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Kilmarnock Weekly Post and County of Ayr Reporter

Saturday April 28th, 1860

Transcription of KILMARNOCK IN THE OLDEN TIME.

No. 4 BACK STREET.

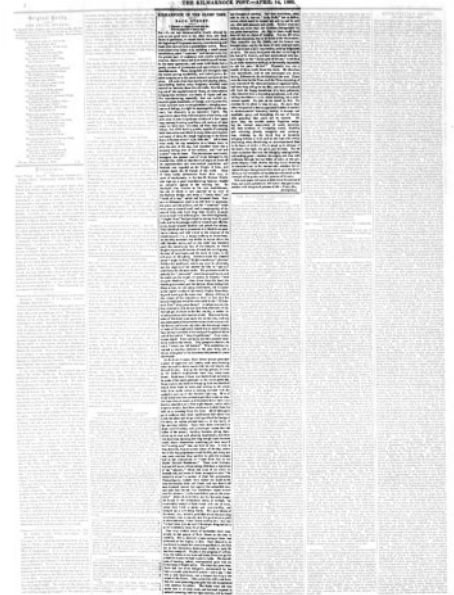
I would not be a child again,
Oh! no-oh! no, not I
And yet I love to think it o'er,
And live the days gone by,"

SIR. - We cannot say at what remote period Back Street was admitted as a distinct identity in Kilmarnock. But we have been long in possession of a receipt book for the payment of feu duty for a property in the street, and we here give the first receipt, written in a neat, tasteful hand of the German text order:

"Kilmarnock, 20th Janry. 1729. "Received from William Stevenson, Bonnetmaker, three pounds fourteen shill. ten pennies Scots, as the Feu duty of his purchase from John Blair, son to the Laird of Adamtoun, Cropt Imbiye and twenty eight. "(Signed) Ro. PATERSON."

Another payment is made, January 1735, of three pounds four shillings six pennies, "after allowance of ten shillings four pennies yearly for ground taken off for the new kirk," shewing pretty nearly the age of the present High Church. The receipt for Jan., 1750, is "received for the Right Honourable the Earl of of Glencairn from W. Stevenson." In 1757, "one pound fourteen shillings Scots is received after Deducing for James Armour's article, now Thos. Mickle's: discharged by WILLIAM PATERSON.

Many changes have occurred in Back Street since these bygone days, and one is inclined to ask, looking at its present condition, what would its then inhabitants have thought had they been told of its state now, and of the splendid bridge by which it is surmounted. The late Duke of Bridgewater conceived the magnicent project of crossing rivers and valleys on his estate by means of a canal without locks. James Brindley supported him in his views, but advised him to take the advice of an experienced engineer. The Duke did so, and from the far-seeing gentleman received the sapient



reply that "he had often heard of castles in the air, but had never learned before where any of them could be erected." Had the wise men of Back Street, 130 years since, or even sixty years since, been told that an unbroken series of arches would extend from above their old bowling-green, over Back Street, Soulis Street, the river, and away into the open fields, and that along the one magnificent bridge which they t bore there would be sweeping at the rate of twenty or thirty miles an hour, carriages of traffic, and filled with human beings, poor and rich, great and small, for the trifling charge of a penny a mile, the assertion would have called forth supreme derision, and the very wisest would have shook his head and cried "castles in the air." But there now it stands, palpable as the airdrawn dagger of the dramatist. Not so evanescent, however, for there it may be expected to remain, an enduring monument of human skill and adventure - a monument, we may say, too, of the improvement of the age, though not for the special improvement of Back Street. It is all very good to be elevated to the pure sunshine up yonder, where the prospect far and wide is verdant and blooming; where the extended habitations of life and activity meet the view; where rising suns and setting suns are seen, rolling in silver beauty or in golden lustre; but look we to the stand of the Colossus on whose shoulders we are placed and we see Back Street dwindled into a lane, poor, insignificant, and fragmentary, the very picture of gloom and desolation, where the moving objects on the narrow pathway are at best but dwarfish, and the urchins which lazily crawl about "appear like mice."

