supplements. (1886 – 1890)

Henderson, T. F. Scottish Vernacular Literature. 3rd revised edition (1910)

Smith, G. Gregory. Scottish Literature (1919)

Hogg. J. and Motherwell, W. The Works of Robert Burns (1852) Vol. V.

Ferguson, Lady. Sir Samuel Ferguson in the Ireland of his day (1896)

Lutton, Anne. Memorials of a Consecrated Life. (1883)

I

Not all the rural poets wrote in the vernacular, and most of those who did were not consistently within the mode. Some wrote bilingually, like Orr and Thomson. Others used vernacular of varying degrees of density, shading off at times to slight use of an occasional dialect word; Herbison is an example of this. One or two wrote largely in the belief that they were using standard English, in no more than a lyric or two drawing upon dialect; of this kind Duffy of Dungannon and Bernard Short of Armagh can be mentioned.

It is more convenient, therefore, to consider the rural writers on the basis of their social categories or on a rough topographical grouping, rather than to attempt a linguistic analysis. It will be found that, as the Linen Industry formed the greatest single common factor in the lives of these, in this chapter will be assembled, under the heading of "The Rhyming Weavers," enough explanatory material to provide adequate background for a discussion of the main groups.

—

Although, as I have stated, verse writers were widely dispersed over the province, the majority will tend to be found most readily in Scots-planted areas: we need scarcely look for them outside Antrim or Down; there are a few instances in the north Armagh - east Tyrone area but these remain separate individuals. The first cluster, in south-east Antrim, stretched in a gently-curved arc from Ballycarry by way of Ballynure, Ballyclare, Templepatrick; the second much more evenly distributed over Co. Down, Ballywalter, Conlig, Comber, Banbridge: the third, the mid-Antrim, was centred on Ballymena.

According to the census returns of 1841, Antrim, Down and Londonderry headed the table of literacy for the thirty-two counties of Ireland; Armagh ranked tenth, followed by Tyrone and Fermanagh, with Cavan sixteenth, Monaghan seventeenth, and Donegal twenty fifth. (1) Now, if one plots the approximate areas of the rural bards on the maps giving the distribution of literacy, it can be seen that these correspond clearly with many of those points which shew the highest figures. The south-east Antrim area will have a figure of 83% compared to 76.3% for the whole county; the Down districts taken together 80% against 72% for the county; the mid-Antrim figure will be 78% against 76.3%.

This means that these areas enjoyed a higher degree of general educational attainment than most other districts before the adoption of national education on a broad scale. But having pointed out this coincidence, we must be careful not to attempt any complicated deductions therefrom; for the standards recorded were for proficiency in the English Tongue; and in the black tracts on the maps, West Donegal, Mayo and Kerry, where the figure for 'illiteracy' was over 70%, the 'illiterate' peasantry must have included hundreds of traditional story-tellers and poets, each with his scores of lengthy narratives or bardic verses carried orally in the older tongue; and it goes against the grain to have the inheritors and custodians of such a tradition labelled with a term implying deficiency of culture.

—

The rural bards did not form groups or schools in any sense. While many individual poets were known to each other, they

(1) The Parliamentary Gazetteer of Ireland (1846) Vol I. p. cxxv and map.

held nothing resembling the bardic courts of the Munster, or even of the Louth - Armagh Gaelic poets, where, in the last instance, "Patrick MacAlindon is said to have kept a school of poetry, where as many as eighteen literary men came together for discussions" (2). The rural bards were local in a most emphatic way, and recognised as such. The Bard of Dunclug, The Bard of Ballycarry, The Bard of Dunover, The Bard of Lambeg, The Bard of Moneyslan, The Bard of Moneyrea, one finds these titles in use by their contemporaries, and proudly accepted by the poets themselves. This is not to suggest that some of them had not more extensive renown. There was indeed a sense of craft-brotherhood among them, and many mutual references or exchanges of rimed compliments occur between poets as far apart as Ballymena, in mid-Antrim and Moneyrea in north Down.

The important fact is that each was accepted by his community as poet. One can realise that this implies a reciprocal effect. The bard derived his subjects from the life of his 'country' - the word is still in use in this very restricted sense; a man from the Middle Glens meeting a Ballymena tractor mechanic at a fair in Waterfoot, will ask him how things are "in his country", a mere fifteen or twenty miles away - and the community seemed to require of him the treatment of subjects of general interest within the group-area. So the rural bard was no isolated poet driven by frustration into obscure or esoteric expression. He might feel neglected by the literary critics when he became dissatisfied with purely local response; but that surely is an occupational ailment common to all poets.

Rural life was balanced on Agriculture and the Linen Industry, but as the latter was a family occupation, and as weavers, in the earlier phases, usually farmed a plot of ground in addition, or, alternatively, farmers had a loom at home to work in the winter when field labour was impossible, the line of demarcation between farmer and weaver was very tenuous, so long as the domestic basis of the industry was maintained.

Although there were schools of a sort, attendance was not compulsory, so the country children usually had brief 'school lives', or none at all, depending upon economic circumstance or the whim of parents. James Orr was not permitted to attend school on account of his physique, his father undertaking his education himself.

Peter Burns of Kilwarlin, Co. Down, summarises his education:

"As I of learning scarce know aught,
Nor never have been grammar taught."

And even for those who attended school, the level of attainment was not impressive:

"First then I nae thing write by rule,
For o' the knowledge taught at school,
Mine was a very scanty share,
I only learn'd the letters there."
(Hugh Porter)

Edward Sloan of Conlig, called himself "almost uneducated". David Herbison attended for two years only, the smoke from the turf fire seriously affecting his weak eyes. Alexander MacKenzie "had not the advantage of a regular education". Francis Davis, like Herbison, had only two years' schooling; John McKinley had 'six months'.

Usually, however, in adult years the weaver became a well-read man, the poets, naturally enough especially in English and Scots verse. There is hardly a poet of repute from Pope to Cowper, who does not find mention in their books, while, as we

(2) The Hidden Ireland: Daniel Corkery (1925) p. 147
see also A First Book of Irish Literature: Aodh de Blacam (N.D) p. 139
and A Text Book of Irish Literature: Eleanor Hull (1908) Part II p. 218

have already seen, Ramsay, Fergusson, Burns and Hogg were extremely popular. For the Scots they had probably wide access to single volumes; for the English, it is likely that such an anthology as "Elegant Extracts in Poetry"(3) was their chief source. Hugh Porter (1813) in an epistle to his patron, Rev. Thomas Tighe, asks permission to borrow this very book.

"Amang the rest that me attracts
There's ane of which I hear great cracks,
An' that's the "Elegant Extracts,"
So, if ye hae it,
Your humble Rhymer, Sir, expects,
Or hopes ye'll gie it.

I'll read as much o't as I can,
An' what I canna read - maun stan',
I'll keep it clean wi' carefu' han';
Nor tear nor burn it,
An' ony time that you deman',
I will return it"

Here and there, also, emerges evidence of acquaintance with the work of Sterne, Smollett, and, most frequently, of Thomas Paine.

This general reading habit, which has now so seriously declined in our rural districts, may have been due to continuation of the custom of their Lowlands forbears, or to the sedentary nature of the weaver's craft, a repetitive job, without the distractions of heavy machinery, or of fellow employees close at hand; or, for the non-weaver, ~~like Huddleston~~, the winter season provided leisure for books, as Huddleston wrote in an "Epistle to John Pettigrew" (1846)

"My denty Jone, while winter rough,
Wi' frost and sna' keeps back the plugh,
And barn-men's jobs are few enugh
The lang storm dreadin';
While auld guid wife ne'er tak's the huff,
Tae see you readin';"

(N. Par.) It was surely this practice which resulted in these areas coming out on top in the Census educational survey. But a highly significant factor was the existence of rural Reading Societies or Book Clubs which were a feature of the country life of those days. The members of these, out of their small subscriptions, maintained lending libraries, and met regularly for discussion and social intercourse.

The names of some we know from the subscription lists for they were often generous supporters of the rural poets, even from some distance. It is surely not by mere chance that the area of the South-east Antrim bards was also studded with a chain of clubs, Magheramorne, Doagh 1st and 2nd, Ballynure, Carnmoney and the Four Towns. But of their organisation we know very little.

The last-mentioned, the Four Towns Club, drawing its

(3) compiled by Rev. Vicesimus Knox. See essay by Edmund Blunden in <u>Essays on the Eighteenth Century Presented to David Nicol Smith</u> (1945) p. 225 [My edition of Extracts is dated 1816, and was picked up locally]

members from the four townlands of Mallusk, Craigarogan, Kilgreel, and Ballynabarnis in South Antrim, was the subject of a paper by Francis Joseph Bigger (4). This society grew out of the amalgamation in 1802 of the Lowtown Club (founded 1790) and the Roughfort Club (founded 1796). The entrance fee was five shillings and the subscription one shilling per quarter. On an average forty members attended, and the library consisted of about 400 volumes. Of its members several are known too in other connexions, Samuel Thomson, Samuel Walker and Thomas Beggs as poets, James Hope for his political activities, and Luke Mullan, Hope's brother-in-law, uncle of the editor of The Rushlight, who, like Thomson had visited Robert Burns.

The smaller towns, often, had clubs of the same kind. Banbridge Reading Society was founded in 1795, and had a subscription of one shilling a month. Of this a catalogue was published in 1838, which contained 1,586 books and a large collection of pamphlets. In its early years members numbered 120; in 1837 these fell to 88, and in 1846 the society ceased to exist (5).

The subscription of this society seems to have been raised to a guinea a year, which proved too high for one rural poet, Joseph Carson of Kilpike, for in his Poems (1831) he includes an "Address to the Committee of the Banbridge Reading Society" remarking ~~that~~ his ill-fortune in not being able to afford membership. This was remedied, however, as we learn from another set of his verses, dated 12th February 1827, in the same volume, "An Epistle of Thanks to the Committee of the Banbridge Reading Society for their Generous Indulgence to the Author in voting him The Privilege of Using The Books of the Society Gratis". In this occurs the couplet:

> "To thank ye for this precious favour,
> Confer'd on me, a rhyming weaver."

James Orr of Ballycarry in the Posthumous Works (1817) has a poem to a reading society, naming among the collection of books, Gibbon, Hume, Johnson, lives of Washington and Captain Cooke, and referring to one of its activities, the formal debate.

> "But hark! the question giv'n, we now commence
> The kind debate, and he whose lucky hit
> To silence awes some son of eloquence
> Is proud as Fox exulting over Pitt.
>
> How fond of order, he who fills the chair!
> How courteous and correct each humbler hind!
> Not one will interrupt, insult, or swear —
> True to the rules that all at entrance sign'd."

John Fullarton of Ballynure records that his father's membership of the local reading society brought many useful books to his attention (6).

This was part of a very broad movement. The Linen Hall ~~L~~ Library had its origins in the same period, and on much the same lines, being founded in 1788, with a monthly subscription of one shilling (7). But this institution rapidly outpaced its rural counterparts, being based in an expanding and not a declining community; and not, like them, vulnerable

(4) Ulster Journal of Archaeology Vol 8 (1902) p. 119
(5) History of Banbridge: Richard Linn (1935) p. 7
(6) "Recollections" in O'More (1867)
(7) History of the Linen Hall Library: John Anderson (1888)

to the economic disasters of the Forties, and the Famine years which had such a serious effect upon the pattern of rural life in Ireland, has survived into our own day, as an important constituent of the cultural resources of the city; but it never numbered among its members, at any one time, three better poets than those of the Four Towns Club.

