

MEMOIR  
OF THE  
REV. WILLIAM C. BURNS, M.A.

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CHAPTER I.

1815–1832.

EARLY YEARS.

WILLIAM CHALMERS BURNS, the subject of the present memoir, was the third son of the Rev. William Hamilton Burns, D.D., minister successively of Dun in Angus, and of Kilsyth in Stirlingshire, and was born in the manse of the former parish on the 1st day of April, 1815. It was a quiet and gentle spot, full of stillness and peace, nestling, with the adjoining church and graveyard, close within the bosom of a romantic dell, amid the shadows of ancient trees and the hoarse chorus of rooks high overhead, which seemed rather to increase than to break the silence. A little beyond, reached by a rustic bridge across an arm of the ravine, was the grey mansion-house of the Erskines, with its antique garden and bowling-green and smooth-shaven lawn, carrying back the thoughts into the far past, as associated in popular tradition with stories of “the good Superintendent” and the brave John Knox.

With this tranquil scene, little suggestive of profound spiritual experiences or intense moral struggles, were his earliest memories linked. To the neighbouring cathedral city of Brechin, too, of which a paternal uncle was then minister, and which by the continual coming and going of cousins and common friends had become to us as another home, our thoughts in after-days often recurred—with the fine old church and churchyard, and the castle steep and the castle pool, and the quaint streets, and the fair sunny gardens, and the scarlet-vested town’s officers, the objects to us of continual wonderment; and chief of all, the reverend face and form of the good pastor, whose very look was a benediction,—all bright for ever in the golden light of childhood. In his sixth year, however, all this was left behind, and became as the dreamy reminiscence of a bygone world. In the year 1821 his father was translated to a wider and more stirring sphere, where the family life developed itself henceforth under intenser and more stimulating influences. The village of Kilsyth, situated about twelve miles east of Glasgow,

at the foot of an undulating range of picturesque green hills, the gentler continuation of the more rugged Campsie Fells, contains a mixed population of hand-loom weavers, colliers, and shopkeepers, which numbered at that time about 3000 souls, and formed the centre of a parish which in its landward part contained about 2000 more. Here the wheels of life moved more swiftly. There was a greater stir of mind, greater variety of interests, greater impetus and force of existence every way, intellectual, moral, social. The chatting groups in the market-place and at the street corners, the merry song often sustained in full chorus, blending with the sound of the shuttle in the long loom-shops, the keen party politics and the strong and even bitter denominational sympathies, the eager and sometimes little-ceremonious canvassings of ministers and sermons, the collisions and mutual jealousies of class and class, with all the other well-known incidents of a south-country weaving village in the neighbourhood of a great industrial and commercial centre, formed altogether a scene in strong contrast to the still life of our former home. A little to the south of this little busy hive, and separated from it only by a narrow valley, stands the manse, with its sheltering thicket of planes and beeches, and commanding an extensive and beautiful prospect not only of the village and the hills, but over a long strath, level as the sea, to the far west, where the blue summit of Goatfell can be dimly descried from the parlour window in a clear day. Here our second home was established, and our deepest and most lasting home affections nurtured. It was to us a sacred and blessed spot in every sense, full of quiet pleasures, healthy activities, and gentle charities—a manse home, and a manse home of the best type, in which cheerful piety, quiet thoughtfulness, and a modest and reverend dignity of speech and carriage, formed together the purest element in which the young life could develop itself and receive its first impressions of truth and duty. Here of course, as elsewhere, it was the parent that made the home, and in this respect I think we were happy beyond the lot of most. Our father, gentle, reverend, gracious, full of kind thoughts, devout affections, and fresh genial sympathies—serious without moroseness, cheerful and even sometimes gay without lightness, zealous, diligent, conscientious without a touch of impetuous haste, and carrying about with him withal an atmosphere of calm repose and staid, measured dignity, which in these bustling days is becoming increasingly rare—he was the very model of a type of the Christian pastorate which is fast passing away; the father alike and the friend of his whole parish, and the loving centre of everything kind and good and true that is passing within its bounds. To him our mother was in some respects the direct counterpart. Of a nimble buoyant active frame, alike of body and mind, she was all light and life and motion, and was as it were the glad sunshine and bright angel of a house which had been otherwise too still and sombre. There was not in those days under their roof much

