

Professor John Stuart Blackie.By the Rev. **Walter C. Smith, D.D., LL.D.**

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John Stuart Blackie was certainly the most outstanding figure in Scotland as the 19th century drew to its close. His fine features and plaided form were familiar to Scotchmen all the world over, recognisable also by Englishmen and Germans who took any interest in the literature of our country. We were all proud of the veteran scholar and author; but our love for the man was more than our pride in his attainments, for his was a character that attracted the affection of all who knew him intimately. In spite of a strong fighting propensity, leading him to denounce snobs and West-ends, and to run tilt at our self-satisfied ignorance, and in general to hit out at anything, however respectable, which he did not approve of, yet essentially his was a very loving nature, and he was in consequence very greatly loved. It is not inconsistent with this that he sometimes, in the heat of the moment, unthinkingly touched men's sore points, and pained them, when he did not mean it. But he never deliberately wounded any one, or spoke a word inconsistent with "the charity that thinketh no evil." His singular purity of mind also was almost feminine in its sweetness and delicacy; yet there was nothing effeminate about him: he was every inch a Man. His patriotism was perhaps, at times, somewhat effusive, yet it was not blinded by prejudice, for he could see, and did not spare, the faults of his countrymen; and if he loved a Scottish song above all others, he was not without a good reason for his preference. Altogether, he was a frank, outspoken, right-hearted Scot, whose virtues and blemishes were both equally manifest; but the former were of high excellence, and the latter, at the worst, were but the follies of a rather "old boy," as he was wont to call himself.

It is not easy exactly to define what were the grounds of the

high position he had assuredly attained as representing the literature of Scotland during these latter days. There were more than one of his fellow countrymen who had reached a higher eminence than he; but they had migrated to England, and were counted among its celebrities. His work, however, was all done in the city which Scott had made so illustrious, and where Jeffrey had sharpened his pen, and not many remained now to vindicate its former name. Wilson had departed, and Aytoun followed him soon; but for eighty-six summers Blackie lived on, his restless and versatile genius standing almost alone. That naturally drew special attention to him, though it will not account for the place he held in the hearts of the people. Nor is it easy to say what was the root of that reverence which gathered so many thousands from all parts of the country to witness his funeral, and to sorrow at his departure. Though he filled a Professor's chair for so many years, he was not a great scholar either of the English, or the German, type; but had a great scorn for mere niceties of grammar, and would have rollicked in boisterous fun at the idea of being the man who knew the mystery of the "enclitic δε." Yet he was familiar with the great classics and loved them; and if not many thorough Grecians came from his classes, not a few men found there what is of more moment, a genuine taste for letters, and the fine sense of cultured thought. Though he wrote and spoke not a little on political questions—on intricate land-laws, *e.g.*—yet he was no politician, and hardly ever read a newspaper unless it happened to contain in its columns a letter from himself. Aristotle's Politics he knew, but, I think, he had given no heed to the history of English political thought. Yet he touched, now and then, with a gleam of true light, questions of deep concern to the poor, and made them feel that, if he had no precise plan for the bettering of their lot, he was, at least, deeply concerned about their sufferings. Again, though his views latterly were nowise in harmony with the Evangelical Theology of the Scottish people, yet he had once come under its influence, and that spell continued to hold him to the end, so that he never found any other worship that gave equal expression to his deepest feelings, and he never ceased to glory in the heroic history of its covenanted martyrs. Probably the heterodox opinion was condoned by the historic

enthusiasm. At any rate, the Professor's Theology was never taken so seriously as his admiration for all that was heroic in the Fathers of the Scottish Church from John Knox to Richard Cameron. Blackie had it in him to be a considerable Lyric Poet, for some of his songs contain lines, and even verses, with the true ring of a man's heart in them. But he had not patience to point and polish them: the gem was there, but it was not cut so as to bring forth its perfect lustre. Probably he himself would have rested his claims to be remembered rather on his philosophy than on his poetry; for though he had none of the Scottish love of metaphysics, and had never mastered the systems of Hume, or Hamilton, or Kant, yet he spoke many a wise and true word to his countrymen, not merely in his book on *Self Culture* and his *Four Phases of Morals*, but in almost every one of the many lectures he delivered on all kinds of subjects. These, indeed, were often marred to those who had not heard them by the almost boyish freaks which, down to the last, he indulged in when addressing an audience, and which were always carefully reported so as to make him often look liker a mountebank than a philosopher. He used to complain of this occasionally, and I had to tell him he had only himself to blame, for he spoke more sense and also more nonsense than any other man I knew. But away from the excitement of public meetings, in the quiet hour, *e.g.*, of a Sabbath evening, such as I often spent with him in his latter days, it was good to listen to his subdued and chastened thought, lit up by many an apt quotation from Aristotle, or Goethe, or the Bible, and one could easily understand, at such times, his claim to be reckoned a philosopher. In those quiet hours his natural eloquence was very impressive, for he was a born orator; and if he could have been kept from skipping and romping away from his theme, at other times, he could not have failed to win the brilliant, if evanescent, honours of a great public speaker. Take him for all in all, he was a man of fine gifts and versatile powers, genuine and right-hearted, who but that he yielded to that versatility of mind might have been a notable poet, orator, or philosopher, but was only Blackie, whom all his countrymen loved. His language was often egotistic, and yet he was not vain, for at bottom his character was simple and humble. The source of not a little fun and light-

hearted mirth, yet he had no humour, I think, and could hardly tell a story without missing the point. He often startled pious folk by "speaking unadvisedly with his lips," and yet there was in his heart a profound reverence for all things good and holy. As I recall him to-day, I seem to be dealing with a lot of contradictory elements, which nevertheless were all sweetly harmonised in a generous and beautiful and loveable personality. A deft and nimble thinker, he was yet profoundly serious, and constantly brooding on the weightiest concerns. Careless of conventionality, and often startling ordinary folk, he was yet at bottom pious and touchingly reverent, loving Socrates and exalting Goethe, but never speaking of Jesus except, in a subdued tone, as "our Saviour." To the last year of his life he was always ready to travel, in wintriest weather, a hundred miles, that he might speak or lecture to some poor villagers, to brighten an evening for them with wise discourse, not unmixed with a touch of juvenile fun. So his days were passed in various studies for his own more perfect culture, and various labours to benefit his fellow-men, and his sun went down amid tender regrets of affection and regard from all his countrymen whom he had loved so well, and who repaid him also with the love which was his due.