Many of these societies, more particularly those in the weaving areas, were reputed to have been centres of sedition and radical thinking, and were believed to have contributed a great deal to the militancy which led to the 98 Rebellion; consequently quite a number are known to have been wrecked and dispersed by the loyalist Yeomanry. Those that were not, generally seem to have succumbed to the hardships of the Forties already mentioned, or to have dragged on and dwindled away as the members grew old and died off, and a generation arose, which, drilled in the compulsorily-attended national schools, had all cultural and literary proclivities whipped out of them by regimented teachers, an unimaginative inspection system and a rigid curriculum which aimed at little more than facility in mental arithmetic.

The Clubs were also places for recreation in story and ballad as well as the more strenuous disciplines of debate and discussion. Parallel with them, Freemasonry played an important part in the lives of the rural male population. Many of the bards were Freemasons; Orr, master of a lodge, MacKenzie, Sloan, Peter Burns, David Herbison; and, again like the reading societies, the lodges figured in the subscription lists for local volumes of verse. Masonic songs and craft allusions occur in the verses of all the poets mentioned — MacKenzie even published one little book entitled <u>The Masonic Chaplet</u> (1832), for which the Ballycarry Lodge "engaged a certain number of copies to defray the expense of printing".

So, when we think of the rural bard's integration with his community, it is to be remembered that the rural community itself was then altogether more <u>organic</u> and self-contained: not ironed flat by standardisation of education, of the instruments of opinion, not drained by railways, or riddled by bus routes. The handloom in the house, the reading society at the cross-roads, and the printer in the market town were links in a then unriven chain.

II

More than the writers in any other class, the weaver-farmers drew heavily upon his practical experience, bringing into his verse allusions to his craft and its trials, the economy of his household, of his personal routine, and the general conditions of the industry of which he was part.

For this class-consciousness we must be grateful, since it provides us with the means of re-presenting a bold picture of the period in livelier colours than those of the social historian's prose, yet more authoritative than the historical novelist's imaginings.

The domestic scene has many recorders. Joseph Carson sets it for us:

"My Bess the house trims up fu'-tidy,
An' wi' her wheel sits down beside me,
While I maun make the shuttle play,
To crack an' wile the time away"

The spinning wife is a frequently recurring figure, but examples involving other members of the family are not rare. One instance I quote from James Orr's "Penitent" (1804)

" His thrifty wife and wise wee lasses span,
While warps and queels employed another bairn."

Family, indeed, was never far from the married weaver's thought and care.

"To haud them weel in brose and claes,
I cheerfu' ply the toilsome slays;
Frae morn till night the shuttle plays,
For that's the doom
Blind Fate ordained me a' my days, —
The damask loom." (Carson)

Although proud of his skill, the bard was also often sharply conscious that his calling fixed him in an inferior social position.

"For manners ye may plainly see
I learned upon the treadle;
An' for my state, my stars an' me
Hae squabbled frae the cradle "
(Hugh Porter)

The difficulties of the craft evoked many comments:

" — wabsters on the treadle,
— wi' crabbit yarn
Coming bad speed
(Duffy: Epistle to a neighbour)

Or Herbison "To a Mouse that cut out a portion of the author's web":

"Your evil tricks you neer gave o'er,
Until my web was cut and tore,
Which made my wife and weans deplore —
To see it hing,
Cut up as wab was ne'er before —
Vile useless thing!"

Or Robert Donnolly of Portadown (1852)

"To curse the flax I think no harm,
Also the mill that spun the yarn;
And if I could the worker learn,
God help him."

This, of course, refers to a rather later technical phase, when the yarn was not spun by the weaver's womenfolk, but provided by "the draper", or agent. In the same poem "To a Linen Manufacturer" Donnolly, still complaining of the poor quality of the yarn, remarks

"I dress'd it with good stirabout
To make it strong"

— The dressing of the threads was usually a flour paste, which, when dry, stiffened them, so that they kept in position more efficiently — so bad, indeed, was it that —

"With croppins, slub and wasted weft,
You'd fill a bag with what is left;
Nor did I think it any theft -
The whole to burn."

No theft - that is although the yarn was not his own property.

"As for the pay - I will not speak,
I earned just one bob per week;
'Twould scarcely buy a herring or leek
For the poor weaver."

In some districts the weavers made muslin, not linen. Francis Davis learned that trade near Hillsborough, Co. Down. Peter Burns of the same county was also a muslin weaver. In "An Epistle by way of reproof. To a Muslin Manufacturer, who had recently made a stoppage on the author's work", this is, a fine or deduction from the payment for the work executed, Burns fingers over a sequence of varieties and textures.

"Policates blue, varonas, too,
Mock dy'd for hawker Nancy;
Stout changing plaids, with mounting beads,
And spotting bells for fancy;
With gauzes light, and plushes bright,
Mull, stiffen'd book, and veining;
With shirtings fine, choice window-blinds
And corded stripes for staining
On any day!"

This is, of course, in "The Holy Fair" stanza. He continues

"My parcel sent, by carman Grant,
You've settled it by fining .."

But he will not accept the penalty or the affront.

"My rustic muse is craving
The recent fine, else I'll decline
The present stroke I'm weaving
This very day."

He then recalls some of the difficulties he had to face on this particular job, and once again we return to the matter of "dressing".

"The drifting snow, not long ago
My cabin seem'd to shiver;
'Mid frosty squalls, my crazy walls
Like aspen leaves did quiver;
Equal to glass in solid mass,
My dressing - paste was frozen;
I burn'd the straw, the 'bove to thaw
For bedding had been chosen
Last new year's Day."

He concludes, "From henceforth, friend, don't use your pen
On future slight offences;
If cloth prove light, return it straight
And I'll remit expences — "

This business of disposing of the 'wab' to the 'draper' was always fraught with trouble. The drapers offered low prices, or sought to reduce payment for defects in the material, real or fancied; and on several occasions the weavers combined in refusing to offer their webs for sale.

Edward Sloan of Conlig recounts one incident vividly.

"My wee bit o labour bein' thrown on the counter,
Wi" butterfly's een tae examine't he goes;
He hemm'd and he ha'd, and he swore it was shameless,
Syne oot wi' his snoot-clout and dighted his nose.
He swore that the warp would been better by double –
For their penny collars 'twas nae use ava;
Though the price o' my labour was just a half-guinea,
He would gie me a shilling, and let me awa'."

However, the weaver called in two old fellows of his craft to act as referees; their expertise baffled the draper, and the weaver gained the day.

It is interesting to compare this account of such a transaction with a jingle by Thomas Stott, who, we must remember, was a wealthy merchant and employer. He tells of "The Brown Linen Buyers" – buyers of unbleached linen, on their rounds.

"To the markets and fairs still we merrily ride,
In sunshine, through hail, rain and snow;
And we buy up the linens as fast as untied,
And the sellers their webs to us show.

No credit we ask: but the rhino down lay
For each piece when to pay we begin;
And we chat and we joke with the weavers so gay,
In our snug little room at the Inn"

The routine is clear: the webs were exposed for sale in The Linen Hall or market; if purchase was agreed upon, the weaver received a docket for his web. In the evening, or, at anyrate, later in the day, the weavers called at the Inn and the buyer paid out ~~[illegible]~~ what was due to each. But one notices that it is not the weavers who call themselves 'gay'; for throughout our period their status was steadily declining.

Years	Average Weekly Wages (8)
1799 – 1806	£1 – 18 – 4
1806 – 1813	1 – 11 – 8
1813 – 1820	1 – 1 – 8
1820 – 1827	12 – 6
1827 – 1834	6 – 8
1834 – 1838	6 – 3

Although bad enough, the parallel fall in prices modified this decline in real wages, which dropped by 1838 to one third of the 1806 figure.

So Peter Burns, whose volume was published in 1835, and who claimed to be the same age as the century, could write of one of the

(8) Parliamentary Gazetteer Vol I. p. cxli.

worst slumps.

"Then worst of all, the weaving trade
I had to yield and lift the spade,
As only half my time I'd staid
Where I was bound;
The cause of which, work was ill-paid,
The nation round."

But it was not all gloom; James Orr, though we must remember he died in 1816, before the position had worsened catastrophically, as a free-footing bachelor, had no compunction in saluting a fiddler-crony.

"I'm glad, my frien', ye mak' a shift
To keep the strings in proper tift;
Ere this new moon forsake the lift
We'll hae some sport,
Tho' my auld treadles sud move swift
At midnight for't."

So widespread in the community was the influence of the Textile Industry that it entered into almost every cranny of rural life. There were many weavers, and many whose trades depended upon them. Reed-makers for instance, in this trade John Fullarton of Ballynure was employed till 1843, when the introductions of powerlooms 'nearly annihilated' it in his district. Samuel Corry of Ballyclare, later publisher of Beggs and Campbell, and lifelong friend of Herbison, was a reedmaker, too. Robert Anderson (1770-1833), the Cumberland Bard, not the Edinburgh doctor, whose "Lucy Gray" gave at least a title for a poem to Wordsworth (9) was a calico-print designer in Co. Antrim from 1808-1818 (10).

William Bleakley of Ballinaskeagh, Co. Down, in the "Author's Account of himself" (1840), declares;

"I could begin and mak' a loom,
And fit her for the shuttle soon;
And hing in her a pair o' slays
That you could handle wi' some ease;
And when the same that I would do,
I could begin and use her too;
Frae a coarse ten to twice the same,
I could in cloth put frae the chain;
Mak' temples, shuttles, swifts and wheel
Or tips as hard as any steel ... "

But then Bleakley was, on his own admission, the super-craftsman.

Yet even those not involved in any aspect of the industry show how the strong stench of the dubbed lint pervaded the countryside.

Francis Boyle of Granshaw, Comber, in his "Wife o' Clinkin Town" (1811) is ostensibly exposing the trouble a clesk or tale-bearer, can provoke: but one cannot help feeling that the old bard thoroughly enjoyed the robust humour of the narrative.

(9) The Poet Wordsworth: Helen Darbishire (1950) p. 33
(10) Ulster Journal of Archaeology vol V. p. 100

"I tauld how Sawney payt the wife,
How limpin' Meg was got wi' bairn,
How Jock an' Elspa livt in strife,
An' Sarah sauld ill-countit yarn.
That Matthew's sowens were thin an' sour,
An' Walter's Willie skims the kirn,
How Junkin's daughter turnt a whore,
An' Will the wabster staw the pirn . . .
How Junkin's daughter fought a roun'
Wi' Mungo's mais an' handle't weel,
Till limmer-face ance knockt her down
Wi' the head-stanart o' her wheel"

Again, when he addresses a 'brother bard', John McKarg of Gilnahirk, the loom provides the symbol for life's vexations.

"On twisty yarn, wi' eeks sae dry,
Your time does waste, your patience try,
Owre mony knots ye hae to tie,
Cast owre your thumb.
'Tis time to throw your shuttle by,
An' quate your loom."

When Samuel Thomson, the schoolmaster of Lyle Hill, requires a visual equivalent for the hedgehog in his poem of that name (1799), it is to the linen processes that he turns.

"Thou looks (Lord save's) arrayed in spikes
A creepin' heckle."

for he knows instinctively that this equation will prove valid for a community in which the heckle is a familiar object and heckling and skutching are common techniques.

When Orr sums up the communal activities to which tea-drinking is an appropriate adjunct, he includes as his first, two textiles processes (1804).

"At breakin', clovin', kirn an' quiltin',
'Tis aye the base that bliss is built on."

Indeed, so general is the acceptance of such allusions, it seems but the most obvious sense, rather than thread-bare metaphor, to talk of the warp and weft of that society.

As the weaver's economic position deteriorated, there seems an increasing concern with the escape offered by alcohol.