direct and systematic home education. The influence and teaching of the place was rather felt, or experienced without being felt, than visibly obtruded and pressed upon us. “My father’s government was rather calm and strong, than bustling and energetic; he was a regulating and steadying power, rather than a busy executive. He was, in short, felt rather as a presence than seen as an agency; the element in which we lived, the atmosphere which we breathed day by day; something, in short, which was as it were presupposed, and in its silent influence entered into everything that was thought, felt, planned, enjoyed, or suffered within our little world. We were not often or much with him, not so much, I think, as would as a general thing be desirable. His calm and unimpulsive temperament here, as elsewhere, fitted him to act rather by continuous influence, than by distinct and specific efforts. A casual encounter in the garden walk or in the harvest field; a forenoon drive to some neighbouring manse or country house; half an hour’s private reading with his boys in the study before break-fast; above all, the Sabbath evening hour of catechising and prayer; these, with now and then the reading aloud in the fireside circle of some interesting and popular volume, a task in which he greatly delighted and much excelled—were the chief occasions of direct intercourse and influence between the father and the child. Sometimes, too, along the garden walk at eventide, or through a partition wall at midnight, the ejaculated words of secret meditation and prayer would reach our ears and hearts, like the sounding of the high-priest’s bells within the veil.”<sup>1</sup> It was in this way that the first touch of serious thought I ever observed in my brother was brought to light. We had lain long awake in our common sleeping chamber after some months of separation, talking eagerly of all our ideas and plans of life, in which as yet God and heaven had little share, when the well-known sound from within the sanctuary was heard in the silence. He was hushed at once at least to momentary seriousness, and whispered: “There can be no doubt where his heart is, and where he is going.” It was not long before the great, decisive change took place, and may possibly have been the first living seed of grace that sunk into his heart —But the more active management of the household and of the home education was safe in the hands of his more nimble and lively partner, who seemed made, if any one ever was, to make home and home duties happy. “Herself the very soul of springy activity and elastic cheerfulness, she kept all around her alive and stirring; while by the infection of her own blithesome and courageous spirit, labour became light and duty pleasant. Never was she so much at home as when, in one of those occasional inundations of friendly kith and kin to which our large connection and central situation exposed us, the manse became too narrow for its inmates, and

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<sup>1</sup> *The Pastor of Kilsyth*: a brief biography of Mr. Burns’ father, published some years ago, from which this sketch of the home life at Kilsyth is partly taken.

double-bedded rooms and extemporized shake-downs became the order of the day. Was there now and then, amid this universal quickness and alacrity, a slight tinge of sharpness in chiding the dreamy loiterer and the handless slut? Perhaps so: yet we children scarcely saw it, to whom she ever spoke in the true mother tones of gentleness and love. From her lips and at her knees we learned our earliest lessons of truth, and in her voice and face first traced, as in a clear mirror, the lineaments of that gentle and loving godliness which bath the promise of the life that now is and of that which is to come.”<sup>2</sup> Such was the element in which my brother’s earliest years were spent, and in which his first experiences of life were formed. There was another household, with which, second to our own, our most hallowed thoughts of home and of home life were associated—the manse of Strathblane, situated about twelve miles from Kilsyth, in a quiet valley at the foot of Ballagan, at the other end of the Campsie range. Dr. William Hamilton, the head of that household, and the father of the better known and well-beloved Dr. James Hamilton of London, was my father’s ancient friend, and in former days had been used, while the assistant minister of a church in Dundee, to visit us, especially at communion times, in our old home at Dun. His stately form, and a certain almost prophetic majesty of mien and bearing, powerfully impressed us, and his image and voice, as he paced up and down the manse parlour, in eager discourse or with rapt air reciting some favourite snatch of sacred song, remained ever afterwards a cherished tradition in the family. When in after-years the two friends found themselves again established within easy distance of each other, the old relation was resumed, and was kept up not only by the official inter-change of services at communion times, but by a cordial intimacy between the families which was signaled by occasional comings and goings in bright summer days along the romantic valley between. Those visits were always seasons of high enjoyment, and revealed to us a phase of the Christian home which was to us in some measure new. Dr. Hamilton was a man far above the common standard of his class and of his time, alike in intellectual stature and in moral elevation and strength. A ripe scholar, a profound divine, and a minister of singular fervour and sanctity, he was characterized at the same time by an enlargement and enlightened liberality of view in regard to all public questions civil and religious, at once admirable and rare. He was an ardent friend of the missionary cause while that cause was yet in its infancy and still suffered the full brunt of the world’s scorn. He was a reformer at a time when, to nine-tenths, of his order, reform, associated with ideas of revolution and church destruction, was a name of terror. I remember during the dart of the Reform Bill, when the whole land was astir with the excitement and the fear

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<sup>2</sup> *The Pastor of Kilsyth.*

