

Mennon Talk

Introduction

Illustrate : Personality / Character / Sense of Humour

George's choice **"The Swallows are come"**

Hector's choice **" Epitaph on a Nanny Goat "**
 that was left in the yard where I worked

You will see that what George and I are chiefly interested in is the Poetry. There's probably a lot you can say about Robert Mennon's life and circumstances, but if he's going to be "The Ayton Bard", we have to have a look at his poetry.

But first a Brief Biography just to place him in his time:

Born in Ayton 1797 Father a slater and glazier
Grew up and educated in Ayton, joined father as slater
1824 moved to London area where he married and spent 26 years
1850 moved from London to Dunbar and set up business
1871 retired to Ayton
1885 died in Ayton aged 88

Life spanned 19th century - many poetic contemporaries -

Burns died the year before in 1796, but in Mennon's lifetime, he could have met any of the following;

James Hogg (The Ettrick Shepherd), Sir Walter Scott,
Wordsworth and Coleridge,
Shelley, Keats and Byron,

Later Victorians : Tennyson, Browning and Matthew Arnold

And the greatest of them all - William McGonagall, Poet & Tragedian

Another poem: Mennon's father was a slater. This may be him talking to his men:

"The Slater's Address to His Men"

So Mennon was born in 1797 - 8 years after the French Revolution broke out in 1789 - and more or less in the middle of the War against Napoleon. He would be 8 when Nelson defeated the French at the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805, and 18 when Wellington defeated Napoleon at Waterloo.

How was Ayton affected by the war?

Well, here is Peter Aitchison on a dramatic incident.

"It was a time of national emergency and potential French invasion....

As dusk was pulling down the day on 31st January 1804, beaconsmen at Hume Castle, far inland, ignited their bonfire on sighting the flames of another from the English side of the Cheviots. The French were on their way! All freeman were called to arms!

What they had actually seen was the reflected glow of a housewarming.....where every fire in the house had been lit. The nervous militiamen of Hume Castle were not to know this, and their signal set in train all the beacons along the border. Foot soldiers and horsemen raced first to their muster points and then began a dash to the coast.....

Throughout the day, volunteers poured into Eyemouth, as the wait went on for an attack that never came. Had the beacon at St Abbs been fired it is likely that the whole of Scotland would have joined in the false alarm. The canny watchers there were more circumspect. They tarried from setting alight their pyre on the very reasonable basis that any invasion alarm would come from the coast and not from inland. By the evening of February 1st the order to stand down was circulated."

Presumably even at a young age Mennon got a whiff of the excitement - two of his brothers were in the Militia (The Home Guard) - but there's no mention of the war and anything to do with it in his poetry.

Here he is on his childhood and youth in Ayton:

Stanza from "Rude Winter's Awa"

*How pleasant to stray by the clear windin' Eye,
Whar' the gay minnows sport, an' the troots catch the fly;
Whar' lovers forgather fu' trig, an' fu' gay,
To whisper their loves at the close o' the day.
Wi' daffi'n and' walkin', wi' laughin' and talkin'.
Nae thought o' the future disturbs them ava:
When aince they forgather, wi' heart like a feather,
They join the blithe chorus, Rude Winter's Awa'.*

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Stanza from "Recollection"

In Recollection then I'll view
Those wellknown scenes, yet ever new
 The haunts of early days.
The sunny banks, the verdant vales
The fairy streams, the hawthorn dales,
 The vocal woods and sprays.
The mountain stream whose thoughtful din
 Rides on the evening breeze:
The echoing dell where pours the linn
 'Midst mossy rocks and trees.
 The caverned rocks, the spreading oaks,
 The abode of bats and crows:
 The ivied towers, the roseate bowers,
 The haunts of owls and beaus.

Apparently Life was idyllic!

Here he is celebrating an important event in his youth:

"His First Breeks"

But what was life really like in those days?

Well, Peter Aitchison says the 1790's at times brought good fishing to the Eyemouth fleet. And John Reid in his talk to the Lit and Arts Soc last week mentioned that the papermill at Millbank brought employment for a number of prople in the area....

However,

A few years ago, the late Jack Bainbridge gave a talk to the Lit and Arts

Society on "Life in Berwick in the 1790's" and his account didn't make it

sound idyllic : Think of Magwitch the convict in

Dickens's "Great Expectations" escaping from the Thames hulks to startle

the boy Pip in the graveyard.

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One Berwick man suffered the unhappy fate of being transported to Australia on the terrible second voyage when many died. I don't know what his crime was but you didn't have to do anything particularly dreadful to be transported.