"I've oft laid down my shuttle
To meet my friends and bottle,
And like great Aristotle,
I have made my brains to reel."

as James Campbell declares in his "Last Lay to the Poets" (1820). From Campbell, too, we get his "Expostulation to Whiskey", "The Gay Topers" (1820), and these are parallelled by many drinking songs or similar exercises from many poets in this category.

The progress of mechanisation spelt disaster to the handicraft; bit by bit, as wages fell, and as the new mills and factories offered alternative employment, the weavers drifted away to the towns, and

the new villages growing up round the tall chimneys and the red-brick blocks.

Thomas Beggs of Ballyclare, like his friend, James McKowen of Lambeg, engaged in bleaching, was keenly aware of the decline.

"And since long other days were we smote with this curse,
That if change ever came, it was change for the worse"

The same poet in his "Auld Wife's Address to her Spinning Wheel" (1867) finds a symbolical figure for the mood of the time.

"An' when I was rade an' hale an' young,
My thread cam' level, an' fine as a hair,
An' the kitten purr'd, an' the cricket sung,
An' the care o' my heart was a lightsome care.
Now men hae erected a new ingine;
An' left but little for us to earn,
An' little for me but to pinch an' pine;
I wish I had died when I was a bairn, —
For my guid auld man he has breathed his last,
An' I on the cauldrife world am cast."

This has its companion piece in Herbison's "Auld Wife's Lament for her Teapot ("Midnight Musings 1848.)

"... The days are past when folk like me
Could earn their bread,
My auld wheel now sits silently
Aboon the bed.

And well may Erin weep and wail
The day the wheels began to fail;
Our tradesmen now can scarce get kail
Betimes to eat,
In shipfuls they are doomed to sail
In quest of meat.

For that machine that spins the yarn,
Left us unfit our bread to earn,
O Erin! will you ne'er turn stern
Against your foe
When every auld wife can discern
Your overthrow"

Many of the best weaver bards died before the change-over had become fully effective; Beggs who had watched part of the trend died in 1847; pcldra Herbison living till 1885, survived right out of the period, like × Ossian after the Fenians; and it is in his work that we find the fullest realisation of the harsh jolting transition. In 1853 he looked back at his "Ain Native Town." McKowen a c benson

"Until we ceased selling our claith in the hall
Nae want was amang us our peace to enthral.

. . . . . .

'Twas heartsome to see on a Saturday morn,
Before the red clouds o' their tassels were shorn,
Our blithe bonnie lasses come into the town,
A' tidy and braw in their hame-woven gown.

What courting and talking in love we enjoyed
When a' at the wheel and the reel were employed,
Our hearthstanes were cozie, the sang was sang roun',
When I was a boy in my ain native town.

O had I the power the past to restore
The reel wad still crack and the spinning wheel snore,
Millyarn wad sink down as it never had been,
Trade flourish as fair as it ever was seen.

. . . . .

A web wi' a steam loom should never appear,
Our country to steep in affliction and fear;
Peace, pleasure and plenty, and happy hearts roun';
And times wad revive in my ain native town."

But the changes were not all due to the industrialisation of work and the proletarianising of the worker: the failure of the potato-crops in 1845, 1846 and 1847, though not so devastating in its effects in northeast Ulster, laid bare the insecurity of the rural economy, with its pernicious forms of land-tenure and its artificially-created famine, when thousands died of starvation and millions of pounds' worth of grain was exported. So the emigrant ships were crammed, the population of Belfast grew from 19,000 in 1803 to 100,000 in 1851(11), and all over the countryside homesteads became wallsteads.

(11) The Lagan Valley 1800-50: E. R. R. Green (1949) p. 29.

The Bards of South East Antrim

The persistence of the vernacular tradition within this narrow area has several interesting features. It was, compared to other districts the country of the book clubs. In County Down the bards appear quite independent of each other. Porter never refers to Boyle; Peters Burns and Huddleston offer no evidence of contact; Sloan and Bleakley do not seem to have heard of each other. But in southeast Antrim, James Campbell knew James Orr who knew Thomson; Beggs was a kinsman of Orr, and a member of the Four Towns Club of which Thomson and Walker were also members. But ~~all th~~ although there was this degree of coherence, they did not form a group with a conscious literary programme; they had scarcely even a unified attitude to politics; the weavers were radicals, the schoolmaster a conservative.

Campbell (1758-1818) is perhaps our ~~tru~~ purest example of the folk-poet; while one might identify his political verse readily enough, but many of his lyrics are as anonymous as any good sheet ballad – there is style in them, but it is an impersonal style. He composed his verses at the loom, to which he kept writing materials attached, and circulated the manuscripts at once among his cronies. He never could be persuaded to prepare a volume for the press. When Orr failed to gain admission into the ranks of the Broadisland Company, Campbell made the song of "The Rejected Yeoman". As a United man himself, he had been arrested and his papers impounded by the authorities. He was released shortly afterwards, but the papers were never returned. The verses came to him and then were gone, and there was no more to be said. When The Posthumous Works (1820) was being prepared, to benefit his widow and orphans, the editors had not only to gather in the scattered manuscripts, but had to dredge the memories of his friends. Campbell's work was popular – I have a fragment of this book which has every appearance of having been read to bits – Forty years after, Corry was to find sufficient demand for a new collection (1870). Not many of the rural bards achieved two volumes and none, so far as I can trace, achieved two posthumous volumes.

There is a harshness and a bitterness in Campbell's writing beyond any of his fellows. His biographer, Fullarton, remarks "A species of hostility to the upper ranks is at all times manifested in his pieces. He considered that he owed no gratitude to the wealthy men of the world", (1) In accordance with this attitude, we find the "Inscription for the Tomb-Stone of Thomas Paine, author of 'The Rights of Man'." So, also, his "Adieu to Tithe" when he was struck off the roll as too poor to contribute.

> "From the fruits of your fields ne'er replenish their bowls,
> Till you see how their labour has nourished your souls"
>
> . . . . .
>
> Being low, poor and needy, 'tis no shame to me;
> The complaint is inherent in my pedigree."

And in "Campbell's Repulse"

> "Who make the rich? The answer's sure –
> It must be the industrious poor".

(1) Memoir in Poems and Songs 1870

This militancy appears in surprising places, as "The Epicure's Address to Bacon"

"I like swine's grease, some think it odd,
I scarce prefer the grace of God"

Campbell did not use a dense Lallans: apart from "The Epicure" which is in "Standard Habbie", the Scots element in him is the merest tincture, and far more characteristic of him are the songs frequently in the form discussed in Chapter XII. But in some of these, the Irish conventions of classical allusion, Orpheus, the Muses, lyres, Phoebus, Morpheus, muffle the personal note, which, for me, occurs in his simple rhythmic statements when the feeling has rendered decoration or artifice unnecessary; as in "Willie Wark's Song", when the poet assesses the benefits of the Rebellion in which he had been implicated.

"In Ninety Eight we arm'd again
To right some things that we thought wrang;
We gat sae little for our pain
It's no' worth mindin' in a sang."

Samuel Thomson (1766-1816), schoolmaster of Carngranny, near Lyle Hill, had something of a reputation in his day, and nearly thirty years after his death, Robert Huddleston who had never met him, and lived in another county, devoted an elegy of over 200 lines to a detailed evocation of his poems.

Thomson was probably the best read of a well read fraternity. He was, not unbecomingly, a little proud of his knowledge ~~(1799)~~

"O had I Denham's classic skill,
Or Dyer's soft descriptive quill,
The beauties of the verdant Lyle
Should echo round my native Isle"

The poem from which these lines are taken "Lyle's Hill. A Rhapsody" (1799) is clearly derived from Denham's "Cooper's Hill", and Dyer's "Grongar Hill", though neither is in this verse-form.

His "Verses to Mrs. Thomson" (1806) ~~is~~ shew a similar literary flourish.

"Shenstonian fire thy bosom warm'd
With all his Leasowes' sketching glow -
And to see this curious grotto form'd
His genius hover'd down below"

He has much traffic with Phoebe, Daphnis, Sylvander, which is rather different from Campbell's classical gods. It is in the verses which are in the Scots rather than the English literary traditions that he shews at his best, and that too, when the experience comes from his senses and not from books.

"Here blithe beneath thy auld grey branches
Where sparrows chirp, and spotted finches
Prepare for ~~the~~ their companion wenches
The nest well feathered;
I bind my wild flowers up in bunches
That I hae gather'd."

("My Boor Tree" 1806)

"Twas on a snell October mornin',
When contra fok had a' their corn in,
An' northern hills begin to shaw
Their heathy sammits white wi' snaw"

("Davie and Sawnie" 1799)

"The lapwing wallops o'er the bogs;
In every ditch hoarse croak the frogs;
And linnets hair among the scroggs"

"Behold the ever-timrous hare,
already quits her furzy shade,
and o'er the field, with watchful care,
Unseen to nip the sprouting blade.

Adown the whin-beskirted way,
There thoughtless plods the schoolboy young,
At-times in haste-anon he'll stay,
And thinks he hears the cuckoo's song"

("The Year in 12 Fits" 1799)

But Thomson was no mild ornithologist. "Lilting to Tobacco" (1799) has a more robust vigour.

"An' when thou'rt out, O potent weed!
Our house gaes fairly wrang indeed,
Cogs, pots an' pans fa' arse o'erhead
An' lie unwashen,
An' aften kicks an' licks succeed
A rash expression."

His "Answer to Paine's Age of Reason" shews a remarkable violence, and a surprising coarseness; but is almost redeemed by its quality of wit.

"Poor wasp of Communition, the football of fate,
A fugitive driven from state unto state" (1799)

Only in his fine "Hedgehog" (1799), however, is Thomson really thick in his Lallans, and it is worth remarking that this is his most consistent single poem. The first stanza runs —

"Thou grimmest far o' grusome tykes
Grubbin' thy food by thorny dykes
Gude faith, thou disna want for pikes
Baith sharp an' rankle;
Thou looks (Lord save's) arrayed in spikes,
A creepin' heckle."

In English too, Thomson could turn a neat quatrain which would not disgrace many a better poet.

"Like me, thou lov'st to sing obscure
The weaving fields and meads among;
And few are willing to endure,
Much less admire our simple song."

("To A Rail", 1799)

His blank verse is bleak enough. Wisely he did not use this form more than twice; once for his visit to Burns; again, for a statement of his political views (1799).

"It makes me lunatick almost to hear
Some clownish blockheads, Frenchified forsooth,
lisp out, affected, their exotic terms
of Citizen and Section - nonsense all.
Would individuals but reform themselves
And represent them, each the virtuous man,
Reform in Parliaments would come of will" ~~179~~

When James Orr of Ballycarry (1770 - 1816) came back from America whither he had fled after the Rebellion, when the rebels had been amnestied, he sent a verse epistle to his friend, Samuel Thomson, who had sympathised with the other side, asking for a resumption of their former cordiality.

"For me wi' a' that's come an' past,
I'm at my ain fireside at last
Fu' blythe tho' fesht awee - "

So Thomson subscribed to Orr's book in 1804, and Orr reciprocated for Thomson's volume in 1806.

James Orr was perhaps the best known of our rural poets, and he held his place in anthologies until this century, but unfortunately not for his vernacular verses but for his essays in standard English. Once again, personification and poetic diction and the hackneyed rhythms in Orr's English verses offer the reader little encouragement. Once or twice when he dares to be simple he can be effective, as in the lines to his father.

"He strove to form my taste and heart,
My hand he trained without a rod,
And bade me, void of self and art,
Befriend my race, and love my God"

("Elegy in the Church-yard" 1804)

But compared to his contemporaries, Orr has two major achievements to his credit; "The Penitent" (1804), and "The Irish Cottier's Death and Burial" (1817), and both of these are consistently vernacular. The first tells of Christy Blair, a weaver of good repute, who took to drink, and brought distress upon himself and his family, but, converted by 'the Methodie', he changed his life. Baldly narrated, this is a tract; but in Orr's handling there is an economy of language. For example, this fragment declares the poet's imaginative sympathy.

