

The Life of Robert Burns

Burns in the South, West and North

17th September – 20th October 1787

There are many fine scenes and castles in the neighbourhood, such as Abercainey, Braco Castle (lying sublime and lonely by its hermit and homeless stream, and at the termination of that long ridge of sterility and silence, stretching between Ardoch and Comrie, called the "Lang-side"—a castle where dwelt a lady, after whom our old teacher, Sir Daniel Sandford, most brilliant of men, in his youth sighed, and sighed in vain Ardoch being his headquarters during his hapless courtship), Lawers, Dunira, and Loch Earn ; but we know not if Burns ever visited any of them. To the magnificent Drummond Castle (which we always think was in Scott's eye when he painted "Tullyveolan "), then occupied by Captain Drummond, afterwards Lord Perth, Burns was not invited, owing to his lines on the inn window at Stirling, formerly quoted. Lord Perth was at this time a new convert from Jacobitism, having just got back the forfeited estates of his family again ; and resented the verses the more on that account, which was rather paltry. So Burns was not asked to visit the grand old house, throwing its tall, bold shadow westward toward the mountain, Turleum (which stands directly opposite, with all its fine wave of woods flowing to the very summit), with the beautiful lake on the north, the long stately avenue (see it described in "Waverley "), the gorgeous garden, and the green Ochils, terminating the southern prospect. Burns returned to the other Ochertyre, after visiting, it is probable now, the scene of the tragedy of Bessie Bell and Mary Gray, which lay on the estate of Mr. Graham of Balgown, whom he seems to have called on. In returning to Mr. Ramsay's, he must needs pass through Strathallan again.

At his seat (which he could easily have reached on horseback from Greenloaning in a few hours) Burns remained two days, and Mr. Ramsay thought his conversation the best he had ever heard. He advised him to write a play like the "Gentle Shepherd," and also "Scottish Georgics. We doubt if either of these plans would have exactly suited Burns. He had not much plot-producing skill, although he had decided dramatic talent, so far as character was concerned. Nor could he have sustained descriptive enthusiasm, like Thomson, through a long poem. James Graham of the "Sabbath," who of all Scottish men in the nineteenth century, unless we except Wilson and Aird, loved Nature most and painted her best—at least, in those nooks and corners into which she retires, and to which he seemed to have followed her on his hands and knees—wrote "British Georgics" on this plan; but the book, in spite of some inimitable touches, totally failed, and is now nearly forgotten. Ramsey told Burns some traditions about Omeron Cameron (see CORRESPONDENCE), but Chambers wisely adds, "It was not for Burns, but for that noteless youth he met at Sir Adam Fergusson's, to accomplish such feats." Scott's "plays" are certainly not feats of genius but of course if he refers to his novels, he is right. Ramsey more sensibly advised Burns to employ his imagination in the cause of truth and virtue, and in the main he followed his advice. On the whole, Ramsey did not resemble certain Edinburgh critics of the time, who reminded Burns of those spinsters in the country who "span their thread so fine that it was fit for neither weft nor woof."