VILLAGE MEMORIES

BY ANDREW WHITLIE

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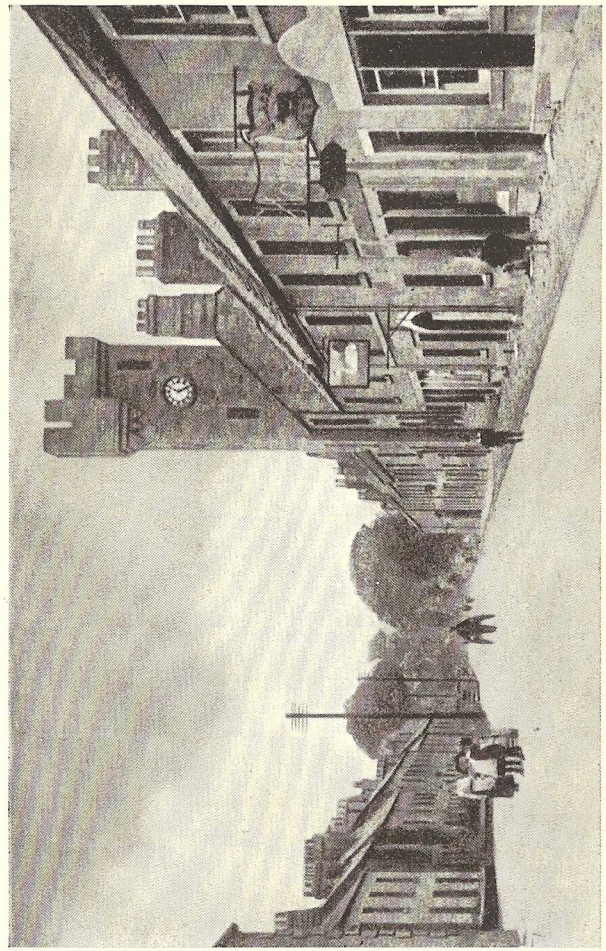

AYTON, BERWICKSHIRE.

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BY ANDREW WHITLIE

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OUR NATIVE VILLAGE

WHAT an ebbtide of thought sets in as we recall the dear old place, and what a floodtide of reminiscences as the living pictures of "auld lang syne" pass before our mental gaze! "Dreaming the dream of life again," we see the dear old home, the family circle, unspeakably happy, because as yet unbroken—especially the parents beloved—"those white souls who gave themselves for others all their years"; the school, which had not infrequently been to us a "torture chamber"; our boon companions there; the favourite playgrounds—not then School-Board-provided, but self-chosen, irrespective of ownership—where fun and frolic reigned, save when our "claim of right" was disputed by the village constable or that more august personage, "the factor"; the bare, whitewashed church—"meetin'-hoose," it was called — of the "barn order style of archi-

tecture," and the holy man of God who ministered there, the living embodiment to us of Him "who died to save us all." Taking a wider range, our fancy embraces the whole countryside. *That* we can tenant with a thousand tales. "Never a wood or a thicket in it but is full of song." "A spring-time land it seemed, where east winds came not."

Such are the thoughts that come to me as I dream "the dear dead past to life again" of my native village. O days never to be recalled! "The spring was in our life, and we were glad." The future, if it appeared at all upon our horizon, was, like "the happy land" of which we sang, "far, far away, far away." It had then no foreboding for us. The present was everything. And yet we were not without troubles of a kind. How frequently when at play were we sent helter-skelter by the appearance amongst us of a tall, gaunt old man, with grizzled and unkempt locks, and eyes swimming in their sockets like islets in a wintry sea. A shake of John Graham's head and a look of his eyes were more terrifying to us than the appearance of his famous namesake of Claverhouse ever could

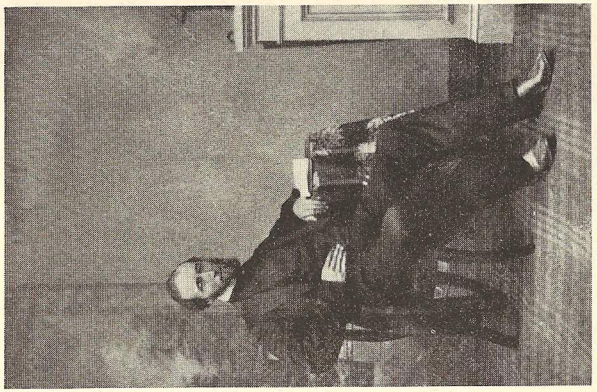
have been—so we thought—to the Scottish Covenanters.