"At length he turn'd a downright ne'er-do-weel,
For ilka draught, he swore, but made him dryer;
The kye gaed baith for debt. A sorry chiel'
Was he to cleave their stakes to men' the fire."

The whole piece is carried through with tact; and without the sentimentality which could so easily have swampt it. It is this poem which has more of the nature of Crabbe than all the 'Poor Houses' and 'Sabbath Schools' which might have developed into that kind.

"The Cottier" like "The Penitent" in Spenserians, is a remarkably skilful concentration of rural custom, and folk-belief, as well as social observation. The covering of the mirror, the stopping of the clock, the wake rituals, these are recorded, not as curiosities but as part of the human texture of the event.

"Syne wi' anither glass they hail day-light,
An' crack mair crouse o' bargains, farms, an' beasts;
Or han' tradition down, an' ither fright,
Wi' dreadfu' tales o' witches, elves, an' ghaists.
The soger lad, wha on his pension rests,
Tells how he fought, an' proudly bares his scaur;
While unfledg'd gulls, just lookin owre their nests,
Brag how they lately did their rivals daur,
Before their first sweethearts, an' dashed them i' the glaur."

Orr's "Donegore Hill" in the 'Holy Fair' stanza, as an historical document is unique. We have no other report in verse of the mustering of the United men at Donegore in June 1798, before the Battle of Antrim, by a participant. And here again the steadfast honesty of Orr

avoiding the rhetorical or the posturing, makes it an authoritative statement. Once again in "The Wanderer" (1804), not the poem of the same name in the 1817 volume, he takes an incident from his rebel days, and gives it durable form. His set-pieces on Tea and on the Potato, both in "Standard Habbie", have technical facility one is liable to overlook in appreciating their value as social history. "The Passengers" too, his account of his voyage to America, is valuable. His lyrics like "Winter" (1804) with its

"— hedge-hauntin' blackbird on ae fit whyles restin'
Wad fain heat the tither in storm-rufflet wing;"

are among the best of their kind for us. Indeed, it would be pleasant to see a little book selected entirely from his vernacular verse, for his reputation should, by its impact, have some chance of reasserting itself. The editors of his posthumous volume, by concentrating on his English verse, succeeded in laying a much heavier burden upon it, than it should have been made to bear: and one must have the disturbing thought that in their earnest gesture of service, they must have laid aside or destroyed work of the quality of "The Penitent", "The Passengers", and the others which are nearly all to be found in the 1804 volume. His work in English shews him to have been a person of humane feelings — "The Bull Bait", sometimes of an epigrammatic turn, but altogether on a smaller scale than when using his "rude Scotch rhymes".

Thomas Beggs (1789-1847) kinsman of Orr, subscriber to Campbell's Posthumous Works, was born at Glenwhirry, Co. Antrim, and as a boy spent a short time at sea, but found his most durable, though intermittent, source of livelihood in various bleach works in the country round Belfast. He was an ambitious and prolific writer, and enjoyed the esteem of his fellow-bards, being graded, after the death of Orr, as the leading poet of the North East; although Herbison who held this opinion too, was much more widely known.

Beggs tried many veins; narrative, descriptive, satirical; but is at his best in the simpler lyrical measures of "The Wee Pauper Wean", or "The Heather Bells o' Slievie Trew." Technically he displayed little curiosity; none of the great Scots instruments, "Standard Habbie", "The Cherry" quatorzain, the "Holy Fair" stanza, nor even work in the heroic couplet, finds place in Corry's edition of the Poetical Works. This volume, though its compilation was a remarkable act of ~~[illegible]~~ loyalty, is not by any means a full collection. One of his most amusing pieces The Rhyming Pedagogues (1821) is omitted, and his only exercise in blank verse.

In The Pedagogues Beggs' reference to John McKinley is of the greatest interest, as it is the only record of that bard outside his own two volumes which we possess. It seems possible that the poets met when Beggs was on a walking tour of north Antrim early in 1819. McKinley was a native of the Dunseverick district. It was this journey which also provided Beggs with the experience for his Rathlin (1820) considered his most serious achievement. Beggs writing of the poets he knew or had known, assesses Orr as "the Shakespere of the plebeian train"; his opinion of McComb has already been quoted in the chapter dealing with that poet; of McKinley and the Muse he writes:

"E'en poor McKinley, wild and mad,
A portion of her spirit had;
The minstrel of a lofty lay,
Let critics cavil as they may
Imprudent, poor and profligate,
With clothing light and little meat,

[no break: continue with verse overpage
H]

Content at evening to procure
His pipe, his bottle and his w—,
Or sit with swindler or with sot,
In filthy stew, or midnight pot —
But let the man be what he will,
McKinley is a poet still."

Beggs' verse is only lightly touched with Scots; this was in some measure due probably, to his not being a rooted man like Orr, or even Thomson; and there is nothing in it of Campbell's ballad-singers' tone. Reading his work extensively one becomes aware of a general feeling of gloom. Not the harsher quality of Campbell, whose rage at, and accusation of society has a proud individual ring; but a sort of sentimental self-pitying note — Davis has a hint of it too. Orr, though he had his griefs, has not. It may have been due to a collective mood, compounded of the decline of in the status of the rural bard as country life went bleaker under the approaching "Famine" and blight, and the grim atmosphere of the Hungry Forties.

Samuel Walker (1803–1885) who had been a fellow member of the Four Towns Club, never issued a printed volume. He had verses in several journals; but all that is left of him may be found in a manuscript note book in the Bigger Collection, Belfast Public Library. This seems to consist of poems written from 1829 to 1839. He lived near Templepatrick, and wrote largely in the vernacular, but his printed verses, for example, those in The Belfast Penny Journal – which are also in the notebook – are not in dialect. He used "Standard Habbie" with fluency.

"Their number now is unco' sma'
Wha credit fairie tales ava;
The fairie forths are planted a'
Wi' groves o' timmer,
Or else they carry craps fu' braw,
O' corn in simmer!"

His "Wake" is in the 'Holy Fair' stanza and is crammed with folklore. Old usages had a fascination for him: one of his Penny Journal poems is entitled "The Churn: or the last day of Harvest", and provides an interesting contrast of its County Antrim customs with Fletcher's "The Churn" which details the County Down ritual.

Perhaps his most interesting work is a long series of "Standard Habbie" in which he had the collaboration of a William McNeece, a friend and neighbour, being "An Epistle to Hawkie, the Cotter's Cow on hearing she had eaten the Bible". Although monotonous in its effect, now and then, a stanza makes its point neatly.

"Some folk will say thou wast to faut
To be sae greedy on the saut;
But, Hawkie, never think on that,
But flisk thy tail;
An' say thou took the wife o' dat
To saut thy kail"

From the birth of James Campbell in 1758 to the death of Samuel Walker in 1885 covers a period of 127 years; from the militant class-conscious weaver with his rebelly verses impounded

by the Yeomanry to the old countryman cherishing his little leather bound note book, the story of our vernacular verse is summarised - and symbolised in the lives and work of five men. One cannot but feel the changing background against which these figures stood: from the folk poet who had no wish to print, if only his friends may hear his verses, through the deceptive summer of the weavers volume subscribed for and published, with visitors coming in coaches to look at the peasant bard, to the autumn of the little paper backed booklets, each carrying a preface of complaint, and the winter of the old country rimer with his verses that no one would print: behind all this, the passage of a countryside from being a neat and prosperous centre of rural industry slowly bleaching into, first, a recruiting ground ~~for~~ and then a dormitory for a vast encroaching city..

The Bards of the County Down

For County Down the story cannot be so compact, so closely interlocked. As I have said, the poets appeared here and there in the most prosperous parts of the county, but generally in isolation from each other. The earliest, Francis Boyle (born *circa* 1730) does refer to two contemporary bards of Gilnahirk, and carries in his volume the complimentary address of one of them, John Meharg; but this is all that we know of him or of Andrew Scott; for most of the others we can shew no reference to close association with any writer of their own social class.

Hugh Porter tells us a good deal of his clerical patrons; MacKenzie by the extent of his subscribers' list, leaves us for another realm of conjecture; anyhow, he was thrust out of his rural matrix, to die slowly and miserably in the bustling town. William Bleakley mentions but few names, none of which we recognise. Edward Sloan salutes Sharman Crawford, and by this gesture and in his verses demonstrates no more than the political aspirations of his class. Joseph Carson jeers at Scott, and announced his allegiance to denomination and party; after thirty years we find him too, ripped out of his context, a hand in a model factory in another place. Peter Burns has remained unrecorded till now, no more than a name in two brief quotations in a journal over ninety years ago. Only Robert Huddleston is a little, just a little, more tenacious, surviving in his own two books, in a verse or two in a friends' volume, and lingering shadowily in the manuscript journal of a priggish young Belfast merchant, H. L. Stewart.

Francis Boyle — O'Donoghue even doubted his name, and neither he nor Bigger knew the title or date of Boyle's book *Miscellaneous Poems* (1811), ~~which~~ is one of the most interesting of the vernacular bards. He used "Standard Habbie".

"'Tis lang sin' that auld thorn was plantit,
An' auld wives say it lang was hauntit,
Wha fairy tribes there danc't an' rantit,
Upo' the green,
An' music to the wanerers chantit,
On Halloween."

("To a Fairy Thorn")

His cuckoo comes in no borrowed plumes.

"An' after a' thy rhymin' din,
Just like the lave o' thy fause kin
Thou leav'st a scabby get behin'
To whinge an' greet,
Without a feather on its skin
To turn the weet."

("To a Cuckoo")

His auld gelding was no imported beast, though Robert Burns may have stood looking over the poets' shoulder.

"When thou wast scarcely ten hands high,
The vile horse-gelder then came by;
He took a hard hemp-rape to tie
Roun' thy shank banes
An' cast thee on thy back to lie,
An' staw thy stanes

Thy bonny face wi' star an' snips,
Thy sleekit hide, thy weel-turnt hips;
Thy tail or mane, I winna clip
Or poll thee bare;
Like them that gang on board a ship
For Glasgow Fair.

When snows lie lang, an' frost is keen,
An' neither grass nor foliage seen,
I gather whins that's young an' green,
An' them prepare,
An' feed thee with them morn an' e'en,
To sleek thy hair."

He had watched the thatcher with a critical eye.

"The guid saugh scobes that ware weel bent,
He drave their points a' up aslant; (saugh scobes = salley rods)
This hindert rain to get a vent
That through might seep.."

And when the young upstarts at the trade demanded the extortionate wages of two shillings a day, and their morning tea, he decided that, henceforth,

"We'll theek wi' slate" (theek = thatch)

But thatching was part of the texture of life, and death. When Ned Mills is dead

"His auld grey head lies at the wa',
His house weel theekit wi a scraw (scraw = sod)
He cares na how the tempest blaw-"

He knew the expense of a Wake.

"Gae buy a pund o' Indian weed,
An' pipes to smoke whan I am dead,
An' whiskey bought frae Mathew Read,
O' his distillin.
There's a' the money that ye need,
That's fifty shillin'."

And if he took a line from Ramsay, he bettered it with one of his own (1).

"She turn'd the brunt side o' her shin
Wi' pictures on't o' a' her kin"
("The Wake")

He knew his own trade thoroughly.

