

REV. GEORGE GILFILLAN ON SELF-EDUCATION.

At the third annual banquet of the Dundee Grocers' Benevolent Society, the Rev. George Gilfillan said:—

Self-culture is not, let us notice, confined to uneducated men. All men worth anything have aided in educating themselves, and have, in this sense, been wiser than all their teachers. Even men College bred, unless they have given themselves a stern and secret training, will only turn out the characters described by Burns—

"A set o' dull conceited hatches,
Confuse their brains in College classes,
They gang in stirks, and come out asses,
Plain truth to speak;
And syne they seek to climb Parnassus,
By dint o' Greek."

It was a genius of this order who once boasted that he had attended two Universities, to which the reply was, "And I knew a calf that sucked two cows, and the more he sucked the bigger calf he became." The term "Self-teaching," however, is usually restricted to the experience and training of those men who have been in a great measure destitute of educational advantages, and who have yet, through diligence, talent or genius, risen to eminent usefulness, or high literary distinction.

Secondly,—As to the benefits of Self-teaching, these may be viewed as chiefly affecting the subject—the self-taught man himself. The great teacher of man, after all, is the soul within him. If this be true, it is obvious that the self-taught man has the advantage of coming more directly in contact with that inner light. He sees it, not through the spectacles of books, but with open face, and with naked eagle eye. It is probably to this direct communion with ideal truth and beauty on the part of Shakespeare—the greatest of all self-taught and of all men—that Grey alludes in the lines in his "Progress of Poesy,"—

"Far from the sun and summer gale,
In thy green lap was Nature's darling laid;
What time while lucid Avon strayed,
To him the mighty mother did unveil
Her awful face. The dauntless child
Stretched forth his little arms and smiled."

And that dream of the Pilgrim's Progress by Bunyan, and these visions of Burns—the one in his auld clay biggin, where the Muse of Colla visited him on his lonely pallet, and the other by the roofless walls of Lincluden Abbey—were they ever likely to be dreamed or imagined by scholars or professors in academic bowers? Could an artificial Aytoun, or even an erratic Blackie, or even an all-learned

Hamilton have produced them? No the dungeon or the hovel is a fitter place for the highest order of imagination, when that exists, than the library of the British Museum or the walls of the Escurial; and although the spider taketh hold with her hands in king's palaces, the spirit of genius is more chary in her presence, and seeks rather the woodland cottage or the wild shielding on the mountain side, and the man of genius cries out—

"O! for a spark o' Nature's fire,
That's a' the learning I desire."

The self-taught man has a greater freshness of feeling in beholding Nature, and a keener zest of sympathy with man, than the well educated. Hence Burns, when walking with Dugald Stewart on the summit of the Baird Hills, near Edinburgh, when he saw a hundred smoking cottages, had his pleasure enhanced far above that of the philosopher, because he knew by experience what worth, honesty, industry, and happiness, these humble roofs enclosed. No self-taught man, so far as I know, was ever a misanthropist. And why?—Because, in the first place, the near and habitual man, even in his lower forms, generates a calm, contemplative spirit in the wise observer, rather than pity and scorn; because, secondly, he sees the vast proportion of good which mingles with the evil; and because, thirdly, he sees less of that deceit and falsehood which constitute, so to speak, the Devil department in the race, and which high culture and civilization in themselves, tend rather to foster than to consume. The self-taught man is generally a man of one book. Hall said of Dr. Kippis that he was perhaps a very clever man, but he had laid so many books on his brains, that they could not move. This is never the case with the self-taught man. He knows only a few books, but he knows these well, and their effect is to stimulate, not to overpower. It was said of old, and may be said still, "Beware of the man of one book." Burns knew no book very thoroughly but the ballad poetry of Scotland. Shakespeare seems to have read little else than a translation of "Plutarch's Lives," and some old histories of England. Bunyan knew no book but one, but then that book was the Bible, and every word of that blessed volume lay in the quiet concordance of his heart. In fine, the self-taught, as stragglers with narrow circumstances, learn generally a certain hardihood of spirit, a contempt for petty difficulties and for pulling sentimentalisms. They are

generally men of iron mould, not used to the melting mood—thoroughly practical men, and men who care little for science, literature, or philosophy, unless they can be turned to useful human purposes.—Grant indeed that they sometimes become opinionative and dogmatic—that they seldom attain perfect ease of manners, and that their awkwardness often takes refuge in clumsy self-assertion, still, in this age of pretence and puppyism, of apeing of the fashionable, of wearing the cast-off garments of the manners of the great, it is refreshing to meet with men of sturdy independence, and blunt, bold manhood. Time would fail to go over the names of self-taught men who have done honor to our country. Besides those I have named already, there is a DeFoo, who not only wrote "Robinson Crusoe," but was one of the great original and anticipative minds of the world, and might almost be called the creator of our commercial, our periodical, our satirical and fictitious literature; James Ferguson, the astronomer, originally a Banffshire boy, studying the stars while herding the cattle upon the midnight heath; Gifford, bred a shoemaker, and dying the editor of the Quarterly Review; Alexander Wilson, who, from a Paisley pedlar, became the great American ornithologist; Cobbett, the brawny politician—the Swift of the nineteenth century who was originally a sargeant in the army; Hugh Miller, the mighty mason of Cromarty, whose history is so familiar to all of us; and Alexander Smith, ten years ago a pattern-drawer in Glasgow, whom I now see standing as a candidate for the Chair of English Literature in the University of that city—a University he never had the privilege of attending. I close by simply calling upon the young men in this city to practice the manly acts and aspire to the hard-won honors of the self-taught. In this city young men are so early plunged into business, and there are so few educational establishments of a high class, that they must be self-educated if they are educated at all. I am aware of the highly praiseworthy efforts which have been made to found a Working Men's College here, and wish these all success—but I have often thought what a pity there is not a regular University here—what a pity that, while a petty place like St. Andrews has a world-famous College, there is none in a town of one hundred thousand inhabitants, and forming now such a noble centre in the northeast of Scotland. But, as I greatly fear, although there may be some chance of the British Association meeting here in 1863, that the Dundee University need hardly be expected till the Greek calends, or the 31st of April, I would earnestly urge all aspiring spirits to attend to the great business of Self-Education.