

"What I knew of ancient story was gathered from Salmon's and Guthrie's *Geographical Grammars*; and the ideas I formed of modern manners, literature, and criticism, I got from the *Spectator*. These, with Pope's *Works*, some *Plays* of Shakspeare, Tull and Dickson on *Agriculture*, the *Pantheon*, Locke *On the Human Understanding*, Stackhouse's *History of the Bible*, Justice's *British Gardener's Directory*, Bayle's *Lectures*, Allan Ramsay's *Works*, Taylor's *Scripture Doctrine of Original Sin*, *A Select Collection of English Songs*, and Hervey's *Meditations*, had formed the whole of my reading. The *Collection of Songs* was my *vade-mecum*. I roved over them driving my cart, or walking to labour, song by song, verse by verse,—carefully noting the true, tender, and sublime, from affectation and fustian. I am convinced I owe to this practice much of my critic craft, such as it is."

Burn's father was a man of uncertain intelligence for his station in life, and was anxious that his children should have the best education which their circumstances admitted of. Robert was, therefore, sent in his sixth year to a little school at Alloway Mill, about a mile from their cottage: not long after, his father took a lead in establishing a young teacher, named John Murdoch, in a humble temple of learning, nearer hand, and there Robert and his younger brother, Gilbert, attended for some time. "With him," says Gilbert, "we learned to read English tolerably well, and to write a little. He taught us, too, the English Grammar. I was too young to profit much from his lessons in grammar, but Robert made some proficiency in it; a circumstance of considerable weight in the unfolding of his genius and character, as he soon became remarkable for the fluency and correctness of his expression, and read the few books that came in his way with much pleasure and improvement; for even then he was a reader when he could get a book." Gilbert next mentions that *The Life of Wallace*, which Robert Burns refers to, "he borrowed from the blacksmith who shod our horses."

The poet was about seven years of age when (1766) his father left the *clay bigging* at Alloway, and settled in the small upland farm at Mount Oliphant, about two miles distant. He and his younger brother continued to attend Mr. Murdoch's school for two years longer, when it was broken up. Murdoch took his leave of the boys, and brought, as a present and memorial, a small compendium of English Grammar, and the tragedy of Titus Andronicus; he began to read the play aloud, but so shocked was the party at some of its incidents, that Robert declared if the play were left, he would burn it; and Murdoch left the comedy of the *School for Love* in its place.

The father now instructed his two sons, and other children: there were no boys of their own age in the neighbourhood, and their father was almost their only companion: he conversed with them as though they were men; he taught them from Salmon's *Geographical Grammar* the situation and history of the different countries of the world; and from a book-society in Ayr he procured Durham's *Physico and Astro Theology*, and Ray's *Wisdom of God in the Creation*, to give his sons some idea of astronomy and natural history. Robert read all these books with an avidity and industry scarcely to be equalled. From Stackhouse's *History of the Bible*, then lately published in Kilmarnock, Robert collected a competent knowledge of ancient history; "for," says his brother, "no book was so voluminous as to slacken his industry, or so antiquated as to damp his researches." About this time a relative inquired at a bookseller's shop in Ayr for a book to teach Robert to write letters, when, instead of the *Complete Letter Writer*, he got by mistake a small collection of letters by the most eminent writers, with a few sensible directions for attaining an easy epistolary style, which book proved to Burns of the greatest consequence.

Burns was about thirteen or fourteen, when, his father regretting that he and his brother wrote so ill, to remedy this defect sent them to the parish school of Dalrymple, between two and three miles distant, the nearest to them. Murdoch, the boys' former master, now settled in Ayr, as a teacher of the English language: he sent them Pope's *Works*, and some other poetry, the first they had an opportunity of reading, except that in the English Collection, and in the *Edinburgh Magazine* for 1772. Robert was now sent to Ayr, "to revise his English grammar with his former teacher," but he was shortly obliged to return to assist in the harvest. He then learned surveying at the parish-school of Kirkoswald. He had learned French of Murdoch, and could soon read and understand any French author in prose. He then attempted to learn Latin, but soon gave it up. Mrs. Paterson, of Ayr, now lent the boys the *Spectator*, Pope's Translation of Homer, and several other books that were of use to them.