We had other terrors; but the *dawn of school life* was our greatest dread. It came at last, and a small school which a lady, under stress of pecuniary circumstances, "took up" in the village was the needle's eye through which we entered the great world of letters—*the alphabet.* No Girton girl was she, nor sweet girl graduate; neither were her methods of the Kindergarten order. Yet, with the aid of her sole assistant, *the tawse*, she managed to scratch the surface of our intellectual plot. How the mysteries of our first lesson book appalled us! It bore the cabalistic, code-like title of "Readymadeasy." *Copies of the first edition must now be priceless.* But the "*great trek*" from *pre* to *post* schoolboy days was *via* the old parochial school system laid down by that great scholastic engineer, John Knox.

As we set out to the unknown land of knowledge, how steep seemed the inclines, how deep the rivers, and the progress—how slow! It could not have been otherwise in our case—through no fault of the system. The school-master of our day, who was "college-bred,"

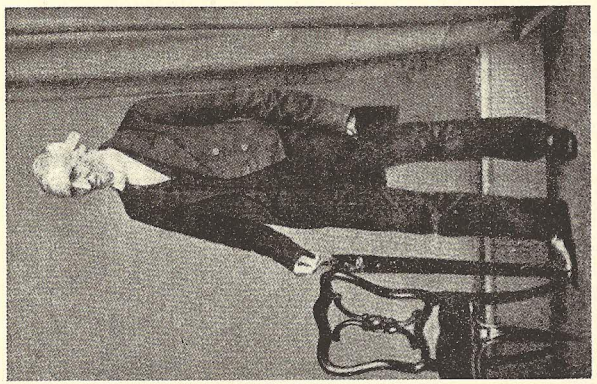
combined in his own person, like many other dominies in Scotland at the time, all the public offices in the village and parish. However, if the time at his disposal for teaching was *short*, his tawse was *long*—and hard! Yet many of the pupils occupy prominent positions in the world. The "lad o' pairts," however, got little help from such a master. Those whose outlook was collegewards fortunately had a friend in a dear old minister of one of the Dissenting churches in the village, the Rev. James Stark. At seven o'clock in the morning, winter and summer, this man, of blessed memory, would be found with the lads (who came from all the churches) in the manse parlour. His punctuality was unfailing. Latin, Greek, Hebrew, French, mathematics, or whatever the study might be, all were alike to him, for he was proficient in all, and his labour was "without money and without price." Of him we shall speak again.

There came, however, from year to year, a green oasis in the shape of the *school vacation*. What times we had then! Life was spent almost entirely in the open. The dam-head above the village mill, with the encircling plantation, was our favourite resort. "What



Rev. THOMAS MONTGOMERY.

Rev. DANIEL CAMERON.



Rev. JAMES STARK.

famous fun was there!" The turf or divit-house was our home by day, and our meals were of turnips (eaten raw) and potatoes roasted in the fire on the hearth. "Tell it not in Gath," the adjoining fields were laid under tribute for our supplies, and our purveyors were generally those who had not, at school, got so "far on" in the Catechism as the Eighth Commandment.

"Dookin'" in the dam-head and swimming were the daily recreations. One swimmer was the envy of us all. He could swim high out of the water like any swan. The majority—Tantalus-like — were always up to the chin when swimming, and had difficulty even in keeping to that level; whilst a few "fearful souls" displayed all the airs of the swimmer, but took care always to keep to shallow parts, so that their forward movement, and their safety, might be secured by toeing the bottom! But for variety's sake we occasionally changed to another playground farther up the river. There, at the "Horn Water Brig," we spent our time in wading and gumping (or guddling) and "walking the plank." To cross by the plank when the river was in flood—*spate*, we

called it—was considered a feat more daring than any ever attempted by Blondin. We could easily have given him points! Whilst these were our summer haunts and amusements, we were not without resorts in winter.

The village gasworks was an *alma mater*, and never had a professor more attentive students than "John o' the Gas" (John Swanston) had in the favoured few who gained admission to the "gas-house." A great reader, John's fund of stories of the weird order was endless. Whilst the boys stocked his furnaces he stocked their heads with stories, and so eerie did they feel after a night of more than *Treasure Island* description that the sound of teeth chattering and of hearts thumping could well be heard as they bent their way homewards in the dark.