of a movement which seemed to most of us like an irruption of the Vandals, hearing with dismay, how a bannered host of workmen from the print-fields in his neighbourhood had actually, at his own desire, filed, to the sound of drum, past his manse, encamped on the green lawn before the door, and received from the good pastor not only words of kindly counsel and encouragement, but “good cheer” also of another and more substantial kind. But it was in his study that he was most at home and in his glory. He had a hunger for books, which fortunately his ample means enabled him to gratify by the accumulation of stores which overflowed far beyond their proper sanctuary into every available nook and corner of the house, and which seemed to us, accustomed to more common things, one of the wonders of the world. The spirit of the father infected the children, and diffused through the place an air of studious application and still quietude which was almost cloistral. Yet was the house happy and cheerful withal. The favourite sports and pastimes, indeed, were like everything else about the place, of the intellectual cast, but none the less on that account bright and gladsome,—a boyish lecture to the literary society at the neighbouring print-fields; an animated discussion of the respective merits of Wilberforce and Brougham, and Grey, and Henry Melville and Dr. Chalmers; or a mock trial in the parlour in the evening, in which boys and girls alike bore their share, and the several parts of judge, jury, panel, and pleading counsel were sustained with an ability and gravity which alike astonished and confounded us. How vividly do I recall the very look and voice with which a fair and gentle girl, “the little one” and the favourite of the family, came for-ward, with a blithesome air which sadly belied her grim part, shouting, “I’m to be the panel.” James, of course, was senior counsel for the crown, as well as the presiding genius of the whole scene; William, his younger brother, and now a respected minister of the Free Church, sat, duly bewigged and gowned, as the most reverend judge, while the remaining parts, I am afraid, broke sadly down in my brother’s hands and mine. Altogether it was one of the brightest and holiest spots I have ever known on earth—a place which angels might well visit, or desire to look into in passing by on errands of mercy and grace; so that it seems quite in the natural course of things that there should have proceeded from it the author of the Mount of Olives and the Happy Home. We returned musing many thoughts, and feeling that we had got a look into a world to which, accustomed to a more outward and muscular style of life, we had been in great measure strangers. My brother’s bent, especially, was at this time decidedly in the “muscular” direction. He gave far greater promise of becoming a mighty hunter than a deep student bearing the pale hue of thought. Strong of limb and of sanguine temperament, his heart was in the open fields and woods, and in all manner of manly and athletic exercises. He spent long days with his fishing-rod on the Carron water on the other

side of the hills, along with a congenial friend from the village. He wandered for hours along the hedges and through the fields with an old carbine, borrowed from the village blacksmith, in search of sparrows and crows. He was famous for lifting up his axe upon the thick trees, at one time clearing the whole precincts of the superfluous growth of years by his unaided strength. He did yeoman's service on occasions in the hay or corn fields, and was in great request by the "minister's man" when a sudden emergency called for the aid of a volunteer force. I do not remember, at that time, any books which greatly interested him except these two—the Pilgrim's Progress, which he read over and over again during a time of confinement occasioned by an accident, and the Life of Sir William Wallace, bought with a half-crown given him when a very little boy by Dr. Hamilton. There were, however, few books then fitted to arrest the attention and stir the minds of the young, and especially of boys. There were no Martin Rattlers, or Old Jacks, or Tom Browns. Even such as there were had in their outward appearance a most uninviting aspect. The rude engravings of former days had just been banished, in the interests of high art and good taste, and the more graceful illustrations of present times had not yet come in. Thus the most enchanting of books had, just at that particular juncture, a most repulsive aspect. The Pilgrim's Progress was without an effigy even of Giant Pope or the Shepherds on the Delectable Mountains. Robinson Crusoe was without the shaggy umbrella and the footprint on the shore. Even the Scots Worthies and the Book of Martyrs were mere acres of black type, without one solemn gleam of the gathered faggots and the aspiring flames, and of the clasped hands and uplifted eyes of martyr faith and victory. Thus there was comparatively little then to allure or to keep within' doors a stirring boy, urged by a strong physical impulse toward the open fields and woods. Meanwhile, however, the essential matters of a common school education went on satisfactorily. He attended, all the time of his residence at home, the parish school of the place, then under the care of the Rev. Alexander Salmon, afterwards of Paisley and Sydney, a teacher of rare intelligence and skill, who was among the first Scottish schoolmasters to avail himself of the modern improved methods of tuition, and to substitute an intellectual interest for the old iron sway of the ferula. I have myself a most vivid recollection of the very time when the grim reign of terror came to an end, and the halcyon days of lively questioning and kindly moral influence began. Here my brother did his work well, and kept a good place in all his classes. He became a good reader, a good arithmetician and accountant, and learned, at least in a certain rough way, the elements of Latin; without, however, any kindlings of desire after further attainments in the higher learning. His thoughts were still all outward, and his highest ambition and declared resolution to be a country farmer, like the fathers of most of his school com-