"Dear Rever'nt sir, here is your pleugh;
Her timber's season't weel eneugh,
Cut aff the bank aboon the sheugh
Whar guid ash grows;
He puts nae rubbish, dosed or rough,
In clergy ploughs"
("Presenting a Plough to a Clergyman")

(1) "Set out the brunt side o' your ~~[illegible]~~ shin,
For pride in poets is no sin." Ramsay, quoted in prospectus for 'Kilmarnock' Burns: Henley and Henderson Vol. I. p. 311.

But he had little respect for "the cloth", apart from the man who wore it.

"A' ither creeds you haud in scorn,
or count them useless blethers;
You'd rather hae a lass upon
a bed o' down or feathers"

("To a Clergyman")

He could turn a lyric when required.

"When I am weaving on my loom,
I think upon my darlin',
Though she remains in Moira town,
An' I live in Kilwarlin;
Resolved in mind for to be kind,
An' never to deceive;
Then in return, her love should burn
For me, her linen weaver."

("The Bonny Weaver")

And if the event needed its comment and assessment, Boyle could offer his steady wisdom.

"It was on Pike Sunday near to Moneyrea,
The Colonel did first his green colours display.
He mustered his men, and away he did go
To fight for the Union with General Munro (2)

. . . . . .

My friends be admonished no more to rebel,
Its dreadful effects there's no Poet can tell,
It desolates countries, proves nation's overthrow,
Brings men to the scaffold like General Munro."

Francis Boyle seems something more than a rural bard: he seems to be the countryside itself articulate. All trades are his. He knows every problem and all the answers. Yet when that rural pattern frays and ravels out, he does not disintegrate. His verse, the total expression of Francis Boyle, remains. "He puts nae rubbish, dozed or rough In clergy ploughs," or in anything else.

Hugh Porter of Moneyslan was, by comparison, a much tamer fellow, as perhaps befits one whose pseudonym was "Lisander". He was impressed by his reverend patrons, by their friends - like Stott or Drummond, by their books. Effective with the octosyllabic couplet and fluent with "Standard Habbie", he is a much more narrowly and pointedly subjective poet than Boyle. Poem after poem turns on himself, his sorry plight, his lack of schooling, the slights that he must bear, the successes of others: Walter Scott received £3,000 for "Rokeby", but for Porter,

"A' rhymers else are now forgot,
Forgot alang wi' me, laddie".

The consequence of this introspection was that he never had time to look at any thing, to describe a bird, a beast or a craft.

Once only does his mood fuse with the physical realities of the occasion to give us a poem, which, while he himself is not submerged, enlarges to take in the season of the year and the community.

(2) Henry Munro, leader of United Irishmen at Battle of Ballynahinch, 1798. Hanged at Lisburn.

"Be hushed, my Muse; ye ken the morn
Begins the shearin' o' the corn,
When knuckle monie a rig maun run,
An' monie a trophy's lost an' won,
When sturdy boys, wi' might an' main,
Shall kemp, till wrists an' thumbs they strain,
Whiles, pithless, pantin' wi' the heat,
They bathe their weazened pelts in sweat,
To gain a string o' fadin' fame,
Before they taste the dear-bought cream —
But bide ye there, my pen an' papers,
For I maun up an' to my scrapers —
Yet, min', my lass, — ye maun return
The very night we cut the churn." (3) (No Note at foot)

("The Muse Dismissed")

Joseph Carson of Kilpike, near Banbridge, another weaver, whose book was printed in Newry in 1831, has already been quoted against Stott, on Book Clubs and on his trade. Although many of the weavers held decided political views, Carson among their bards, is alone in being a nationalist, and a Roman Catholic. Further he was more prone frequently to name his enemies, one intensely troubled him — "Our country's shame, vile Castlereagh". Much more than Porter, but in a smaller more personal way than Boyle, he participated in the life of the community. For example, he shared a newspaper with five others:

"You sit looking over the News at your ease,
And just send the paper wherever you please,
With orders imperious, to handle it clean,
To read it in haste and return it again;
As if we were outcasts of blind Fortunatus
And you like good fellows were sending it gratis"

Carson usually confined his vernacular to "Standard Habbie", which he wrote easily. In English he manipulated a great variety of forms, one ode being Pindaric.

Like Boyle he had an eye for other trades than his own.

"As you're so dapper, neat and nimble,
Take up the lap-board, goose and thimble,
And seated on the tailor's boss,
Your lumber bearers lapp'd across,
You may be taught, without delay,
To 'stitch the louse, and jag the flea'."

("To Doctor J—l")

In his "Epistle to Mr. James Hogg", he complained that the Irish poets had neglected their native landscape.

"Yet a' these rural beauties lie
Unnoticed by a bardie's eye,
Unsung in heart-felt melody
's enchanting sound,
While every Scottish mountain high,
Is classic ground."

Another weaver, of muslin in this instance, Peter Burns of Kilwarlin is not recorded by O'Donoghue. Alexander Hume writing in the Ulster Journal of Archaeology in 1857 quoted a few lines, ascribing them to a poet of this name and place. Early in 1951 I came upon the volume Poems on Various Subjects by Peter Burns of Kilwarlin. Printed for the Author 1835, in the Belfast Public Library, Reference section. This is no copy in the Kennedy or the Bigger Collections; and by the lettering on the spine, Burns: Poems it has hitherto been taken as a volume by the celebrated poet of the same surname.

The verse throughout is written in English, but Burns's use of "Standard Habbie" and the "Holy Fair" stanza, and the frequent occurrence of assonance instead of rime, suggests to me that the poet may have had a theory that to spell in the rather haphazard fashion in which dialect was usually rendered, gave a somewhat illiterate appearance to the page, and that, though read in his own or his neighbours' vernacular pronunciation the verses could pass muster among their local hearers, without losing any communicability for readers with another pronunciation.

Many of his poems concern themselves with details of his employment. Several are crammed with 'medical' references. One epistle to a surgeon gallops along:-

"Your powders and pills have been always cephalic,
Most rare in dejections, or inward declines;
Foregoing cathartics, in symptoms of colic,
Or such like contractions, they've prov'd anodynes..."

His most robust set of verses is "Pegg Vain's Toast", the ballad of a street beggar recounting the story of her many associations.

"A pension'd soldier next, you ken,
Join'd me I was so neat and trim,
Then I four pounds and shillings ten,
Per quarter fobb'd twelve years by him.

Alas! the pox a second time,
Soon caus'd his death, tho' sleek and fat,
He was cut off in life the prime,
And sure his friends blam'd me for that."

William Bleakley of Ballinaskeagh who published his Moral and Religious Poems in 1840 wrote largely in English, but in vernacular used "Standard Habbie" and the octosyllabic couplet; his idiom was hardly touched with Scots. As a country craftsman, beside his work as cooper and loom-mechanic, he could make carts and furniture, and 'case a clock'. From house-building to cradles he knew the skills; cobbling and well-sinking came within his range, and though ignorant of music,

"Yet I could mak' a fiddle that
Would speak distinct the sharp and flat
Wi' pleasing treble, counter, base,
To screed you off the Chevy Chace."
("The Author's Account of Himself")

But his verse-scope is limited, and his poems are as plain and unadorned as a deal board.

Edward Sloan of Conlig, whose Bard's Offering appeared in 1854, was more ambitious, wrote ballads, lyrics and heroic couplets; his "Judgment" is in Spenserians. A blank verse dialogue, "The Fast",

in very prosaic lines, is an honest attempt to discuss the problem of religiosity versus charity, with the poet coming down heavily on the side of active Christianity rather than church observance:

"— talk less
About reform, and do; drag forth the slaves,
Who wander in our midst, to public gaze;
Give to the poor man work and wages for it,
Nor, while we work him, starve him to the death!"

His most interesting poem, "The Year's Holidays", in octosyllables, covers the round of the seasons and their accompanying rituals; among these he records the practice of little boys on New Year's Day of thrusting a wisp of straw in at ~~the each~~ the door of each neighbour's house, a custom to this day carried out in Newtownards, and, so far as I am aware, no where else. The dyeing of Easter eggs, remarked by William Reed, the use of yarrow as a love-charm, the rites of Hallowe'en, and many other folkways make this set of verses a compact source-book for the student.

Only in a few lyrics does the Scots element appear, and of his fellow bards he is alone in not using "Standard Habbie". A farewell address to his masonic lodge suggests that he emigrated to America.

Robert Huddleston, with two volumes, in 1844 and 1846 was one of the most prolific of the County Down rimers. His radicalism is apparent in his allusion to "the immortal Paine", and his remark that "if I have not studied the tedious Murray, I shall, at least, be able to understand the more concise Cobbett" (1846) is indicative of his assertive attitude. The same preface (1846) leaves us in no doubt regarding his grasp of his literary function. "I know the peculiarity of my country language dashes my poetry to nothingness. Being but a rustic, born and bred where the language in its aboriginal idiom is spoken, it has a peculiar charm to me above all other modes of speech. What then remains for me, but to follow the language which nature has given me, though it may be dry to the polite of the day, as I am loth to change it for any other accent... Though I may not be a Robert Burns to the lowland Scottish peasantry, let me hope, at least, that I shall one day be a Robert Huddleston to the Ulster Irish".

His "Doddery Willowaim" in the 1844 collection, is strongly in the "Tam o' Shanter" vein, but runs with its own momentum for 1,200 lines, and as a tale of 'the imps of Hell' and Clooty their lord, it has its moments of robust vigour, such as the description of the storm:

"The night is dark - as dark as dungeon,
The win' mair sadly mournfu' whingin'.
Aff house an' ha' the thack now flees,
While slate an' tile skep 'fore the breeze:
E'en bendin' bushes crackin' root,
An' stacks frae aff their timmer coups;
An' forage tae the kiln is tost,
An' sheaves on posts are blawdin' threash'd:
The gathered storm begins tae burst,
That lang wi' wrath was pendant ~~to~~ nurst;
It comes wi' tenfold force at last,
The hurryin', eddyin', tempest blast"

In the same poem his evocation of the cobbler's work, with ~~onomatopoeia~~ onomatopoeia of some excellence, takes its place with Boyle's

thresher and Carson's tailor.

"Wi' every clink the auld hook's dirl,
A' roun' like shot the tacks did birl –
The ancient knife now rashin' sharps,
An' through the oxhide wheezelin' starts;
And now the elson eddyin' bores,
The weel-wax'd en' now whizzin' snores;
While sturdy wrist wi' tradesman's sough
Weel reddst thegether wi' a pegh"

In his 1846 collection, the longest item is "Tam Tearaway", a narrative in rough heroic couplets, of a cunning theft, thick with folklore and country knowledge.

"Tam had an auld yad which he styled 'the Bear':
Ay, bare enough, good knows, wi' teeth and hair:-
A rackle blade, but worn tae skin and bane,
Wha beetled whins and milldust did sustain"

More than usual with the rural bards, there is pleasing natural observation:

"The bracken rustled o'er the neighbouring brae,
The clustering crawtae blossomed round the slae."

This can be carried over to illuminate his description of persons, as of a clergyman – "that fop, in wagtail garb".

Huddleston turned out many love lyrics: The Lovely Lass o' Creevy Ha', The Bonnie Lass o' Tully-quilly, The Bloomin' Sweet Lassie o' Broadley's Brae, The Sweet Bloomin' Lassie o' Lovely Drumarrak, display a wide, if monotonous range of affection. Of his song "Nannie", he writes in a note, "Burns sang of a Nannie as well as many thousands before him; but you will find by inspection his Nannie and mine to be quite different".