The boys of the village were not really evil-disposed, though they certainly were not strong in the Decalogue, as we have already hinted. The doctor's garden produced apples of too tempting a kind—a strong proof of the law of heredity. The poor man had seen his favourite fruit, like "the flowers o' the forest," "a' wede away." But one day a happy thought took possession of him. With a quill he managed

to drill a hole in some of the "remanent" apples, which he filled up with a drug whose potency was only known to himself. A night or two afterwards he was summoned in the "sma' 'oors" to the bedside of a youth who was supposed to have been poisoned. Between the spasms and contortions the doctor, with difficulty, diagnosed the case. Eventually he concluded that apples were the cause of the disorder! This was as stoutly denied by the patient. But on the doctor declaring his inability to prescribe for the trouble—*which might prove fatal!*—confession was made by the youth that it was through him the apples had disappeared. The doctor had a poor second in "Sherlock Holmes."

The religious life of the village was of the undemonstrative order, as is too often the case in Scotland; nevertheless, there was undoubted proof of the piety that prevailed. The best evidence that real religion permeated the life of the village may be gathered from the fact that there went out from it to bless mankind, such men as the late revered Principal Cairns, D.D.; the Rev. George Johnston, D.D., of Ecclefechan, and later of Edinburgh; the

Rev. William Thompson, of the English Presbyterian Church at Woolwich (both now deceased), not to name others.

The Churches.

Curiously enough, "The Disruption"—which we boys thought must refer to some active volcano—missed our parish. The then incumbent was never enamoured of his office, though he was an able man in other ways. He was possessed of great mechanical ability, and we have it on good authority that the favourite toy of our beloved Queen Victoria, when a child, was a wonderful piece of mechanism of his construction, viz., an orrery. This wonderful article had been presented by the minister of the parish to her Royal predecessor at an audience with which he had been honoured.

Whilst the minister laboured in his engineering sanctum, his daughter toiled in his proper sphere, the study, and it was "most surely believed among us" that the sermons preached, or read rather, on Sundays were foreign to the preacher's brain. There was no doubt as to the daughter's ability to compose a sermon, as "The Offering" and "Gathered Fragments," two volumes of poems published by her and

now much prized, amply testify. The "orrery" referred to, or rather a duplicate of it, formed the subject of one of her pieces—"The Broken Orrery"—from which we quote a few lines:—

"'Tis meet that thou be motionless and still,
Thou mute memorial of the buried past;
'Tis meet that thou no more survive the loss
Of him who fashioned thee—for now no more
His dexterous fingers ply the simple tool
Beneath the guidance of the busy brain,
No more thy circling movements shall reveal
The tale of other worlds,
Of wheeling orbs.
. . . No more thy mimic sun
Shall rise and set, and trace the shadowy bands
Of day and night around this wheeling globe;
No more thy tiny moon, with varying phase,
Shall wheel her circuit round her patron sphere."

But we have quoted enough to show the poet's art and the clerico-mechanician's skill. The minister, whose heart had never been right in regard to his work, was suddenly pulled up by the Disruption. Whether the thought of "leaving the manse," or the alternative of remaining in the "Establishment," hastened his end, was never known; but his death at this particular juncture put the parish in the somewhat unique position of not requiring to discuss

the *pros and cons* of the question then uppermost in Scotland.

The Rev. Daniel Cameron, his successor, was as evangelical as any minister that the Free Church could have produced, and so the parish was no loser. But the village had also the saving grace of two Dissenting churches, both of them belonging to the United Presbyterian body. One of the ministers we have already referred to as the gratis tutor of the "lads o' pairts." Never lived so guileless a man since Nathanael, of Gospel story. He knew and spoke no evil of any. Gossip, so indigenous to villages, was never received or given. With consummate art he silenced the talebearer whilst retaining his respect. What a model of a pastor and preacher! Like his Master, he knew his sheep "by name" as well as by sight. During the singing of the first psalm he would "gently scan" the congregation, and if members were missed on two successive Sundays they knew they were certain to have "a ca'" from the minister.

The Sunday services were of the "double harness" order—a long lecture and as long a sermon being "delivered" in succession (all from memory), with only a psalm between.