panions and friends. And yet, even then, a touch of deeper feeling would now and then betray itself, which revealed the hidden fire that slumbered within. A touching instance of this I very vividly remember. The population of a dovecot which he owned as his special property, had become redundant, and the decree had gone forth from the higher powers that some of his favourites should fall a sacrifice to the public good. Yielding reluctant to the stern necessity, he undertook himself the office of executioner, which he deemed would be more mercifully discharged by his own hand than by any other; and planting himself carbine in hand at the corner of a wall at a little distance, took his aim resolutely but tremblingly at one of the devoted flock perched on the ridge of the house, between him and the sky. The shot missed its mark, but unhappily only partially. The poor bird was sorely wounded in the foot, but not killed; and gathering up the broken and bleeding limb beneath its wing, stood on the other, silent and motionless, a spectacle of agony. Instantly his heart smote him for the deed he had done; he was now, to his own sense, no more the executioner, but the cruel murderer; and he stood there rooted to the spot for hours together, as in bitter penance, gazing up with streaming eyes to the hapless victim, which seemed in its turn to look down reproachfully upon him. The whole scene, which is distinctly before me now, might almost have reminded one of Rispah, the daughter of Aiah, in her long watch beside the bodies of her slaughtered sons, “when she took sackcloth and spread it for her on the rock, from the beginning of harvest, until water dropped upon them out of heaven.” A circumstance, however, which now transpired, changed at once the whole course of his thoughts, and opened a new, and, as the event proved, a most momentous chapter in his life. A maternal uncle, a respected lawyer in Aberdeen, who happened to visit us at this time, not approving of the farming project, kindly invited William, then in his thirteenth year, to spend a winter with him, and take advantage of the higher training of the grammar-school of that city, then at the very height of its fame, under the distinguished rectorship of the Rev. Dr. James Melvin. I must here indulge myself with a passing tribute to the memory of a revered teacher, to whom my brother, with myself and many others, owed much—then well known within his own sphere, but since his death far more widely, as one of the first classical scholars of his day, and, more perhaps than any other man, the reviver in modern times of exact scholarship, and especially of Latin scholarship, in Scotland. In doing so, I avail myself of the graphic pencil of a distinguished alumnus of the school, who has with fond and loving hand drawn the portrait of his revered master:—”I have known many other men,” says the editor of Macmillan’s Magazine, “since I knew him—men of far greater celebrity in the world, and of intellectual claims of far more rousing character than belong to Latin scholarship—but I have known no one, and I expect to

know no one, so perfect in his type as Melvin. Every man whose memory is tolerably faithful can reckon up those to whom he is himself indebted; and trying to estimate at this moment the relative proportions of influence from this man and from that man encountered by me, which I can still feel running in my veins, it so happens that I can trace none more distinct, however it may have been marred and mudded, than that stream which as Melvin gave it was truly 'honey wine.' . . . . During our three years in the under-classes we saw Melvin only incidentally, and on the weekly gathering of the whole school in the public school-room; while the fact that he wore a gown and kept his hat on, while the other three masters were without gowns and had their hats off, greatly impressed the young ones. His authority over the other masters was never made in the least apparent, but it was felt to exist; and there was always an awful sense of what might be the consequence of an appeal to him in a case of discipline. No such appeal in my day ever ended in anything more serious than a public verbal rebuke; but that was terrible enough. For the aspect of the man—then in the prime of manhood, lean, but rather tall and well-shouldered, and with a face of the pale-dark kind, naturally austere, and made more stern by the marks of the small-pox—was unusually awe-compelling. The name 'Grim,' or more fully, 'Grim Pluto,' had been bestowed upon him, after a phrase in one of the lessons, by one of his early classes; and this name was known to all the school. When he entered the school gate the whisper in the public school would be, 'Here's Grim;' and, as he walked through the school into his own classroom, looking neither right nor left, with his gold watch-chain and seals dangling audibly as he went, all would be hushed. And yet, with all this fear of him, there was an affection and a longing to be in his classes, to partake of that richer and finer instruction of which we heard such reports.

"When one did come into the rector's immediate charge, one came to know him better. The great awe of him still remained. Stricter or more perfect order than that which Melvin kept in the two classes which he taught simultaneously, it is impossible to conceive. But it was all done by sheer moral impressiveness, and a power of rebuke, either by mere glance or by glance and word together, in which he was masterly. As a born ruler of boys, Arnold himself cannot have surpassed Melvin. And though there were wanting in Melvin's case many of those incidents which must have contributed to the complete veneration with which the Rugby boys looked at Arnold—the known reputation of the man, for example, in the wide world of thought and letters beyond the walls of the school—yet, so far as personal influence within the school was concerned, there was in Melvin some form of almost all those things that we read of in Arnold, as tending to blend love more and more, on closer intimacy, with the first feeling of reverence. Integrity and truthfulness, conjoined with a wonderful considerateness, were

characteristic of all he said and did. His influence was so high-toned and strict, that, even had he taught nothing expressly, it would have been a moral benefit for a boy to have been within it. It did one good even to look at him day after day as he sat and presided over us. As he sat now, in his own class-room, always with his hat off, one came to admire more and more, despite his grim and somewhat scarred face, the beauty of his finely-formed head, the short black hair of which, cringing close round it, defined its shape exactly, and made it more an ideal Roman head than would have been found on any other shoulders in a whole Campus Martius of the Aberdonians. One un-Roman habit he had, that of snuff-taking. But though he took snuff in extraordinary quantities, it was, if I may so say, as a Roman gentleman would have taken it—with all the dignity of the toga, and every pinch emphatic.