Thus, although Robert Burns was the child of poverty and toil, there were fortunate circumstances in his position: his parents

were excellent persons; his father exerted himself as his instructor, and, cottager as he was, contrived to have something like the benefits of private tuition for his two eldest sons; and the young poet became, comparatively speaking, a well-educated man. His father had remarked, from a very early period, the bright intellect of his elder-born in particular, saying to his wife, "Whoever may live to see it, something extraordinary will come from that boy!"

It was not until his twenty-third year that Burns's reading was enlarged by the addition of Thomson, Shenstone, Sterne, and Mackenzie. Other standard works soon followed. The great advantage of his learning was, that what books he had, he read and studied thoroughly—his attention was not distracted by a multitude of volumes, and his mind grew up with original and robust vigour; and in the veriest shades of obscurity, he toiled, when a mere youth, to support his virtuous parents and their household; yet all this time he grasped at every opportunity of acquiring knowledge from men and books.

Burns, says Mr. Carruthers, came as a potent auxiliary or fellow-worker with Cowper, in bringing poetry into the channels of truth and nature. There were only two years between the *Task*, and the *Cotter's Saturday Night*. No poetry was ever more instantaneously or universally popular among a people than that of Burns in Scotland. There was a humour of Smollett, the pathos and tenderness of Sterne or Richardson, the real life of Fielding, and the description of Thomson—all united in the delineations of Scottish manners and scenery by the Ayrshire ploughman. His masterpiece is *Tam o'Shanter*: it was so considered by himself, and the judgment has been confirmed by Campbell, Wilson, Montgomery, and by almost every critic.

CXXI.

RICHARD PORSON, "THE NORFOLK BOY," AT HAPPEBURGH, ETON, AND CAMBRIDGE.

Richard Porson was born in 1759, at East Ruston, near North Walsham, Norfolk: he was the eldest son of the parish-clerk of the place, who was a worsted-weaver, and is described as clever in his way. Porson's mother was the daughter of a shoemaker: she was shrewd and lively, and had considerable literary taste, being familiar with Shakspeare and other standard English authors, from her access to a library in a gentleman's house where she lived servant.

Porson, when a boy, was put to the loom at once, and probably helped his mother in the corn-fields in harvest-time. He was next sent to the neighbouring school of Happeburgh, the master of which was a good Latin scholar. When the father took his son to school, he said to the master: "I have brought my boy Richard to you, and just want him to make (*sic*) his own name, and then I shall take him into the loom." The master, however, took great pains with the boy, making him at night repeat the lessons he had learnt during the day, and thus, probably, laid the foundation of Porson's unrivalled memory. He had previously been for a short time at a school at Bacton, but was unable to bear the rough treatment of the boys. At Happeburgh, he learnt rapidly—especially arithmetic, of which he continued all his life very fond; and his penmanship was very skilful. His memory was wonderful: he would repeat a lesson which he had learnt one or two years before, and had never seen in the interim. He had only such books as his father's cottage supplied—a volume or two of Arithmetic, Greenwood's *England*, Jewell's *Apology*; an odd volume of Chambers's *Cyclopaedia*, picked up from a wrecked coaster; and eight or ten volumes of the *Universal Magazine*.

The remarkable aptitude of Porson soon became noticed: at the age of eleven, Mr. Hewitt, the curate of East Ruston, took charge of his education, and continued to instruct him till the age of thirteen, when his fame as a youthful prodigy, through Mr. Hewitt, became known to Mr. Norris, the founder of the Norrisian Professorship at Cambridge, who said, however: "Well, I see nothing particular in this heavy-looking boy, but I confide in your account of his talents." Porson was then sent to Cambridge, where the Greek Professor, and three tutors of Trinity College, having examined him, reported of him so favourably that Mr. Norris had him entered on the foundation at Eton, in 1774.

Mr. Hewitt, writing to the Cambridge Professor, speaks of having had "the orderly and good boy under his care for almost two years, chiefly on Corderius's *Colloquies*, Cæsar, Ovid, Horace,