This interlude of singing was known as "the interval" during which husbands rushed home "to let their wives oot," or *vice versa*. "The interval" was a great institution for us youngsters. Then we felt on par with the bird which had escaped from the snare of the fowler.

There were giants in those days in the pew as well as in the pulpit. Shepherds and hinds who had been hard-worked all the week "sat through" the double service, and could outline the discourses afterwards in a way to secure the approval of any divinity professor.

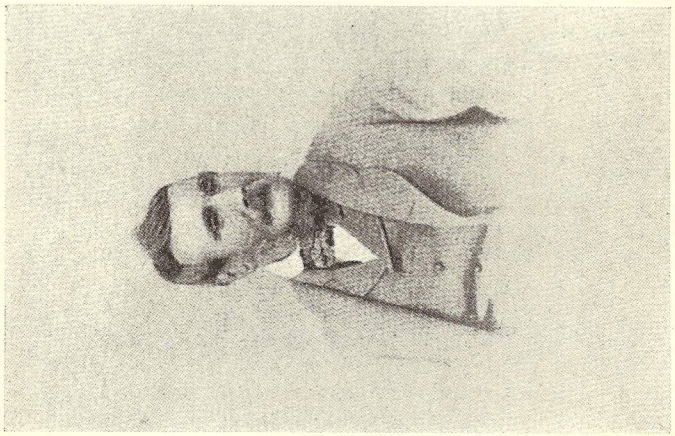
A custom, now nearly obsolete, we fear, was then greatly in vogue, viz., "taking down the heads." This kept one attentive in church, without the aid of peppermints (*pace* Lord Rosebery), and it was a means of those who tarried at home sharing in the spoil. The preacher was of the "dry" order, but his ministrations were faithfully waited upon. He served his day and generation—in this, his only charge—for over fifty years, during which time his stipend never exceeded £80 per annum, and had been less. Nevertheless, he educated his two sons for the clerical and medical professions respectively. His end was peace. On a Fast Day afternoon, as he sat in his easy chair per-

using a volume of French sermons, "he was not, for God took him."

These Sabbaths are a blessed memory still, even though, after the double services described, the afternoons and evenings were spent in going over "the heads" of the sermon, or in such books as Hervey's *Meditations Amongst the Tombs*; Boston's *Fourfold State*; Krummacher's *Elijah the Tishbite*; Fisher's *Marrow of Modern Divinity*; Bates's *Four Last Things*; Cheever's *Lectures on the Pilgrim's Progress*; Owen on *The Epistle to the Hebrews*; and other *halesome farin'* suitable for the day. His mantle fell on an able and like-minded successor, the Rev. William Wilson.

The minister of the other Dissenting church was the Rev. Thomas Montgomery, who died in 1881. [The union of these two churches was happily consummated in the beginning of 1895, Mr Wilson becoming senior minister, and the Rev. David S. Cairns, nephew of the late Principal Cairns, colleague minister of the united churches, now the United Free Church. The Rev. D. S. Cairns, while at Ayton, was elected Professor of Systematic Theology and Apologetics in the Aberdeen U.F. College, and later received the degree of Doctor of Divinity

ROBERT GRIEVE.



ROBERT MENNON.

from the University of Aberdeen. Professor Cairns is the Moderator-Designate of the ensuing Assembly of the United Free Church, and has also been nominated to succeed the late Dr Iverach as Principal of the Aberdeen College.]

THE VILLAGE DOCTOR (DR ROBERT COLVILLE).

Yes; how can we ever forget "Dr Bob"? He was one of ourselves, born in the village, and "everybody's body." Smart was he, though never considered very *skeely* (skilful). His smartness had been largely helped by a short residence in New York, after he had qualified.

Stories regarding him are endless, but one only must suffice. It circles round the village poorhouse and a certain working mason, who, though a stranger to the parish, wished to pass "the gloamin' of life" in the comparatively comfortable quarters the poorhouse afforded. Maxwell Young, for such was his name, called "Maxie" for short, was a good workman, but like Narcissus, he could say "a quenchless thirst wasted my life." Drink, like an octopus, had him in its grasp. His periodical bouts of drinking alternated with disappearances from the village, to which at intervals he always

returned. In course of time "the clock struck the hour for retiring" from further labour, so Maxie thought or resolved, and so he laid himself aside with an illness, which, though it might be known to himself, baffled the skill of "Dr Bob" for a time.