“In that teaching of Latin which Melvin perseveringly kept to as his particular business, a large portion of the work of his classes consisted, of course, of readings in the Latin authors, in continuation of what had been read in the junior classes. Here, unless perchance he began with a survey of the grammar, to see how we were grounded, and to rivet us afresh to the rock, we first came to perceive his essential peculiarities. Accuracy, to the last and minutest word read, and to the nicest shade of distinction between two apparent synonyms, was what he studied and insisted on, and this always with a view to the cultivation of a taste for pure and classic, as distinct from Brummagem Latinity. . . . The quantity read was not large—seldom more than a page a day—but every sentence was gone over at least five times—first read aloud by the boy that might be called on—then translated word for word with the utmost literality, each Latin word being named as the English equivalent was fitted to it—then rendered as a whole somewhat more freely and elegantly, but still with no permission of that slovenly practice of translation which is called ‘giving the spirit of the original,’ then analyzed etymologically, each important verb or noun becoming the text for an exercise up and down, backwards and forwards, in all appertaining to it; and lastly, construed or analyzed in respect of its syntax and idiom, the reasons of its moods, cases and what not. . . . Of course in the readings, whether from the prose writers or the poets, occasion was taken by Melvin to convey all sorts of minute pieces of elucidative historical and biographical information, in addition to what the boys were expected to have procured for themselves in the act of preparation, and in this way a considerable amount of curious lore about the Roman calendar, the Roman wines and the way of drinking them, &c., was gradually and accurately acquired. Never either did Melvin leave a passage of peculiar beauty of thought, expression, or sound, without rousing us to a sense of this peculiarity, and impressing it upon us, by reading the passage himself, eloquently and lovingly, so as to give effect

to it. Over a line like Virgil's description of the Cyclopes working at the anvil:

Illi inter sere magnâ vi brachia tollunt,

he would linger with real ecstasy, repeating it again and again with something of a tremble of excitement in his grave voice. Perhaps, however, it was in expounding his favourite Horace that he rose oftenest to what may be called the higher criticism. It was really beautiful to hear him dissect a passage in Horace and then put it together again thrillingly complete."

But it was in the matter of prose composition most of all, that the Aberdeen grammar-school then stood, and I believe still stands, facile prince's among the higher schools in Scotland. The great charm of this part of the work was the rigid and absolute accuracy which was exacted throughout, and the perfect confidence that, all being done in the school, beyond the reach of surreptitious aid from tutors and friends, everything was fair and square between one competitor and another. I believe that the universal adoption of this principle, instead of the present loose practice of giving exercises home to be manufactured any way which the lax consciences of tutors and pupils may acquiesce in, would do more than any one thing to revive the spirit of thorough scholarship in our Scottish schools. If any justification were needed of Dr. Melvin's method in this respect, it might be found in the universal interest, rising in all the better boys even to enthusiasm, which this part of the school work excited. "Two entire days in every week were devoted to 'the versions,' and these were the days of keenest emulation. In anticipation of them it was our habit to jot down in note-books of our own, divided alphabetically, and with index margins for the leading words, any specialties of phrase or idiom, any niceties about ut, quum, quad and quia, ilk and isle, uter and quit, suus and ejus, plerique and plurimi and the like, upon which Melvin dwelt in the course of our readings. With these manuscript 'phrase-books' and 'idiom-books' (containing doubtless much that might be found in print, but precious as compiled by ourselves) and with Ainsworth's Dictionary . . . we assembled on the morning of every 'version day,' and sure enough in the piece of English which Melvin then dictated to us, which was always a model of correct style and punctuation, and generally not uninteresting in matter, there were some of the traps laid for us against which he had been recently warning us. We sat and wrote the version—those who were done first (generally the first faction boys) going up to Melvin's desk to have them examined—who then became his assistants in examining the other versions so as to clear them all within the day."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> This does not exactly agree with my recollections. In my time it was only versions from the lower regions of the class that were committed to such 'prentice hands. Every pupil who had the slightest pretensions to scholarship, or capacity for scholarship, had his

. . . The system of marking was peculiar. You were classed, not by your positive merits of ingenuity, elegance and such like, but as in the world itself, by your freedom from faults or illegalities. Only between two versions coequal in respect of freedom from error was any positive merit of elegance allowed to decide the superiority. . . . There were three grades of error—the ‘animus, or as we called it, the mink, which counted as 1, and included misspellings, wrong choices of words, &c.; the medius, or midie, which counted as 2, and included false tenses and other such slips; and the maximus, or maxie, which counted as 4, and included wrong genders, a glaring indicative for a subjunctive, &c. On a maxie in the version of a good scholar, Melvin was always cuttingly severe. ‘*Ut . . . dixit,*’ he would say, underscoring the two words in a sentence where the latter should have been *diceret*; ‘*ut . . . dixit,*’ he would repeat, refreshing his frown with a pinch of snuff; ‘*ut . . . dixit,*’ he would say a third time, with a look in the culprit’s face as if he had murdered his father; ‘O William, William! you have been very giddy of late;’ and William would descend crestfallen, and be miserable for half a day.”