The body - snatchers (resurrectionists) were at work in Berwick and people rose up in wrath against them and took the law into their own hands. During the 1790's there was a lot of poverty in Berwick and the authorities had to take action to alleviate people's distress.

So life at the time wasn't all fun and games.

What were things like in Scotland?

Lord Cockburn in his "Memorials of His Time" says Scotland was a dictatorship. *".... Henry Dundas well calculated by talent and manner to make despotism popular, was the absolute dictator of Scotland, and had the means of rewarding submission and of suppressing opposition, beyond what were ever exercised in modern times by one person, in any portion of the empire..."*

He adds: "..... a first conviction of sedition by a judge-packed jury was followed by 14 years transportation....."

If anything it was more repressive than in England and punishments could be just as drastic. When a country like France rises up and executes its king and queen and many of its aristocrats, you want to make sure that no one is thinking the wrong kind of thoughts in your country. You will remember that Robbie Burns had to pull in his horns in the

1790's - he got a bit of a fright when he spoke out of turn, and might well have lost his job as an excise-man.

How was Mennon affected by the repressive situation?

As far as we can judge, he didn't put his head above the parapet. People like Shelley and Byron and Wordsworth could speak out when they saw injustice, but a man in Mennon's position was more vulnerable. He kept quiet and stuck to less incriminating subjects.

There are only two poems where he seems to express a critical opinion:

"The Scared Partridges"

In criticising the shooting of partridges and game birds, he was following a tradition in Scottish poets. Burns makes some references to his dislike of the sport and expresses sympathy for birds and animals.

Naturally we don't want to stir up controversy. We are neutral reporters.

"Epistle to Thomas Hall on board of HMS Penelope
on the coast of Africa"

A religious man who ran a Sunday School while he was in London, he felt strongly about slavery. He wasn't alone in this. The Slave Trade had been abolished in 1807, and there was a strong movement to do away with slavery itself.

We can now move with Mennon to London.

His father died in 1824, and it may be that there was some rearrangement in the family. His older brother would probably take over the business.

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In any case there was unlikely to be enough business around here for several slaters. There was, however, work in London, where recovery after the war had brought renewed investment and new building.

Here is Mennon on working on the roof of Westminster Hall. You can see that he doesn't make a slater's job as cheerful a business as he does in the earlier poem.

"The Slater's Soliloquy, on a Winter's Day" P 24
(composed on Westminster Hall when repairing the roof)

During the late 1820's he gets married - to Sarah Bridger, a Sussex girl, born in 1808, and so 11 years younger than him.

Appropriate moment for a Love Poem : "The Rise and Progress of Love"

The Rise and Progress of Love **Extract**

I saw her when a child at play
Amidst a merry train;
But never dreamt I'd see the day
When she wad be my ain.

I saw her mingle in the dance
Upon the flowery lea,
An' felt attracted by the glance
That twinkled in her e'e.

I've seen her now for many a day
The sunshine o' my hame;
In want an' wealth, in weal an' woe,
To me she's aye the same.

I hope to see her at the last
In thon bright world above,
Where nae dark clud shall e'er o'er cast
The firmament o' love.

7

He was 26 years in London and seems to have appreciated the countryside around London, which may have been more accessible then than it is now.

Extract : "Reflections Suggested by a Summer Evening near Guildford"

Again the lovely month of June
Spreads verdure o'er the plain;
The bees and birds their voices tune
To nature's sweetest strains.

'Tis sweet to smell the new-mown hay,
To view the waving corn,
To see the dewdrops on the spray,
Glittering at early morn.

When evening spreads its thoughtful shade
Across yon lovely vale;
And lovers wander down the glade,
To breathe the tender tale.

When blackbirds whistle to their mates,
And rooks suspend their toil;
When milkmaids sing, and wicket gates
Cry out for want of oil.

When geese and children on the green
Send forth a joyful noise;
When bats and swallows late are seen
Chasing the gnats and flies.

When scarce a breath disturbs the trees,
When leaves seem listening all
To these sweet strains that ever please,
Sung by the nightingale.

Then, that's the time I like the best,
Alone, unheard, unseen,
To watch all nature sink to rest,
Majestic and serene.

He made one visit to Ayton in 1844, that is after 20 years in London, and travelled to Scotland by boat, which was probably the most convenient way of going at that time. In a poem to his wife, he says:

"When I'm on the restless ocean
Grieve not though the wind may blow,
Let your thoughts in warm devotion
Rise whence help can only flow."