The parish authorities, having failed in their quest of Maxie's native parish (he apparently never owned such a necessary commodity), had no alternative but to put him on their "casual list" and in the "casual ward," which, for some time, had been Maxie's objective. On entering the ward he voluntarily abandoned all hope of ever being able to walk again.

Under a too confident feeling of "fixity of tenure," however, and by the aid of crutches supplied by the parish, Maxie decided to exhibit himself in the village occasionally, in order that his supporters might see that their rates were not misapplied.

But an evil day soon came to Maxie.

"Dr Bob" had been silently studying the case all the time. And so one morning he paid an early visit to Maxie, who, as an invalid, of course, was not an early riser. After feeling his pulse, and going through all the other usual

formalities of a doctor's visit, in presence of the matron, of course, "Dr Bob," in tones loud and deliberate enough for Maxie to hear, said, "Now, Bell (Bell was the matron's name, short for Isabel), this case has baffled me for some time, and I have decided, therefore, to have a consultation (which, of course, was not quite correct). So to-morrow morning, Bell, at eleven o'clock punctual, Dr Blank and I will be here. I quite expect an operation will be necessary, so have a bright fire in the room here. I propose to pierce Maxie's back with red-hot needles, as I believe the trouble is located in the back. Let there be no mistake about the fire, Bell, for Dr Blank is a busy man. He must catch the 11.45 train, and there will be no time to lose."

Maxie, comfortably recumbent after breakfast, with bedclothes carefully tucked in level with his lips, and red night-cap drawn down so that his nose only was visible, listened like a hare startled by the distant barking of the keen-scented dog. The rest of that day—his last in the ward—was spent in deep meditation. Long before the break of day on the morrow, Maxie had disappeared, leaving, to his credit be it said, the parish-provided crutches, and to

this day his "to be continued" story has never been resumed.

The village tales included many other stories of the humorous sort. The man whose legs had been supple, like india-rubber bands, for years, and whose means of locomotion, from village to village, had been by a hand-barrow, on which, according to an unwritten law, the people of one village in turns carried him cross-countrywise to the next, was a favourite tradition. On one noted occasion, so the story went, as he was being carried, as the manner was, to his next destination, a bull charged the party when in the middle of a field. The bearers, doing the natural thing, laid their burden down, no doubt with pity and regret, but to their surprise and dismay, he who had been their anxious charge for years, outstripped them in the race to the nearest gate beyond which he knew lay his "city of refuge." But whilst there were impostors, there were many godly folks who were an honour to any village. How independent people were in those days! The thought of parish relief was heart-breaking to them. With strong crying and tears have I seen helpless old women plead that their "case might not be mentioned at the Board

meeting." To die of starvation would have been preferable to life prolonged on parish relief. The "morning cloud" of sturdy Scottish independence of this sort has, I fear, quite passed away.

Space permits of only a passing reference to the *village poet*, Robert Mennon, who was a remarkable man in his way. He was one of those "striving souls who long for joys of thought, and yet must toil unmurmuring through dull lives from youth to age." Like many another Scotsman, he had no sympathy with Nansen's aspiration of "farthest north," but followed the older and better advice to "keep ha'den sooth." After fifty years' residence in the south he returned to the village with a competency, and lived and died—full of years and honour—in the same house in which he was born. His volume of poems contain many gems.

Another native, Barbara Smith, the authoress of a popular work on the Sabbath, viz., *The Pearl of Days*, as well as other books, was held in high esteem, as was her brother, also an author of no mean order.

Of the village *postie*—of pre-uniform days—Robert Grieve, a man of no ordinary character who, during his long term of office, covered

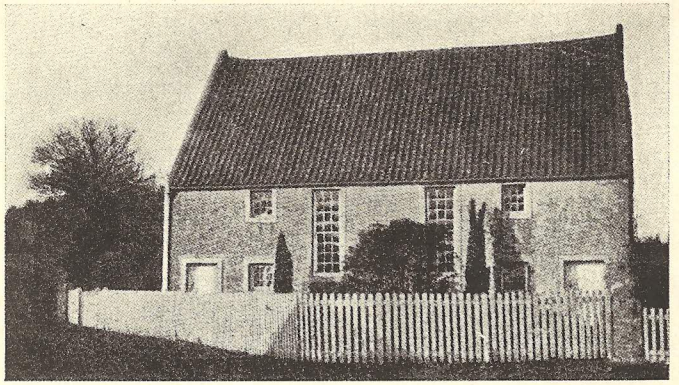
more ground than, perhaps, any other man in the service, much might be said to interest and amuse. For over thirty years his *deliveries* extended over a distance of twenty miles per day, so that he must have covered 190,000 miles during his official career.