There is not an old Melvinian in all the world who will not recognize this picture, or fail to authenticate with a thrill of pleasure every line’ and shade of it. If “William” is still alive, he will have felt that look still upon him as he read these lines, as we ourselves can at this moment recall with a shudder just such another. My brother at once felt the fascination of the place and of the man, and caught the breath of a new existence, in which all his old dreams of farming and of a country life vanished out of sight. He fought his way steadily up the class till he reached the genial and exhilarating air of the highest “faction,” and closed the session as one of the rector’s best and most trusted scholars. When he returned home, even after the interval of a college session, his talk was still of Melvin and of the grammar-school, and was of such an enthusiastic kind as to kindle in me an irrepressible longing to explore the same Eldorado of golden knowledge and pure classic lore. The effects of the mental discipline thus acquired were lasting, and had an important influence on the whole course of his future life, forming in him once for all those habits of rigid accuracy, thorough work, and conscientious regard for rule and law which ever afterwards distinguished him; while at the same time awakening and training that remarkable faculty for the study of language which stood him in such good stead in the missionary labours of later years. From the school he passed to the University, standing fifth on the list of bursars or open scholars in Marischal College, from among more than a hundred competitors; and after two successive sessions, in which he obtained honourable distinction in all his classes, returned home in the

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exercise examined and appraised by the rector himself, either publicly before the class at the afternoon meeting or at home overnight.

spring of 1831, having completed, as was then thought, his education and full preparation for the work of his life. The nature of that work he had already chosen. His residence with his uncle at Aberdeen had had naturally enough the same effect upon him as the companionship of farmers' sons at the Kilsyth parish school, and he was now accordingly as decidedly set on the profession of the law, as before on a country life. His father, who had earnestly desired his dedication to the Christian ministry, gave his reluctant consent, and a few months afterwards he was settled with his uncle, Mr. Alexander Burns, a writer to the signet in Edinburgh, with the view of being bound as an apprentice, so soon as the necessary certificates from his college professors could be obtained.

But "man proposeth, God disposeth." "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord: for as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts." God had "girded" him for a far higher and nobler work than that which he had chosen for himself, though as yet "he did not know Him." Before all the certificates had arrived, and while yet the last of them was impatiently waited for, a change had taken place in the spirit of his mind, which translated him at once as into a new world and gave a new direction to his whole after-life. The extant memorials of the memorable event are not abundant, but explicit and deeply interesting. "While William was at Aberdeen," writes an elder sister, "a great change had come over our eldest sister, who from a life of gaiety in Edinburgh during two winters, was turned most decidedly with her face Zionwards, and left Edinburgh for ever. She returned to our quiet manse, desiring, whatever others did, that she might serve the Lord; and from this service she never drew back, but her path was as the shining light shining more and more until the perfect day—at Pesth, 18th February, 1865—when she passed into glory. I think the year 1831 was a year of grace in our family. I remember we began a practice of reading aloud between dinner and tea some religious book. Bridges on the 19th Psalm was with our sister a special favourite, and means of grace. On these occasions dear William, to our sorrow, without saying a word always slipped out, and he was to our view the feast likely subject of grace in the family. He always vehemently rejected the idea of being a minister, and said he wished to be a lawyer, because he 'saw lawyers rich and with fine houses.' Oh! what a contrast his after-life was to this! for one more conformed to his Saviour, in self-denial and in voluntary poverty, the world has never seen—at least one who was all this, without false asceticism or self-righteous pride.

"When, in this spirit, William went to Edinburgh to be bound apprentice to our uncle A. with the view of being a W.S., we mourned over him as one going to be 'bound' to the world; and this view seemed to have come over

his own mind when he found the different kind of society he was thrown into, from what he left behind in the manse. A joint letter we wrote him, to which he often afterwards referred as one of the chief means of awakening him, has passed from my mind, and a single sentence quoted from it in a letter of his which still remains is all that is left. The first dawn of hope regarding him is to be found in a letter of date 5th December, 1831, in which the following for him remarkable words occur, 'I am extremely obliged to you for your excellent letter, also to papa, and I look forward to our correspondence as a thing that shall afford me great pleasure when I am fairly settled away from that dear home where I have enjoyed so many happy days, and where in all likelihood I shall never be resident again. I wish you would recommend me to, or send me some good religious reading.' This request astonished us, and I think we sent him Boston's Fourfold Slate. Very soon after this he suddenly and unexpectedly walked in one evening into the dining-room at the old manse, with a graver look than was his wont; and in answer to our mother's exclamation, Oh! Willie, where have you come from? his answer was gravely, 'From Edinburgh.' 'How did you come?' 'I walked' [a distance of 36 miles]. There was then a silence, and standing on the hearth-rug, with his back to the fire, he said, 'What would you think, mamma, if I should be a minister after all?' His countenance showed that he was speaking in earnest, and he then told openly how the Lord had arrested him, and that he had no rest in his spirit till he should come home and obtain his parents' consent to relinquish the law and give himself to the service of Jesus in the ministry of the gospel. The inner history of this wonderful change you have in his own diary—this is as I saw it; and far distant as is the clay, I remember it vividly, and my feeling was that I was standing in the presence of a miracle. I could not contain my feelings, but rushed along the long passage which led to our father's study, and shutting the door threw myself on my knees and wept. After being a short time at home, he returned to Edinburgh with our parents' joyful consent to his being what they had long wished and prayed for—a minister of the everlasting gospel. By a singular providence he was free to do so. He had not been bound apprentice, owing to a delay in the arrival of one of his certificates of attendance at college; and it was during this interval that the whole current of his life was changed. It may be right to add that William had been all along, so far as ever known to me, perfectly free from all outward vice. I never knew of an act of duplicity or a bad word. This I think is important to be mentioned, as from his deep views of sin, he during all the course of his spiritual life spoke of himself in such terms of self-loathing, that those unacquainted with the facts might naturally suppose that he had been turned to

