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978-1-108-07892-4 - The Life of Sir David Wilkie: With His Journals, Tours, and
Critical Remarks on Works of Art: Volume 1

Allan Cunningham

Excerpt

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L I F E
OF
SIR DAVID WILKIE.

CHAPTER I.

BIRTH AND PARENTAGE OF SIR DAVID WILKIE. — SENT TO SCHOOL
AT PITLESSIE. — REMOVED TO KETTLE SCHOOL. — EARLY LOVE
FOR DRAWING.

THE Scottish divines of the days of the Covenant regarded Painting and Poetry as matters idolatrous and vain: they dismissed from public worship all external splendour: their kirks were as rude as those of Rome were elegant: their dress was affectedly plain and homely: their manners rough and austere, and their sermons presuming and inquisitorial:—succeeding pastors softened these asperities, yet the sense of the beautiful, which education heightens, continued to be darkened by a devotion which, though sincere, was gloomy and unsocial: the scholars of the kirk made tardy and reluctant approaches towards the graceful and the polite; but nature at length asserted her own dignity — “Out of the eater came forth meat, and out of the sour came forth sweetness.” Poetry and Painting, in their highest and happiest moods, sprung direct from the bosom of the kirk — the great poet of

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the Seasons, and the great painter whose life I am about to delineate, were sons of Presbyterian clergymen.

Sir David Wilkie was born at the manse of the parish of Cults, on the banks of Eden-water, in the county of Fife, on the 18th of November, 1785. "I am the third son," he says, in a brief and modest memoir which he commenced of himself, "of the Rev. David Wilkie and of Isabella Lister, his wife, a native of the district. My father came from the county of Mid-Lothian, and from a neighbourhood often mentioned, which, endeared by birthright, had, like the ancient Hebron, a halo and an interest about it which no other place could possess. He was a native of Ratho-Byres, a small property which had been in possession of our family for 400 years, until, as he used to tell us, by the imprudence of his ancestors, it had passed to a younger branch of the same family and name, and was held by his father, John Wilkie, only as its tenant and cultivator. Of the singular worth and good qualities of that excellent person, my grandfather, I have heard much and from many persons. After his death, the family mansion, an humble structure, was allowed to sink to decay; but, from a feeling of respect to his own ancestry, the proprietor, James Wilkie of Gilchristown, permitted a gable-end, containing the chimney corner where my grandfather loved to entertain his friends, to remain, which I remember a grey ruin, a venerable landmark of other years."

It is still remembered as one of those dreams in which men of genius love sometimes to indulge, that

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[More information](#)

ÆT. 1.

SIR DAVID WILKIE.

3

Sir David, as his fame increased, talked of buying back, if possible, the family inheritance, some fifty or sixty acres; of building a mansion where the grey old gable of Ratho-Byres stood; and of adorning it with pictures from his own pencil, recording deeds and scenes of Scottish glory. The birthplace of his fathers was dear to his heart; he loved to speak of Gogarburn, a small trout stream, as poets speak of the Tweed and the Tay; and of the scenes of skirmishes nigh Ratho, between the Scots, the English, and the Danes, as actions which History had done wrong to neglect, and which Painting, had such art then existed, would have done well to record. He used to relate, with pleasure, that Ratho possessed the old Scots parliamentary Bible of the Regent Morton, a folio, of a clear, and, for the times, a beautiful type, embellished with rude cuts, on which he had looked with interest; nor did he fail in these reminiscences to remember, that, in 1745, a female relation, whom a fear of Prince Charles and his Highlandmen had driven from Edinburgh to Ratho-Byres, prepared and presented to his grandfather the first cup of tea ever drank in the house of Wilkie, or indeed in the district.

“In the neighbourhood of Ratho,” continues Sir David, “reside other families of my name: Matthew Wilkie of Bonnington, and William Wilkie of Ormiston Hill, extensive proprietors of land, are counted our relations, and claim descent from the same stock. With the Reverend John Wilkie of Uphall I wish I could count kindred as surely, for he had a mind superior to his time. It happened in the year 1720 that