But we must resume our contact with things and persons sixty years ago. Let us give education and the ladies the foremost place in our remarks. Near to the railway arch, and in the back ground of the property called "Cochrane's Land," stood an academy. No; a seminary. No; but "the wife's schule." No more than her neighbours was she allowed the name of Mrs; and we do not know if even the not unenviable title of "wife" could in strict propriety be given to her. She was always neat and shining as "a new preen," and in public moved along with a self satisfied air, a manner thought to be all but indispensable in those who take it upon them to start the young ideas. She held sway in her small one-eyed room for many a day, and it was often a wonder to us, who sat at the feet of the Messrs Fyfe, how she dealt out her authority and her lore. She had a pretty good number who profited by her instruction, but woe, woe, out of doors to those who were so poor spirited as to give themselves up to henpecking in the way they did. In and about the same land resided John Templeton, James we Finingham, senior, and James Fulton, first-rate men and staunch antiburghers - a name which spoke proudly for its possessors. On the authority of the latter of these worthies rested the truth of "a shoor of blue sic bonnets" having fallen in the Clerk's holm about or preceding a little "the Heelandman's year." A little farther down the street lived "the wee Marshalls, as like ane anither as twa peas." They were retiring bodies, and "coost a loop of the stockin, and sell't a bit bake for a kinna throughpitten." Below the Marshalls stood a frail sombre-looking house, the aspect of which would not have disgraced a Bastile. At one of the upper windows, or rather airholes, generally open, constantly sat an old man, Laird Something, with a red night-cap, or rather red turned black. We imagined his look to be exceedingly forbidding, and when his stern eye would meet our shrinking gaze, we expected anything rather than good luck for that day. Who were the other inmates of that gloomy the tenement memory does not say, but we

think they were of migratory character, and held a kind of imperiam in imperio, being in but not of Back Street. Below that again was an inn - yes, an inn - John Fleming's inn. John sold good ale, and sterner stuff also. John's successor was Mungo Duncan, but East George Street now overruns the place, and what care its many passengers about the ale, or the mirth and jolity which were there sixty years since. We think that in the next house lived the Jeemie Baird of our first paper, the happiest mortal, perhaps, in Back Street. Time with its leaden wings hovers over many of the rich and great, but over Jeemie they were of C aerial lightness. Over the "chappin" some days of the week would pass unheeded, but in some quiet moment when progress would be reported, the still blessed songster would say, "This week's almost over boys, but hare at the next." At the very bottom of the street lived a respectable family of the name of Tinnoch or Tannoch, who, with the family of Charles Thomson, at the extremity of the other side, were a step towards the aristocracy, and the general community were well pleased to acknowledge them as "a wee bit aboon," Beyond Tinnoch's was a serpentine passage, the intricacies of which would have taken the making of a Maghellen to find out. Whether it had its outlet in the Great Pacifle, or somewhere about Croft Street, it would be somewhat risky to say.

These officious remarks of ours comprehend the principal characters and conditions in Back Street proper, about the beginning of the present century, so far as we can think of. But it may not be out of place to notice that Mr McKay, in his "History of Kilmarnock," relates the following circumstance relating to Back Street. He says in page 185, first edition - "Nine or ten years prior to this time (1801), the body of an old woman named Jenny Whitley, who hanged herself in Back Street, met with a fate revolting to humanity. It was taken by stealth from her own house, and thrown into a pit in the vicinity of Riccarton. It was afterwards brought back to Kilmarnock and boiled during the night at the Town Green, in a large pot which had been taken from the door of an ironmonger's shop. This was done, we believe, by some individuals who wanted her bones to form a skeleton." We cannot say where Jenny's house stood, and the circumstances of her melancholy end were before our day. Many a time did we hear the story of Jenny Whitley rehearsed, and often did the ghost of the big pot and the "stennars," which we thought were at the skinwork above Green Street, rise before our imagination, giving a most unpleasant sensation.