For one so rough in his scansion, so loose in his rimes, it is perhaps surprising to find him able to carry through the "Cherry and Slae" quatorzain with ease

"There's lasses braw in every airt
And loosesome girls can win the heart
Sae lovely in their sheen
But a' the lasses e'er I saw
The lass o' Divis beats them a'
She's worthy o' a king
Ye ken her, sir, I'd sair nay mair,
Ye saw her bonny face;
And for her mind, I vow and swear
It does not lack o' grace.
The dearie, so cheery,
That few, e'en, can excell,
The rare one, the fair one,
Alluring bonnie Bell."

When Stewart with Davis and Fletcher visited the Bard of Moneyrea in May 1868, he found him a rather shabby and unkempt figure utterly unimpressive in personality. In fact, what Stewart could not appreciate was that the encounter was that of two antagonistic cultures; the Victorian urban colliding with the vernacular traditional; that the, to him, illiterate jingler was, in reality, one of the last of the folkbards, custodian of a richer heritage than his, free of a technical range which drew upon three centuries of Scots literature.

The Bards of Mid Antrim

The mid Antrim cluster differs in many important respects from the south east Antrim or the County Down bards. They do not exhibit the rural consistency in theme and calling as those of Down; they have not the social coherence of the poets of the south east of their own county. Though numerous, they remain somewhat unrelated as writers.

John Smyth (1783-1854) popular in the newspapers under the pseudonym of "Magowan", never published a volume and died in America: John Getty (1781-1857), John Gwin (1813-1883), and the brothers Patrick (1837-1864) and Samuel Fee Gwin (1845-1867) were schoolmasters, and, apart from some work by Getty, moved outside the vernacular tradition. Elizabeth Treacy (circa 1830-?) of Brigadee, with her volume Poems by Finola (1851) takes her place among the poets of The Nation, only in a few allegorical poems going beyond the customary rhetorical ballad. Ida White, wife of a Ballymena publisher and newspaper proprietor, produced her two books after our period, in 1874 and 1890, although a proportion of the material was written before 1870; as a republican, freethinker, and, later, exile in Paris, she followed a rather eccentric course for a Ballymena lady; for which course, a spell of imprisonment in Holloway, a public attack on the Czar of Russia, and some verses to John Burns, the dockers' leader, set the key. With such a career one cannot help feeling sorry that she was not a better poet.

Only in David Herbison (1800-1880) and Thomas Gwin (1850-1917) are exponents of the vernacular to be found; and as the latter was not published in book-form till 1900, we are left with the Bard of Dunclug.

"The Bard of Dunclug
Stands six feet in his hose,
Has a finely formed head
And an aquiline nose"

So wrote James McKowen. In addition, Herbison is the only poet to whose memory a public monument has ever been erected in Ulster – if we accept the archaeologists' view that "Ossian's Grave" at Lubitavish, is no such thing, but merely another "horned cairn".

He was a weaver, a Freemason and a Unitarian, and with a long life and seven volumes, presents a considerable figure. The posthumous Select Works (1883) runs to 309 double column pages of verse, for he was probably our most prolific bard. In the preface to The Snow Wreath (1869) he refers to the journals which had given hospitality to his compositions. In thirty consecutive numbers of the Ulster Conservative he had thirty three pieces. From 1858 to 1869 the Ballymena Observer printed at least 60. With this enormous output, Herbison was bound to attract attention; even Samuel Ferguson made a point of sending him his books as they came out.

Perhaps his greatest gift was that of friendship; there was scarcely a rural bard from Alexander MacKenzie to Robert Huddleston who was not numbered among his acquaintances; and he kept up an interchange of verses with Beggs, McKowen and J. W. Montgomery; with salutes to the lovely Miss Treacy and to Mrs. White. Many otherwise unrecorded items of biographical interest regarding his fellows in the craft are to be found in the notes to the Select Works

[type on overleaf →
i.e. the back of this.

The Rhyming Pedagogues

At a time when, for the working-class, there had been little or no provision for formal education, but the need for it was becoming apparent, schoolmastering offered a career open to the talented country lad, for the Irish and the Scots had high respect for learning.

Robert Young (1800 – ?) found his patron, Rev. James Graham of Magilligan, Co. Derry, writing to try to have him accepted for training in Dublin, at the Kildare Place establishment. But their journey was fruitless, and Young had to stop in the Mourne country to take up his trade of nailor once more. William McComb of Belfast was more successful, perhaps had more influential supporters, was trained in Dublin, and returned north to teach, until he foresaw greater profit in selling bibles and registering marriages.

This deliberate effort to climb a little way out of their class had an obvious effect on the work of those teachers who happened also to be writers of verse. They felt generally dialect to be near illiteracy, and that their status required them to have regard for the proprieties of standard English; but as this had not been their native tongue, they could not use it with whole-hearted conviction or ease.

Their pay was miserably low, and so they were quite unable to establish themselves in any other social category. Consequently they hovered in an uncomfortable economic limbo.

One of the earliest of these, Hugh Tynan (1782 – 1802), of Donaghadee, spent two hours a day at the Customs House, and taught school the rest of his time. His verse was first published in 1800, and three years later, a posthumous volume was brought out in an effort to assist his aged and indigent mother. The friends James Orr and Samuel Thomson subscribed; David Boyd of The Belfast Poor House, himself a teacher, and Samuel Burdy, not too wrapped up in his own miseries, also paid up. The expected literary conventions of "feathered choirs", "swains", and "snow-white fluid" (milk). There is also "An Ode to Deism":

"E'en in this isle, with great success,
Are spread the modern blasphemies
Of thy proud pupil Paine."

John Williamson (1791 – 1839), of Ardglass, is more rewarding, though not for strictly literary qualities. His book published in the year of his death gained over 500 subscribers, for Williamson was head of a classical academy which prepared young gentlemen for the professions. County Down had several of these, the most famous at Rademon where the Neilson (or Nelson – they used both forms) family carried on for several generations turning out Roman Catholic Bishops and Presbyterian Moderators. Rev William Neilson the pioneer of Irish studies was of this clan, and Rev. Isaac Nelson the contemporary head of the school was among Williamson's subscribers. Others were William Carr, William Boyce (to be discussed in a later chapter), Dr. James McDonnell, the sponsor of the Harp Festival, and a Joseph Carson, likely the Bard of Kilpike.

Williamson praises tobacco – Samuel Thomson and several other took the same subject – in such terms as these:

"Of cordials, smoking is the best,
It draws the water from the chest."

He saluted the new mechanical advances of the age.

"The complicated vapour-mov'd machine
Is wrought by one where twenty once had been; . . .
By such, o'er realms on rapid rails we glide,
Thus realising fancy's magic dream,
In the amazing force omnipotent of steam."

He also recorded the young girls' May Eve practices, and the spells of the witch, at that season, against the countryside. At any rate, he had not cut himself adrift from the imaginative world of the peasant.

William Anderson of Saintfield, and, later, Lurgan had two volumes, 1830 and 1841. In the latter he too celebrated "The Utility of Steam". Other subjects which inspired him were The Big Wind of January 1839, the Queen's Accouchement, and her providential escape with her Royal Consort from assassination. He also remarked "on the crowds of Irish labourers passing through Lurgan on their way to Scotland and England in search of work". He asserted that his verses were "entirely adapted for edification and moral instruction, and particularly to inspire the mind and morals of youth"; but it is hard to believe that he succeeded greatly in his aim.

One turns with relief to Peter Magennis (1817-1910), the Bard of Derrygonnelly, in Co. Fermanagh, for he declared his aim to be "to serve, enlighten and amuse"; and in his two books, 1844, 1888, he achieves at least the second and the third of these intentions. In his poem "Education in Enniskillen" (1857) the couplets have a vigour beyond those of most schoolmasters. The topographical detail could hardly more feelingly be realised.

"The felon Jail alone, a shadowy pile,
Shed darkness round where all things seem to smile,
The new-fledged Nunnery, modest and demure,
Slept in the moonlight silent and secure;
Cole's Testimonial looked sublime and tall;
And like a bully rose the Orange Hall;
Beneath my eyes and broader than my hat
Upon the waters Inniskilling sat."

In the same year he commented on the demise of a local landowner.

"No poet praises Lora's lord,
Nor chants a requiem for the dead—
No gift to poet he bestowed,
No smile on him he ever shed:-
He lived obeying nature's law,
To all his tastes and passions just,
His face old Erin seldom saw,
Nor is the mistress of his dust".

Of his profession he declared:

"The man who spends his days among
The simple guileless urchin throng;
By habit or by sympathy
As they as innocent grows he".

Magennis, by his descriptive verses, by his historical ballads and little dramas on local themes, was very much the poet of his place; and, too living as he did, outside the Scots-planted regions, unfamiliar with either their dialects or the Scots literary tradition, he is probably as representative a local bard as Fermanagh ever produced, for his sympathies were all with the rackrented peasant, the man on the ground.

"New Solons we've got who affirm for a nation
There's nothing so saving as large emigration"
("The New Land Commission")

"On nature and on man an eye he turns,
Beholds society – beholds and mourns."
("The Bard of the Mountain")

From the neighbouring county of Tyrone, another schoolmaster, Patrick Quin, in A Bird's Eye view of Human Society (1862), had no illusions about his relation to that society.

"The peasant Teacher, conquering by degrees,
His great reward? despised by those he frees.
The nation sees him grappling with the foe,
Himself a victim of the direst woe."

Of the mid Antrim poets, John Given, sometime headmaster of Ballymena Model School produced, in Voices from the Rostrum (1860), a series of poems of emphatically pedagogic purpose. Each of the 'School-Room Rhymes' was directed to the task of inculcating some portion of general knowledge. His educational pioneering led to experiments with conducted visits of his pupils to local examples of geographical features, hills, rivers, etc. Some poems also dealt with physical properties such as attraction, light, Steam (once more), or conveyed good horticultural advice:

"Destroy the weeds,
For if the seeds
Of groundsel, dock or thistle
Get leave to grow,
Your crops, I know,
Will not be worth a whistle.

This provided swift opportunity for moral application –

"Pluck up the weeds,
For if the seeds
Of folly, fraud, or lying,
Spread o'er the mind,
Too late you'll find
Life's but a name for dying."

Of the other Givens of the same countryside, Patrick and Samuel Fee, Patrick was very ambitious indeed, with themes like "God and the World", treated in blank verse, or "Language" in a complicated ten line stanza. At the Queen's College "under Professor Craik he was specially distinguished for his metrical exercises," and won first prize in the Northern Whig's Shakespeare Tercentenary Competition, for which Craik was one of the judges.

Samuel Fee never got so far as Queen's. When he was seventeen he was put in charge of Tullygrawley National School, which has, in recent years, housed the children who, under Mr. R. L. Russell, have given us the delightful verses and linocuts of *The Child and his Pencil* (1935).

Samuel's verses lilt more easily than his brother Patrick's, and are in a more sentimental and popular style.

But of the rural schoolmasters, Henry MacDonald Flecher (1825 – ?), was certainly the most accomplished and various.

Born at Ballinderry, Co. Antrim, he spent his youth on the shores of Lough Neagh, became a teacher at Moneyrea, Co. Down, where he met Robert Huddleston, and in 1866 found employment in Belfast as the manager of a textile mill. At this time, or perhaps a little earlier for Stewart's family came from Saintfield, he became an intimate friend of Hugh Leslie Stewart, who makes a number of references to him in his MSS. In 1871 Flecher emigrated to the United States of America where he was living in 1909. He contributed verse to the *Northern Whig* under the pseudonym of *Coilus*, and in 1859 he won second prize for a Burns Centenary Poem. In the same year he ~~was second~~ published *Rhymes and Ravings by a County Antrim Lad*. Under his own name *Poems, Songs and Ballads* was issued in 1866. Ralph Varian's anthology, *The Harp of Erin* included eight of his poems. *Odin's Last Hour and other Poems* was published in Chicago, in 1900, but contains very little new material.