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a young man, of a good family, in the parish of Mid-Calder, fell sick, and, as the wisest of the land differed about the nature of his complaint, he was believed, in the superstitious spirit of those times, to be witched. A poor old woman of the neighbourhood acknowledged that she had uttered a rash wish respecting him, and, as his disorder corresponded with her words, she in consequence confessed herself a witch. The family complained to the Presbytery, and the Presbytery desired John Wilkie to preach a sermon on the heinousness of witchcraft. His text was, 'Submit yourselves therefore to God: resist the devil and he will fly from you:' the sermon, the fame of which still exists in the district, directed against superstitious beliefs and influences, removed the veil from many eyes; people wondered at their ignorance; and the old women of Mid-Calder were no longer believed, even on their word, to be witches. Of an equally enlightened and perhaps a finer spirit, was the Reverend William Wilkie, minister of Ratho, author of 'The Epigoniad,' a poem on the Theban War, which, in a language though reminding us too much of Pope, almost his contemporary, exhibits such facility of composition, such readiness of imagery, and such power of expression, as induced Hume the historian to call him the Scottish Homer. Nor should his Fables be forgotten by those who speak of his poetry; nor his love for the pursuits of agriculture, in which he excelled."

Here the memoir of Sir David abruptly closes, but the family papers enable me to continue the earlier narrative of the name. His father, a David also, who

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[More information](#)

ÆT. 1.

SIR DAVID WILKIE.

5

was born at Ratho-Byres in the year 1738, exhibited in very early years a studious mood, which marked him for the church. He went to the University of Edinburgh in the eighteenth year of his age, and was preferred for his diligence to a bursary, which, in addition to its honours, brought him forty pounds Scots a year (*i. e.* 3*l.* 6*s.* 8*d.* sterling). Such were the rewards with which an ancient nation stimulated the diligence of her scholars. For upwards of a dozen years he pursued his studies in Greek, Hebrew, Philosophy, and Mathematics, eking out the frugal allowance of his family by private instruction, which brought a few guineas to his pocket, and rising still in reputation for modest worth and solid and useful attainments. But though he appears to have taken all the steps which students take to make themselves known to the patrons of the church, the door of the pulpit seemed reluctant to open and admit him, and ere he had reached his thirtieth year he fell sick of that worst of all diseases—hope deferred. His merits, however, had made him known to William Wilkie, author of “The Epigoniad,” promoted for his learning, if not for his poetry, to a professorship of divinity at St. Andrews; and the first use which that worthy man made of his power was to invite his desponding kinsman to attend his divinity class, and obtain for him a table bursary in that University. This was in the year 1768; in the succeeding year he passed his trials, and preached before the presbytery of St. Andrews; and in the year following he went as assistant to the minister of Glamis, at the humble salary of sixteen pounds, which received the welcome

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augmentation of ten pounds, when he was next year appointed assistant to the pastor of Rescobie in Fifeshire.

These dates and circumstances are from a most simple and interesting account which this truly primitive person wrote of the leading events of his very useful life, in which he describes his studies and struggles for distinction and independence: he may now tell his story in his own words, for it is about to mingle with the fortunes of his distinguished son. “1773, November 24. Received a presentation from the United College of St. Andrews to the vacant church of Cults, which was sustained by them.”—“1774, April 11. Left Rescobie, and on the 14th of April was ordained minister of Cults, where I still continue.” This presentation has been attributed partly to the influence of Professor Wilkie, and partly to the favourable impression which his kinsman’s learning and industry had made on the heads of the University. This family record now becomes more domestic and touching. “1776, October 18. Was this day married to one of the most beautiful women in Fife, Miss Mary Campbell, sister to George Campbell, one of the ministers of Cupar.” This young lady was the aunt of the present Lord Campbell, and is still remembered as one of the loveliest women of the land. These sad words follow:—“1777, February 8. This day my beloved wife departed this life, having been taken ill of a fever, attended by consumption—an event the most afflicting I ever met with.” Thus began, but did not end, the friendship between the families of Wilkie and Campbell.

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[More information](#)

Æt. 1.

SIR DAVID WILKIE.

7

A manse without a mistress I have heard grey heads call unseemly; that of Cults was in due season supplied with another. A sense of gratitude, perhaps, rather than of beauty such as that of Mary Campbell, induced the second choice: the marriage and its melancholy result are recorded in these words in the family papers:—"1778, November 3. Was this day married to Miss Peggie Wilkie, my cousin, in Edinburgh."—"1780, March 28. This day my most indulgent wife departed this life, after being delivered of a still-born male child." Thus was the manse of Cults deprived a second time of a young mistress. But the kirk establishment of Scotland is of itself a silent admonition against celibacy: in addition to a manse to manage, there is a glebe and garden, which, with their fruit and milk, require the skill of soft hands, warning the pastor that it is neither meet nor profitable to be alone. Something of this seems to have been present to the mind of the incumbent of Cults, and occasioned the following domestic entry in his family record:—"1781, October 4. Was this day married to Miss Isabella Lister, daughter to Mr. James Lister, farmer of Pitlessie Mill." The father of the bride was a man of singular worth and sagacity; respected too, for he was one of the elders of Cults, and miller of Pitlessie Mill, which stood then, and still stands, on Eden-water, near the village of Pitlessie, made memorable now by the pencil of his grandson. The bride herself shared in the sagacity of her race; and though so young that some of the more elderly maidens of Strath-Eden, taking serious looks for the work of years, declared