The visit home may not have been entirely successful. He couldn't quite recapture his earlier youthful experience. There is a stanza in his Poem about "The Big Arm-Chair" which expresses this :

"I've oftentimes thought that the sensitive mind,
To be happy should never leave home;
For a pleasure is lost that we never can find
When far amongst strangers we roam.
When years have gone by and again we return,
Such changes we see and we hear,
There's a void in our heart that we ever must mourn,
We scarce know the big Arm-Chair."

In 1850, he and his wife left London and returned to Scotland - the first time there for her presumably - and he set up business in Dunbar. He probably started in small way, but he prospered and eventually employed 4 men.

He continued to write poetry and contributed to the poetry pages of "The Haddingtonshire Courier".

In 1869, when he was 72, he began to collect together all his poems in order to have them published. And it may be a copy of that book that was at one time in Ayton, but disappeared.

He seems to have like Dunbar and you find him writing poems in praise of it and inviting relatives to visit and enjoy its offerings with him e.g.

Dunbar Fair: (addressed to Margaret Whitelaw in Ayton)

"Of the many rare sights you will see,
I a few of them only will mention;
There are mountebanks dancing with glee,
And music to draw your attention.

There are gingerbread wives with their stalls,
And fancy flag baskets and wickers,
Apples, oranges, nuts, brandy-balls,
And a cooper with tubs, pails and bickers.

And there will be no dearth of lads
Of various ages and classes;
Rich bachelors, too, and old maids,
And plenty of red-cheeked lasses."

Here's another poem from his Dunbar time, which shows how appreciative

Mennon could be:

"The Happy Man - Willie Malcolm" P 52

In 1871 his wife died. He retired to Ayton.
He had 14 years of retirement there. He died in 1885.

Mennon as poet of Nature

He saw himself as a Poet of Nature. He didn't feel that he had had the kind of education to equip him to aspire to anything more than that. However, he doesn't really apologise for that but rather claims that there's a lot to be said for being a self-taught poet of nature. Here he is writing to William Sutherland, the Langton Bard:

"To thee, a self-taught genius would aspire
To send some breathings of poetic fire.....

My lines uncultivate spontaneous flow;
No Greek or Latin languages I know.....

Nature, my guide, first bid me take the pen
And follow her, not works of learned men."

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Drawing to a close.....

A Reading of "The Whoopers" Stanzas 1, 2, 3, and the Last P 66

Audience join in the chorus.

Finally.... Last Stanza : "Ayton Past and Present" P 63

May Ayton ever be, time shall cease,
The abode of worth, he home of happiness,
All classes live in happiness and peace,
And make these fairy scenes a land of bliss!

John Reid Ayton

John Reid's talk on the paper mills in the parish mentions that the mill at Millbank provided year-long employment in the area.

A report in 1809 says that mills at Broomhouse, Ayton, and Allen-bank (Chirnside) employed 200 excluding wives and children.

The author of the report "with 14 years experience of the Ayton Mill" states that "the poor fund of Ayton Parish has been materially relieved since the start of manufacture, although two deaths have happened in recent years due to famine".

Peter Aitchison Eyemouth

"At first, traffic at the harbour exceeded the trust's expectations. Because of the French war, imports of foreign grain were banned, and this stimulated production at home. Berwickshire was the breadbasket of Scotland. Grain prices doubled between 1795 and 1797 and vast quantities were shifted through Eyemouth.

Thomas Purves the harbour master was rushed off his feet and he petitioned - successfully - for an increase in his salary."

"....the dying years of the 18th century offered much promise to Eyemouth...."

The Whoopers o' Ayton

To be a bard is unco hard
Whar kent by a' aroond ye ,O;
Ane's native place, ('tis a disgrace)
Will strive aye to confoond ye, O!
But if I can I'll tak a plan
Anent their spleen defeatin', O
An' raise to fame the far-kent name
O' the famous Whoopers o' Ayton, O.

Chorus

*For lasses mony blythe and bonny
Set a' our hearts abeatin', O;
We lads o' fame, proud o' the name
O' the famous Whoopers o' Ayton, O.*

2

To sing the praise o' former days,
When Ayton's drolls were mony, O,
Wad tak a muse wi' brighter views,
Mare jokesome, queer, an' funny, O.
John Watherstane, wha cared for nane,
McDougall famed for dancin', O,
Renown'd Mark Ranks for merry
pranks,
An' Petery for romancin', O.