This first volume, besides giving information which enables us to correct O'Donoghue's estimated birth-date for Flecher, displays considerable ~~eff~~ evidence of his schoolmastering. The first set of verses, "The Irish Schoolmaster's Humble Petition," is a most direct statement of the economic plight of the profession at the time; and several other poems deepen the gloom, "The Aged Teacher", "An Epistle to an Old Schoolmaster".

A couple of political poems, on O'Connell and on Smith O'Brien, together with a number of historical ballads shew his sympathies to have been with the Irish patriotic elements. Perhaps it was recognition of this which delayed publication until even the pseudonymous avowal of such loyalties should no longer prove dangerous or even too unpopular. In the 1866 volume many of these are omitted, and while the mood was still nationalist, the expression had become somewhat tempered.

Several of these ballads have an interest ~~beyo~~ beyond their political intention. "The Outlaw's Dream" is very much in the manner of J. J. Callanan (1795-1829), one of the first Southern poets to write in a distinctly Irish mode. And in a number Flecher's use of Irish words – *saggan*, *canavan*, *banshee* – shews the first hint in a Northern poet of a stylistic device which was to become one of the properties of the verse of the Irish Literary Revival, thirty years later. Some of the Irishry, especially in the lyrics of his second volume, such as "My Phelim", or "Maggie Bawn" evidence the influence of Francis Davis, to whom *Rhymes and Ravings* had been dedicated, although the poets did not meet until H. L. Stewart brought them together.

These influences and devices give Flecher a place in the flow of development from *The Nation* group to the work of Eithne

Carbery (Anna MacManus) (1866-1902) and Alice Milligan who was born in 1866 and is still living, a kind of lagging parallel to Samuel Ferguson, lacking his firm basis of scholarship and his more masculine quality of mind. One poem, "The Persecuted Patriot," was suggested by a reading of James McHenry's novel O'Halloran.

Other elements, like these not quite fused into a unity of attitude and expression, were Fletcher's awareness of the folk-tradition in using "Standard Habbie" with but little Scots, and the Montgomery quatorzain with a modified bobwheel, omitting the painty internal rimes - this he devised for "An Epistle to Robert Huddleston" (1860), his admitted imitation of Robert Burns' "Address to his Auld Mare", and his frequent indebtedness to the Tennyson of "In Memoriam" and "Maud"

Although his exercises in the standard English forms of blank verse, Spenserian stanza, and heroic couplet, were competent and display the opinions of a progressive, tolerant mind, his work in them is never distinguished ~~in them~~, or remarkable for precision of natural observation. There was too, a bold strain of hearty coarseness which he eliminated after Rhymes and Ravings.

Perhaps too, Fletcher represents the born folk-bard becoming confused by too much reading and thinking on non-traditional lines, and diverted from a full realisation of his scope and function not only by the decay of the folk-tradition, but by his removal, through economic circumstance, from intimacy with the folk. His obvious restlessness, changing of jobs and emigration, may be the outward sign of this.

We may find that his "Married for Money" (1866) has vigour.

> O Girls be warned by your comrade Ann,
> And marry no mortal for money or lan';
> What's lashins to live on and little to do
> With a husband you hate and a marriage you rue?

And that "The Buckle Beggar and the Marriage Act 1845" (1859), referring to the recent legislation which terminated the right of suspended clergy to celebrate marriages, has wit:

> "And since the law, without a falter,
> Pursues us to the very alter -
> Where modest people wed,
> They'll pass, immediately, an act
> To show them how they must transact
> Their business in bed."

But it is perhaps in "The Churn" (rewritten and greatly expanded from a straitforward narrative to something in the manner of "The Jolly Beggars", by 1866) which is most characteristic of him. This, of course, deals with the ritual cutting of the last ~~sheaf~~ standing of corn, the granny, and the celebrations which accompanied it. A poem by Hugh Porter which also refers to this ritual has already been quoted, and Samuel Walker's stanzas on the same subject have been mentioned.

The conclusion runs:-

"But mazy reel and merry tune
And social chatter ceased
About the hour the cloudless moon
Had turned the shadows east,
And now their day of work and play
And night of frolic over,
Each lively lass tripped o'er the grass
Escorted by her lover.

The lake whose ripples all day sung,
The silent midnight hushes;
The nestling breezes slept among
The mist-hung reeds and rushes.
The herb was grey with silver dew,
The yellow stooks had paled;
And down a heaven of deepest blue
The dazzling crescent sailed.

The barking coot, the owlet's hoot,
The bandog's echoed baying,
Mixed with the sound of mirth around
Where happy groups were straying.
Then many a tender tale was told,
And stored as memory's treasure;
And hearts that now lie calm and cold,
Throbbed wild with hope and pleasure."

It may be seen then of the schoolmaster-poets the interest tends to diminish with their distance from the folk and the folk-tradition. Tynan and Anderson went quite astray. John Given got engrossed in his "object-lessons". Williamson remained a little closer with his memories of May Eve, of yarrow and snail. Magennis and Fletcher accomplished their best work when their roots held firmest.

Surely the clearest example of the danger the schoolmaster
ran may be observed in the literary fates of the members of the Given
family. Patrick, the Queen'sman, and Samuel Lee and a third brother
Marcus who apparently did not write verse, all became teachers. But Thomas
who received the meagerest education and stayed on the farm, became the most
significant poet. Under no social obligation to shed his vernacular, he
was able to keep his place in his community, and to make the verses required
as truly as Francis Boyle or James Orr. So, too, his adherence to
his native speech kept open the channels for communication, and permitted
him to work legitimately with the untranslatable precision of dialect:

"The blackbird keeks ~~to~~ oot frae the fog at the broo,
Gies his neb a bit dicht on a stane"

("To ~~keep~~ keek" is to peep out alertly; "fog" is a species of moss; "broo" is the
Irish "bru", brow or brink, - the side of a "sheugh", ditch or stream; "dicht" is
a quick light wipe.)

Thomas Given was able to use "Standard Habbie", and "The Holy Fair" stanza, with traditional ease, the latter even when writing a street-ballad for weavers on strike, in a particularly dense Lallans; and, to round off the picture of the rooted man, he was for many years secretary of his masonic Lodge, and, ultimately, a Justice of the Peace.

When his brother, Samuel Lee Given, wrote of May Eve, it was in the strain of

"God put me in a garden of flowers and joy and bliss,
I saw Hypocrisy come in and steal Possession's kiss;
Inconstancy shut up her eyes, and said 'twas foreordained,
The heart is free and fetterless and may not be enchained."

When Thomas described "The Cuckoo Storm", it was in terms like this:

"Then the blackbird got up and he whistled a note
That gairt ilka feather sten' oot frae his throat,
Though the hail bounced like peas off his bonny black gown,
He seemed na tae mind, but went on wae his tune".

—

And Three Odd Volumes

Three more considerable volumes remain to be glanced at; not only for their length, one is by far the longest poem of the century in Ulster, but because by intention and subject they are eccentric from either the Polite or the folk conventions.

The first of these, Contemplations on the Power, Wisdom, and Goodness of God; manifested in man's first estate on earth (1844), was by William Boyce, a merchant in Belfast. We have very little information about the author beyond the fact that he was born at Ardilea, half way between Clough and Dundrum, in south east Down, that he voted for the Tory candidates in the Belfast election of 1833, and that in one amusingly scurrilous journal Duke Hamilton's Belfast Cemivell No. 15 (28. XI. 1834) there was a reference to Boyce's earlier volume, Contemplations on the Holy Scriptures (1834): "If Boyce does not quit his two-faced capers at Simms and McIntyre's, by 'the shade of Scott' we'll raffle him. You know what we mean, man of metal. Look out, Ould Browse. It is rumoured that you are an active colleague of a certain controversial party. The Reviewers could not be induced to notice you; but a juvenile friend has volunteered to give you a screed in our next." Unfortunately I have not been able to find a copy of the next, or any other issue, and so, beyond remarking that Simms and McIntyre were then the town's most enterprising publishers, this passage must be left tantalisingly obscure.

Contemplations on the Power, etc., extends to nearly ten thousand lines, for the most part, of blank verse. With a General Preface in 49 pages of prose, discussing the age of the earth and examining contemporary theories of geology, the poem proper describes, day by day, the first week of creation with extensive and varied excursions from the chronological theme.

To clarify his exposition Boyce (page 25) suggests a helpful device.

"If drawing compasses a pair you take—
And form one circle of a farthing's width,
This shade with Indian ink, or substance dark,—
'Twill shew the earth as now the muse doth sing;
Then next replace the polish'd compass' leg—
But stretch the pencil's point beyond the rim
Of that circumference black one quarter inch,
Then wheel your brazen shaft in circlar line—
This leaves a space in white all round that disk,
And represents this world and atmosphere;
But far beyond that outward bound'ry lies,
In space unmeasured, emptiness and void—
Nam'd Universal, 'bracing orbs remote!
This paints the earth in stage of Second Day,
Tear not that draft— but keep it safe in store,
For use I'll tell when comes the Fourth Day's Song."

The various stages of creation are followed in great detail; the topic of rivers produces a long topographical examination of the courses of the Lagan, Bann and Erne, which are shewn to be

excellent demonstrations of their kind. The Niagara offers a splendid opportunity for indulgent detail, which Mr. Boyce, however, evades in a delightful fashion.

> "As o'er a 'Public Paper' late I strayed,
> A Column struck my sense – 'twas of that Flood –
> The theme, by one named 'J. S. Buckingham'
> To thee, Niagara! that song is penn'd,
> 'Tis grand in the extreme; I'll copy it,
> As some may like it well – 'tis thus: –" (P. 73)

Then follows a stretch of 40 riming lines.

T. S. Eliot with his interpolated quotations, has in Boyce a strong precedent; for, besides Buckingham, we have a poem by Lady Flora Hastings, and, most surprisingly, Coleridge's "Lines to a young ass tethered near its dam" (pp. 284-5)

It is quite impossible to extract more than a very few diamonds from this vast mountain.

From the Sixth Day's Work: –

> "And there were Sheeps, horned Goats and moiled, with Kine;
> All made with powers to chew the cud, or ruminate
> On what before was partly minced to smalls".

From this same day's work, the creation of Eve really moved the poet out of his steady stride, for (P. 231) unannounced, he breaks into heroic couplets for about twenty lines: –

> "Erect she stood, and with an heavenly air –
> Whilst o'er her shoulders rolled the golden hair.
>
> . . . .
>
> Bright humming insects, bees and wandering flies,
> Directed wonder through her ears and eyes"

One cannot help regretting that he did not cast the whole work in this form, for the sharpened discipline might have compelled him to omit recalcitrant material to the benefit of his poem's compactness: but, on the other ~~day~~ hand, we might have lost too much.

The mating of Eve and Adam is gently treated.

> "And as two silvery doves at evening's hour,
> (Love cooing) seek some far away retreat,
> Pursuing amorous nature's secret rules;
> So these, our great progenitors, removed
> From nether scenes to mossy bank or bower
> (First singing a Duet of grateful thanks)
> As choice directed through those solemn shades, –
> Where they alone embathed in honied dews
> And mingled in the embrace of holy love,
> Whilst night-birds sang the twilight shades away". (P.P. 275-6)

The catastrophe of the fall reminds Boyce of the dread fact of mortality, which he considers very carefully, his mind brooding sombrely on the deaths of those he had known;

"But time would fail (at least that time I have),
To tell the whole in full; the total sum;
The names, the lives, the graves of all the dead,
That might be writ within the last few years:
In Down they sleep, in Antrim, Derry, Donegal
Tyrone, Fermanagh, the Isles, and Monaghan . . . .
Why need I name them all just now? they're dead
(Some names I'll give, but states I will forbear);
What hath been told will keep alive the fact
(This is the end in view), that death is near;
The dead are near or far away on earth,
But so it is, they're dead! and we must die! –
Another case or two, and then I'll quit" (p. 270)

The case or two becomes an impressive list of hundreds of names, sometimes names only with no thread to tie them to any kind of background.