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that the minister was old enough to be her father, she conducted herself with so much decorum, and fulfilled the duties of her station with such ease and courtesy, that all the parishioners rejoiced when, in due time, the minister was enabled to make the following entry in the domestic records of his house, which told that the hand of sorrow was lifted from the manse, where it had been twice laid most heavily. “1782. August 13. This day, at half an hour before twelve o’clock at noon, my dear wife was delivered of a son, who was baptized on the 25th, and received the name of John, after my father.” Other entries of a like nature in the course of time followed. “1784. July 3. This day, about four o’clock in the morning, Bell was delivered of a son, who, on the eleventh, was baptized by the name of James, after her father.” The third entry introduces us to the great artist. “1785, November 18. This day, about five in the evening, Bell was delivered of a SON, who, on December 4th, was baptized by the name of DAVID, after myself.”

We might dispense with the paternal record after instancing this decisive entry, but it contains other particulars which are not less than interesting. On the day which preceded the birth of Sir David, his grandfather John Wilkie died, at Ratho-Byres, at the ripe age of ninety years : in the year 1793, the minister of Cults was cured of a complaint by Dr. Bell, which, brought on by study and anxiety, threatened his life; and, in the year 1794, he published his work on “The Theory of Interest,” which good judges have pronounced a profound and able book, and which

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ÆT. 1.

SIR DAVID WILKIE.

9

Mr. Pitt, it is said, consulted in all his calculations: he writes thus of it himself—“ Upon this work I have employed considerable study during the space of four years and a half, and which, it is to be hoped, will maintain its character while calculations are in repute in these kingdoms. It is dedicated to Lord Napier, who received the compliment in a kind and obliging manner.” Of this good man, as well as of his family, more will be told in the course of the narrative.

In the days of which we speak, the stipends of the Scottish clergy were in general as low as any lover of humility could desire. That of Cults was only one hundred and thirteen pounds a year*; the glebe, or pendicle of land attached to the manse, extended only to three or four acres; and it required all the care and forethought of the minister and his very young wife to keep free from debt, and maintain the look of gentility which is expected in a scholar and a divine: this they accomplished by placing their income under a system of exact economy, and indulging in no expensive desires. But all this determination to be frugal might have failed, for as their family increased their necessary expenses increased also, had not Mrs. Wilkie, by a self-denial uncommon in so young a wife, and with the wisdom of an experienced matron, from the hour that she entered on the duties of her station, resolved to live within their income; and this resolution, which involved a serious frugality in silk, and lace, and “ needle-work of Egypt,” was fulfilled so strictly,

* The stipend, paid partly in kind and partly in money, amounted in the year 1774 to the moderate sum of 68*l.* 10*s.* 3*d.*; and for many years afterwards it fluctuated from 57*l.* up to 100*l.*

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that till the outfit of their sons required those strict bonds of economy to be slackened, the minister of Cults continued free and unincumbered. In those days frugality and simplicity formed the domestic motto in the north, and this was true of the pastor as well as the peasant. It was not then a law in domestic economy that nothing should be of home or fireside manufacture; the spinning wheels of the manse, and the country looms of Pitlessie, provided fine linen and woollen cloth for all except holiday apparel: the simplicity of Presbyterianism demanded in the minister no sumptuous change of vestments; and the people—inclining to austerity—loved to listen to a sermon preached in a homespun coat.

In a simplicity corresponding to the pastor's dress the manse of those days was furnished. It is still remembered in Nithsdale, that on the ordination of a favourite minister, when one of his elders, aware of the humility of his purse, enquired how he would find furniture to replenish the manse, he replied: "The fir and the alder of the glebe shall be fine cedar and polished mahogany to me; the hands which can make a harrow or a plough can surely make a chair to sit on, and a bed to lie on; my wife and her maidens will spin yarn for the curtains; and the loom which weaves a shepherd's plaid will weave them. I mean the manse to exhibit an example of thrift to my parish." There might be a little of the pride of the primitive in this; but unostentatious simplicity in manses generally prevailed; the linen of ordinary households was spun from lint sown in a neighbouring farmer's ground, and bleached on the nearest burn-bank by the