God from a life of open sin, as indeed is broadly hinted in an Aberdeen document recently given to the world.”<sup>4</sup>

Such was the event so far as it could be seen from the outside, even by those who stood the nearest to it. Happily we have another and still more authentic record of it from his own hand—a solemn deposition as before God, in regard to a sacred secret, over which before man he ever cast the veil of a deep and reverent reserve. It was drawn forth by a sudden gush of reminiscence, when, ten years afterwards, and after his own new life had become the germ of similar life to thousands of other souls, he unexpectedly found himself, in the course of a solitary evening walk, in the midst of those scenes which were linked to him with such infinite and deathless memories:—

“Edin., Tuesday, Nov. 16, 1841.—To-day I was chiefly occupied, as far as business is concerned, in preparing for the press the letters I sent some time ago to the Greenside Place school. In taking the air I walked over scenes which were indeed fitted to speak aloud of mercy to my favoured soul. I walked along York Place, and looked up to the windows of the room (No. 41, west side, upper flat) where, when reading Pike’s *Early Piety* on a Sabbath afternoon, I think about the middle of December, 183r, an arrow from the quiver of the King of Zion was shot by his Almighty sovereign hand through my heart, though it was hard enough to resist all inferior means of salvation. Who can understand the feelings with which I again revisited the spot. Alas! the windows in the roof above met my eye, as the place where a few months afterwards (in 1832) poor Uncle Alexander died in one day of cholera! Oh! what a contrast between the scenes of mercy and judgment exhibited by God in places so near each other! From this I walked down and revisited my old lodgings, No. 69 Broughton Place, where my earliest days as a child of grace were spent, and where first the Spirit of God shone with full light upon the glory of Jesus as a Saviour for such as I was. This was, I think, about the 7th of January, 1832. Although it was then, I remember, that the light of God first shone fully and transportingly on his word, and into my heart, I was never from the beginning, three weeks before, in utter darkness, but felt that God had been always willing to save me, that I was a self-murderer, and that now He was in his own sovereignty touching my heart and drawing me to himself for his own glory; and again, though about the time mentioned, I remembered to have beheld transporting wonders in God’s law, yet my peace following on this was far different indeed from a settled quiet frame of mind. I had many fears and many awful struggles with sin and Satan, and many sleepless nights of mingling joy and fear, and faith and hope, and love. Ebenezer! Halleluiah! Halleluiah! Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> It may be of more importance for me to state that my own thorough belief is in entire accordance with that here expressed. As a brother nearly of the same age, I had been constantly with him and shared his inmost thoughts; and I always understood from him that he had begun to tread those paths of folly which often lead to open sin, but never passed over the verge of the precipice. On the contrary, he seemed to regard it as a singular mercy from the Lord, that the effectual call of grace had come just in time to save him from a ruin otherwise, as it seemed to him, inevitable.

“*Wednesday*.—Yesterday morning I breakfasted with Mr. Bruce, and this morning with Mr. Brown (C. J. B.); on both occasions we had interesting conversations. Mr. Bruce seemed pleased to be reminded of old events, and promised to give me the dates of several sermons which I was benefited by when preached. The means by which my change of heart was brought about were these, I think—Mr. Bruce’s preaching, which engaged me much, and the fear of sudden death from the approach of cholera, were preparatory. A letter from my sisters at home, in which they spoke in a single sentence of going as pilgrims to Zion, and leaving me behind, proved a word in season and touched my natural feelings very deeply; for when sin had rendered me dead to every other feeling, I could not think of my Christian parents, and my godly home with all its sweet and solemn privileges, without an awful conflict of soul at the thought of parting with them for ever. I could think of parting with Christ, for I knew him not—alas! do I yet know him?—but to part with them was too much for me to bear. In this way the way was prepared, but as yet I am fully conscious that my heart was spiritually dead. However the set time came. I sat down, with solemn impressions arising from the causes now mentioned, to read a part of Pike’s *Early Piety*, which my dear father had given me at leaving home; (Ah! little did he know what use God was to make of it, little did the author of that solemn treatise know one of the purposes for which he wrote it;) and in one moment, while gazing on a solemn passage in it, my inmost soul was in one instant pierced as with a dart. God had apprehended me. I felt the conviction of my lost estate rushing through me with resistless power; I left the room and retired to a bedroom, there to pour out my heart for the first time with many tears in a genuine heart-rending cry for mercy. From the first moment of this wonderful experience I had the inspiring hope of being saved by a sovereign and infinitely gracious God; and in the same instant almost I felt that I must leave my present occupation, and devote myself to Jesus in the ministry of that glorious gospel by which I had been saved. From that day to this, blessed be Jehovah, I have been conscious more or less deeply of the possession of a new and holy principle, leading me to live by the faith of Jesus to the glory of God, and in the communion of the Holy Ghost. Salvation unto our God, who sitteth on the throne, and unto the Lamb!”