The thoroughfare running between Back Street and Fore Street was long a nondescript place, and perhaps claimed affinity with the former. Next to Back Street stood "Ringan Jamieson's kiln," where now stands the flourishing academy of Mr Gunnyon. The kiln, after being converted into a wright's shop, took fire, and on the site the present respectable building was erected. Next to the kiln stood an alarmingly frail house, where resided John Wyllie, a tailor, who made our first boyish habiliments. We only remember the dread we felt when we entered the premises, dark as Erebus, and by the help of a rope guided ourselves up the flight of stairs to the dingy apartment of the kind old man, who put our fears to rest by his calm and gentle manner. Nothing but the bright prospect of new garments could have induced us to risk the gloom and difficulty on the way to the man of stitches. Opposite this there was a carpet work belonging to the late Mr Robert Wyllie, New Street. Farther on was the house or inn of Ninian Jamieson, who was long a principal carrier to Glasgow,

serving people from all parts of the town. He was succeeded in business by Robert Wardrop. On the same north side of the street resided barber Hodge, to whose shop, especially on Saturday evenings, there was a great resort, and which proved a principal focus for news and stories, whether domestic or foreign. Here, in a dirty, dark background, surrounded by toppledown houses, stood the schoolhouse of John Thomson, precentor in the Low Church, who commanded a good school, but like many another in the line, "had fanght enough to get up his bawbees, no to speak o' the fash he had wi' thae sorrows o' weans"

We doubt not, sir, that many, from different standpoints, could present to you and your readers a more gratifying view of Back Street, but we hope that our imperfect sketches will not be altogether devoid of interest; and, willing to bring forward anything enhancing to the locality, we wish to allude to a few individuals somewhat identified with it. The late Major Parker of Assloss was long a prominent and interesting personage in Back Street. He took his daily ride from his town-house in Green Street to his estate at "Sliddery Braes," and regularly as the morning came his jolly presence was seen in our humble street. He seemed always a happy man when mounted, and had very little of hauteur about him, though he might have a consciousness of the respect he inspired. He was glad enough to value the rendered honour of any one, but always exchanged special civilities with John Todd, who was never more at home than when he was out to receive the major's gracious smile and bland inquiry. Recruiting parties, whom we may class here, always took Back Street in their rounds, and not unfrequently have we seen a double row of sergeants, followed by a long retinue of musicians, privates, and recruits, all in pride and full of spirits, for then was the time when the army was truly an estate in the realm. In later times, though not very recently, Back Street was honoured by being the residence for a time of two gentlemen now at the head of high and most prosperous educational establishments in our country. In it dwelt one of the most distinguished poets of the present day, and one of the best public story-tellers that we have. The editor and proprietor of the Kilmarnock Miscellany, Captain of the late Rifle Brigade, and no mean poet, also resided in the place. And, though last not least, a prosperous merchant and persevering, energetic newspaper proprietor, who has been more successful, and has done more to give the town of his nativity the benefit of such a publication than all preceding effort, whether by individuals or combined attempts.

As we hinted at the commencement of our communications, Back Street bids fair for extinction as a street and the probability is that one frail building after another will give way as the requirements of Portland Street shall be more pressing. The thought is solemnizing that the bustle and activity of life which there existed in such abundance, should be followed by the silence and dreariness of decay. But the change is compensated by the reflection that all around a more healthful and vigorous life is found to exist; so that though this small portion of Kilmarnock should deteriorate, or even be obliterated, the town itself still flourishes in rapidly advancing beauty and splendour. This is but the common lot. One flourishing part of the world, after another, becomes dead to activity. and, from that particular stand-point, universal desolation is apprehended; but the proud swell of life and civilization is going on beyond the circumscribed place of observation; and the improvement of mankind is more decided and still more extensive, while the fruits of the sublime

depths of genius appear in more beautiful, as well as in more useful forms. It may be, too, that the special types of our species for exalted genius, are not so marked or great as in the world's earlier ages, but if we have a subdivision of talent - as every man in the present age is reputed a giant in intellect compared with the mass of our rude forefathers so must we still look to find no retrogression in mental power, but the reverse, and a consequent advancement in every thing calculated to please the taste and to promote the convenience and comfort of our race. We would in fine say that the transmission of power and privileges granted by Providence to any particular portion of the human family, does not argue their entire withdrawment, for their reflex influence may be still enjoyed. But such a transmission may indicate that there may have been a misimprovement of the blessings conferred, and the thought of this economy of the great and wise Ruler of the Universe should stimulate alike individuals and communities to a proper appreciation of the benefits in their possession, and to such a use of them as will in some measure correspond with the magnitude and importance of the trust. -Yours, &c. ANTIQUITAS.