Stories of the "French invasion," which never came off; of the "false alarm" in which our own beacon light played a part; and of the doings of "Burke and Hare," the dreaded resurrectionists, must be left untold.

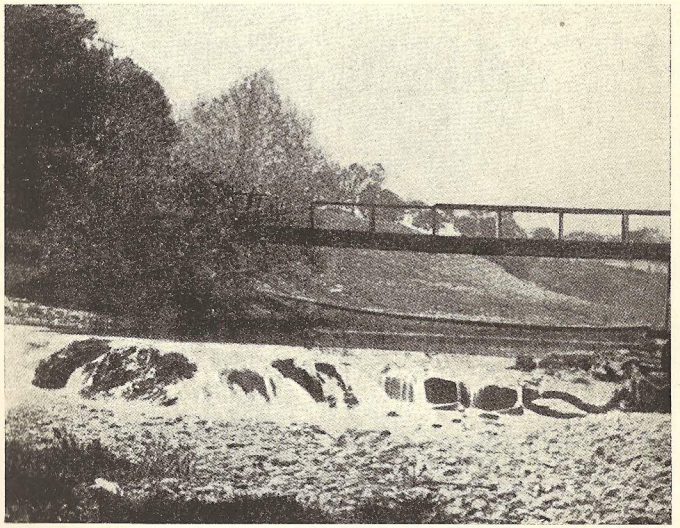
The companions of early years who still survive have passed the crest of the hill of life, and their faces are toward the sunset. But as one by one they pass to the morning of "the life everlasting," the comfort is that "love will live, though loved ones die."

"The paths trodden by those whom we love become holy ground to us for ever and ever."

"The voices that have passed away,
The faces that have turned to mould,
Were round me in the room to-day,
And laughed and chatted as of old."



"THE AULD MEETIN' HOOSE."



HORN WATER BRIG.

THE AULD MEETIN' HOOSE.

The auld meetin' hoose wi' its roof o' red tilin',
Its white washen wa's an' its windows sae trim,
The burn wimplin' by't and the summer sun smilin',
A' mak' up a pictur' that never grows dim.

O weel dae I min' the square pews wi' their tables,
The coorts i' the laft whaur the gentle folk sat,
The stairs creepin' up at the sides o' baith gables,
An' the board 'bune the poopit sae smooth an' sae flat.

In cauld wintry waither, my teeth aften chatter'd,
My taes were benumb'd, an' my fingers were chill'd;
Lat weet come, or sleet come, or snaw drift, what matter'd,
Oor seats on the Sawbath had aye to be fill'd.

But then i' the simmer 'twas lichtsome an' cheerie
Wi' chirpin's o' sparries amang the yew trees,
Wi' the burnie's saft murmur; an' less ane should weary,
Stray veesits frae bummies, an' bricht butterflees.

That auld Meetin' Hoose was a hame o' the saintly;
The flock was selec', an' the numbers but sma';
Their service was bare, an' the words spoken quaintly;
But the speerit o' worship pervaded them a'.

Aroun' the kirk door I can see them forgaither
In twas an' in threes for a neebourly chat
'Bout the state o' the craps, the forecast o' the waither,
The ailin's an' failin's o' this ane an' that.

I can see them gang an' sit doun sae doucely—
The men doff their bannets wi' rev'rence an' care,
The wives wi' their buiks row'd in hankies fu' loosely
An' wi' bunches o' spearmint to sweeten the air.

The doctrines o' grace was the theme o' the preacher,
An' covenant blessin's to a' that believe ;
A faithfu' an' upricht expounder an' teacher,
A man frae whose mouth the pure word you'd receive.

I min' i' the hame gannin how sagely we listen'd
To screeds o' the sermons frae guidly auld men,
An' hoo their pows wagg't, their very e'en glisten'd,
As heids an' partiklers were gane owre again.

Thou auld Meetin' Hoose, thou art gane an' forever,
They've no left a stane o' thy weel packit wa's ;
But nae flicht o' time frae my mem'ry can sever
The sicht o' thy face, or the licht o' thy cause.

A. T. N.