The only other extant memorial of this eventful time is contained in the following letter to his sisters, written soon after his unexpected visit to Kilsyth, and which is the first surviving blossom of the new life that had dawned upon him:—

“*Edinburgh, February 20th, 1832*.—MY DEAR SISTERS,—. . . I feel it often a great encouragement to me to persevere in that *life* upon which I have entered, that I do not *make for heaven alone*; but though there be few that find ‘the strait gate’ and the ‘narrow way,’ yet that my nearest and *dearest* friends upon earth are my fellow-pilgrims to the ‘heavenly Canaan.’ Let us encourage and exhort one another in following and *trusting* in the *Lamb* who was slain, and who now intercedes for all who trust in him, at the right hand of the Father. I have been apt, as is I believe the case with many young Christians, to make my safety depend upon my feelings, and consequently to feel miserable when not engaged in religious exercises, and to despise in some degree the ordinary business of life; but I have for some time past been coming to juster and more stable views. I had another conversation with Mr. Bruce about a week ago; I

was as much as on the former occasion delighted with him, and I trust edified. He had two admirable discourses last Sabbath (yesterday), the one a lecture from the 7th and 8th verses of the 6th of Matthew, and the other from Ephesians, 3d chapter and 12th verse, 'In whom we have boldness,' &c. They were both very much suited to my state, and I trust I was much benefited by them Mr. Moody and I are on the most intimate terms; he is one of the few that live near to God. . . .

"If the Lord spare us all, I look forward to the happiest meeting that ever we have had. We are now, my dearest sisters, linked together by a new tie, being members of the same body, and the children of the Almighty, our Father in heaven: but till then let us pray daily to Him for one another, and seek a nearer communion with Him to whom we have access with confidence by the blood of Jesus. Let not the question be with us, 'How near must we be to him in order to insure our safety?' but how much communion can we possibly attain to while here on earth. This is not our home, 'for we are dead, and our life is hid with Christ in God.' 'When He who is our life shall appear, then shall we also appear with Him in glory.' What a hope is this, That our eyes shall see Him, and that we shall dwell with Him for ever and ever! He now makes intercession for us at the Father's right hand. May we be 'kept by the POWER of God through faith unto salvation.' Let us have but one object in view, the kingdom of heaven, and all other necessary things shall be added unto us. All things shall work together for the eternal good of them that love God, and we must wait upon the Lord that he may give us this love. There is no object in this world, the contemplation of which is an adequate employment for that immortal and divine principle in us—the soul,' except the character of the 'Lord of Hosts;' with the contemplation of which, although we were to devote our entire lives, yet would we be compelled to exclaim, 'Thou art past finding out;' and this is the God to whom we approach with so little humility and contrition of soul. How wonderful that he should not only listen to us when we call on Him, but condescend to work in us by his Holy Spirit exciting us to draw near unto Him. We ought to strive to bring our fellow-creatures to a knowledge of their state, and of the mercy that is freely offered them: it is truly an awful thought, that anyone to whom the gospel is proclaimed should go down to that lake that burneth with fire and brimstone for ever. People are apt to think themselves independent creatures, and that none has a right to their services; but if we do not take God's mercy in Christ Jesus, we must take His wrath. I pity most of all those whom we call decent people, who, although they will hardly believe it, are in as unsafe a state as the openly profligate, as they do not build on Christ as the foundation. . . . The cholera is going on here though slowly, and I hope we might all be mercifully spared; but let us endeavour to say from the heart, 'The will of the Lord be done.' I have a letter to — ready, which I expect to have an opportunity of forwarding this week. Let us pray earnestly for him, that the Lord would open his heart to the truth; that we may go all on together to that blessed country to which Christ has purchased an admittance for all who trust in and follow Him. I cannot tell you all nor any of my thoughts on paper, but wait for a meeting with you, if the Lord will. Till then fare-well.—I remain, my dearest sisters, your truly affectionate brother,—WM. C. BURNS."

He remained still for a short time in the office of his uncle, who had already formed an exalted estimate of his ability and aptitude for business,

and of his prospects of future success, and who parted from him with unfeigned regret.

In the course of the summer he returned to Kilsyth, and by the beginning of November he was once more in Aberdeen, to resume the broken thread of his studies, with a view to the ministry of the Church of Scotland.