"Whinsey, Mayne, Montgomeries, Caughey, Neill,
Linden, Rogers, Hamiltons, and Ward; the Allisons, and Lee;
With Laird, Ainsworth, and Oldham, Findlay, Shaws and various Blacks;"
(pp. 272-3)

Sometimes with circumstantial comment: –

"There Mrs. Hewitt lies, her like was scarce,
Her son is there, and now he fades away;
Ardsview, her native house, doth stand on high
And she is very low, but what of this,
If she has reached the mansions of the blessed?" (p. 275)

. . . . .

"And Mrs. Wilkins, thou who wert so kind,
Shalt not behold thy native seat in Down;
Moore was thy maiden name, and thou art gone"

. . . . (p. 281)

"Two more were drowned, another boiled to death;
And Marshall he was torn between two wheels;
His arm departed first, and then his life;
Then, Clark, was killed by falling from thy gig;
Belturbet was thy home, but now the earth."
(p. 281)

with perhaps his most characteristic line, a line which contains the essential Boyce: –

"'Twas hydrophobia dragged poor Harvey down." (p. 280)

The poem concludes with a contemplation of Eden and the peace and beauty of the earth before the Fall;

"— where in peace
Our parents lay a second night on earth;
Whilst o'er their tide of love enchantment fell
On their mediation state and pure embrace;
And there I'll leave them in their First Estate,
The happiest pair that ever slept on earth."

Boyce's principal excursion from his theme occurs in the Fourth Day's Work, and treats of the famous storm, the Big Wind of January 1839, which left its impression on our local folk-memory. Unfortunately we must confine our attention to a small batch of verses.

"Loud howling flew the Tempest, sweeping all —
Baths, Asylums, Houses, Gardens, and Museums,
Buildings for Commerce, Customs, or Harangue,
Streets, Wells, and Basins, Hospitals, or Houses Poor,
Rivers, Canals, or Lakes, Quays, Docks, and Yards!
It passed through Ballyhaise, Cootehill, and Cavan,
Belturbet, Pettigo, the Enniskillen bridge,
Brookborough, Ederney and Irvingstown ...
Through Caledon, Carnteel, Coagh, and Clady,
Dromore (Tyrone), Dungannon, Fintona;
Away by Carson's groves, the Chapel hills,
Next Bunbury's and the Jervis mountains crown'd,
Omagh, Pomeroy, Stewartstown, and Six Mile Cross,
Ballywillwill, and Carnagill (Armagh)
Moy, Charlemont, Glasslough and Maghera" (p. 165)

And with one last romantic image we leave the poet.

Not far from Articlave, beyond the Bann,
There stood a famed Mausoleum near the House;
Terrific howled the hurricane around,
And laid the marble statue o'er the ground;
Charta, columns, marbles, pedestal and base,
Fair superstructure once, but ruined now!
The white hand bears no more the scroll
Of Magna; for Lord George's arm was smash'd,
And ruined there, the beauteous body lay
One mass of ruins, beautiful in death (p. 157)

But the thought of Charta and Magna may not so easily be dismissed.

—

It was religious promptings also which inspired the second vast work. This, of about 23,000 lines, is entitled Wisdom versus Satan on the Stage of Time, by Elijah the Prophet (Not Elijah the Tishbite) and was published in 1871. The copy in the Kennedy Collection (Linen Hall Library) carries a pencil note ascribing the authorship, James A. Moncrieff. From a directory for 1868, I find: J. W. Moncrieff, oil and produce brokers, Victoria Street; residence, Mountpottinger.

The front cover is stamped with the interlaced triangles enclosing the word "Selah", the back with the triangles enclosing the numbers "666". The Preface deals in prophecy in which the Pyramids of Egypt figure: an italicised announcement, "The four persons who shall appear at the end of this dispensation are in the British Isles at present, and at the time appointed will be installed in their offices", promises a much more challenging work than follows; for the poem proper is simply a very long narrative in quite competent blank verse without any of the glorious flourishes of William Boyce, and without any trace of personality. I must admit that I have found even the prose arguments prefacing its 48 books, too tedious to summarise. But <u>Wisdom versus Satan</u> remains a curiosity which, someday, must be read by someone else since the proofreader.

By contrast, the third strange book is something of a minnow, a mere three thousand lines in heroic couplets. <u>Fancies on the Photograph</u> (1864) is by John Rorke, for many years English and Science master at the Royal School, Dungannon. This deals with the potentialities of the camera, its value in portraiture, in science, in art, in human relationships such as love and bereavement.

The author laments that past ages did not enjoy this great benefit, and so we must forever regret that we have no true likeness of the famous men of old.

> "Where is the bard of Avon? – none to limn
> His features, though all men were drawn by him" (p. 11)

The photograph offers the only true portrait:

> "The crumpled ribbon or the careless tie
> Cannot escape his all-observant eye ....
> He tints in freckles on the angry fair,
> Sol's every triumph is recorded there;
> But yet so gently, they are hard to see,
> As on the flower the footprints of the bee;
> The prying microscope alone reveals
> How much he pictures, and how well conceals." (p. 18)

This, of the portrait of an aged beggar:-

> "It seems a rudeness, but was kindly done,
> To get his case thus stated by the sun;
> Nor can we doubt that such distress and grief
> Writ with a sunbeam, soon obtained relief" (p. 20)

The second part, "The New Temple of Fame", suggests that it is the responsibility of the community to have eminent persons photographed and exhibited to the public as inspiration to feats of moral or physical bravery, or to rectitude of behaviour. Those so portrayed should be the Queen, her councillors, the champions of the Press, the orators, 'the astronomic sage', the antiquary, 'the computist', the philanthropist, the chemist, the geologist, the Arctic hero, the surgeon, the botanist, the soldier, the poet, the artist; while one 'with lecturing rod' should be continually employed to indicate the virtues of these.

[continue on reverse

Summary

What then may be said in summary? That some human beings under the most diverse circumstances will attempt to make verses. That for success in this there seem to be certain necessary factors. First, an innate capacity, talent, or even genius; and for genius we dare shape no rules. That the existence of printers, magazines or journals to carry verse, and informed criticism, and a general social awareness, if not acceptance, of the writer's function and some measure of economic support for it, are indispensable to a healthy literature.

During our period the greatest deficiencies in this regard were in the criticism, the general social acceptance, and in the extent of economic support. Throughout that time, it seems, no individual was able to make a livelihood by verse alone. Nor was it any accident that our three best poets, Samuel Ferguson, William Allingham and Thomas Caulfield Irwin, sooner or later, established themselves elsewhere; and that, as indicated in the "Note in Definition", many more of the highly talented moved away, leaving us to deal with, in point of quality, a seriously diminished body of verse-writing.

For those who remained let me return to a classification suggested earlier: the Colonial, the Popular, the Vernacular. Within the Colonial mode, when the English standards of taste and style were operative, even after some time-lag, competent work was accomplished; the general 'style', the decorum and discipline of the heroic couplet, and a literary feeling for words enabled several writers, not strongly individual in themselves, to achieve respectable verse. When that discipline broke down and the anarchy of the Romantics succeeded, our poets floundered for want of any general standards, for the community to which they belonged had no standards of its own to offer, and so the Popular kind was a degeneration. This latter drove the poet into privacy like J. S. Drennan, J. J. Murphy or Robert Patterson, or weakened and dispersed what in better days should have proved a considerable talent, like that of Francis Davis.

With the Vernacular the position was much the same. When there was a sound folk-tradition, the bards wrote well within it, often shewing a remarkable technical ability, their work charged with humanity, each poem a social act. But with the dissolution of the stable rural economy and the decay of vernacular speech, that phase passed. One has only to compare the kind of ballad now printed in our provincial papers with the verses of Orr, Boyle or Thomson, to realise the complete cleavage between the past and the present. One of the most important factors was, of course, the setting up of the system of National Education, which gave no place in reading, writing or in speech to the vernacular; the language of the heart, imposing a half-realised, wholly inorganic idiom on all alike. Alexander Hume writing on Dialect, in 1858, remarked with satisfaction, "a higher intellectual tone has been given to the population by the National Schools, so that the words not found in printed books are to a great degree disused by the rising generation" (1) Now in Ulster, very few people can read verse in Scots, or Lallans, with any ease, where their great-grandfathers had Montgomery, Ramsay, Fergusson, Burns and Hogg on their shelves, and a rich balladry on

(1) Ulster Journal of Archaeology, first series Vol VI. p. 51

their tongues.

Of the many verse writers busy in Ulster in the period, a few can still give some aesthetic pleasure; Stuart, William Drennan, Orr, Boyle, Thomson, J. S. Drennan, ~~and~~ J. J. Murphy, and Davis more than the others; but some of the others in single poems or fragments, - too. Some few can offer an intellectual pleasure, Drummond, for instance, or may satisfy literary curiosity, - as in Rorke or Boyce. A great many more have interest for the social historian, in their records of trades, customs and beliefs — an untapped source for the student eager to learn by what path his people have come, so that he may understand why they are as they are.

A small anthology should serve to make the best verse accessible again. For the rest, the student will still have to burrow and sift, and not many others will even feel called upon to flick over the pages and stir the dust.

Bibliography

This is set out under three heads; (a) the volumes of verse and the anthologies upon this study has been based; (b) the books, journals, etc., from which the biographical and bibliographical information regarding the poets and their publications has been drawn; (c) comparative works and studies.

The volumes in (a) have been found in the F. J. Bigger Collection, the Belfast Printed Books, and the General Poetry Collections in the Reference Department of the Belfast Public Library; the Kennedy Collection in the Linen Hall Library, Belfast; the Calwell and the Belfast Printed Books Collections in the Library of the Belfast Museum and Art Gallery; and in my own private collection. The following letters have been used to indicate the collections in which is to be found the actual copy used:- B = Bigger, P = Public Library, K = Kennedy, M = Museum, H = my own.

The basic reference books were:-

David J. O'Donoghue: *The Poets of Ireland*. 1892-93

D. J. O'Donoghue: *The Poets of Ireland: a biographical and bibliographical Dictionary of Irish writers of English Verse*. 1912

Catalogue of the F. J. Bigger Collection in the Belfast Public Library. 1930

The second (1912) edition of *O'Donoghue* is much fuller, and is indispensable to this study. But the compiler had not always examined the books for himself, and so certain corrections have to be made, and a few omissions made good. The *Bigger Catalogue* has several serious mistakes in titles and dates, and it does not give the place of origin of the volumes.

Two magazines, *The Ulster Journal of Archaeology*, second series and *The Irish Book Lover*, have also been of the utmost value in the scattered notes and articles relevant to the subject.

There is a great dearth of biography on any serious scale: only one poet, Anne Dutton, achieved a memorial volume, and in her case the literary interest is subordinate to the religious material.

I have also used for handy reference my own papers, "The Rhyming Weavers" (three articles) in *Fibres, Fabrics and Cordage* Vol XV, nos. 7-9, 1948, of which I have had recourse to an offprint; and *Ulster Poets 1800-1850*, a paper read to the Belfast Literary Society 2.I.1950, and privately printed by myself. *Rann* *An Ulster Quarterly of Poetry* No. XI, winter 1950-51, comprises a small anthology of Ulster verse for the period 1800-1825, selected, with a foreword, by myself; this has, where necessary, been used.