Chorus

3

Auld Reekie Tripe wi' cutty pipe,
Self-praise was a' his glory, O;
An' Tailer Prick wi' stilt an' stick,
Wha never curtailed a story, O,
And Tibby Bird, wha ne'er was sturd,
Although she prayed wi' fervour, O;
An' Peggy Nott kept virtue hot,
For fear the loss would starve her, O!

Chorus

4

Surroundin' pairts wi' spitefu' hearts
Wad fain eclipse our glory, O;
An' often tried, but were defied,
As told in ancient story, O.
To jump or thraw, or play fitba',
They took the highest station, O;
Their manly airts and mental pairts,
Commanded approbation, O.

Chorus

5

It is their praise aloft to raise
By which to gain their favour, O;
But as I claim a kindred frame
Some folks may say "Ye waver, O."
Yet 'tis weel-kenn'd, tho' never penn'd,
An's often been remarkit, O
Where'er they be, they bear the gree
At kirk, at ball, or market, O.

Chorus

6

Then let us toast wha rule the roast,
Success to a' our lasses, O,
An' if ye be a' Whoopers free,
For ance tak aff yer glasses, O!
For while we can, lift up our han'
To the hole below our noses, O,
Nae wardly care except the fair,
Shall ever discompose us, O.

Chorus

An Epitaph on Mr John Wilson

(Written at his own request)

Beneath this stone lies John Wilson,
An independent fellow,
Who, when he got an extra pot,
Would loudly roar and bellow.

A rough outside does often hide
A rare and brilliant gem:
The fairest flower in Nature's bower
Grows on a prickly stem.

Wi' John 'twas so, he was a foe
To no one that he knew;
And on my troth, I'll take an oath
These were not very few.

By Firth of Forth he was brought forth,
His prime in London spent,
A chip by trade, a knowing blade,
A native of Tranent.

Though sometimes tart, a feeling heart
Did in his bosom glow;
And here at last, through many a blast,
He's anchored safe below.

**To Thomas Hall, on board of
HMS Penelope on the coast of
Africa**

Dear Thomas, I received your letter,
For which I find myself your debtor;
And lest you think me a forgetter,
I take the pen
My thoughts in writing to unfetter
As well's I can.

Oh, man, it makes me often sigh
To think that man will sell and buy,
Like fattened grunterns in the sty,
Their fellow creatures,
Because the sovereign of the sky
Has blacked their features.

It is a crying sin and shame
To all who bear the Christian name;
And if the devil has a flame
Of deeper blue,
Slave-dealers quake, while I proclaim
He'll save it for you.

Those boasted sons of liberty,
Who dwell beyond the Atlantic Sea,
(I blush to think they sprang like me
From British roots)
'Mongst them's the worst of slavery,
Men used like brutes.

War I abhor, 'tis a disgrace
When practised by the human race,
But should I e'er a foeman face,
May he be that villain
Who drags the negro from his place,
Devoid of feeling.

Go on, dear Tom, I wish you speed,
May God assist you in your need,
Your cause is noble, o'er your head
He'll stretch His arm,
And while your foes around you bleed,
Keep you from harm.

When inland rivers you explore,
When burning towns on Afric's shore,
When placed amid the cannon's roar,
Be this your care,
The Almighty's blessing to implore
In fervent prayer.

Then thousands set from bondage free,
Will bless the bold "Penelope",
And we at home will hope to see
You back victorious;
While Britain's sons will envy thee
A fame so glorious.

The Swallows are Come

Come a' ye puir mortals that dread the east wind,
Wi' its host o' tormentors o' body and mind;
Cheer up an' be happy, nae langer look glum,
I've guid news to tell you – the swallows are come!

This morning in May, I was early astir,
Admirin' the face o' earth, ocean, and air;
When hearin' a chatter, I looked at the lum,
And saw, wi' emotion – the swallows are come!

About their auld dwellin's they cunningly keek,
An' intruders expel wi' a pinch an' a squeek;
We'll hae biggin' o' hooses without square or plumb,
An' castles in air, now the swallows are come.

Dame Nature, I fancy, looks pleased on the scene,
The fields wave wi' verdure, the hedges are green;
The air's feathered songsters, late dowie and dumb,
Unite in grand chorus – the swallows are come!

We'll now hae the pleasure, wi' sun shinin' fair,
To see them swift glidin' in curves through the air;
While bees, flies, an' midges, in midst o' their hum,
May look oot for squalls, now the swallows are
come!

O wha can be sad midst the beauties o' May,
'Mang gowans, an' lavricks, an' butterflies gay?
About headaches an' toothaches we'll ne'er fash oor
thumb,
We're sure o' guid weather – the swallows are come!