

Gaelic Language

Archibald Farquharson.

TIREE, -10th September, 1869.

The following Letter on this interesting subject appeared in the Perthshire Advertiser of last Thursday.

Sir,—Any man that has a forty, or even a twenty, years' acquaintance with the Highlands of Perthshire, cannot but perceive that the Gaelic is fast losing ground, and must come to the conclusion, that should things go on for the next sixty years as they have gone on during the last twenty years, the Gaelic will cease to be the language of that large district of country. If there was ever a machinery at work for producing a certain result, there is one at present in active operation—a united and a determined effort is put forth, perhaps not intentionally, to banish the Gaelic entirely out of the country. If all this was the effect of Christianity, I for one ought to rejoice ; but I am certain it is not so, that it has more of the horned antichrist in it than of anything else.

I ask those who have the management of our schools—and let their consciences answer the question—Do you think, gentlemen, that Christianity would introduce the Latin rudiments and the English grammar into our schools, have them learned and taught, and at the same time exclude the Gaelic New Testament without being either read or taught at all? What would the great Author of Christianity think were He to attend the examination of one of our Highland schools and find the children taught in all the other branches of education, but not able to read the history of His own birth, and life, and death, and resurrection in their mother tongue? Would He not frown upon the teacher and his patrons with a frown to them so intolerable, as to wish the earth would open its mouth and swallow them alive, to hide them from His dread presence.

Were those who have the management of our schools truly under the influence of real Christianity, I have no doubt that they would come to the unanimous conclusion that the Gaelic ought first to be taught; which would not only

be the Christian, but also the natural and the rational, way of teaching our youth. Understanding the words they read would exercise their judgments as well as their memory, and be a source of greater encouragement to them than to be groping their way like the blind in reading a language they scarcely know anything about. And when they could read the New Testament, to commence at once with the English alphabet, pronunciation, spelling, and reading ; and as they went along, to translate every word into Gaelic. The little folk would become big in their own eyes when they felt that they were able to master the Sassenach's hard sayings, being aided to do so by another, as well as by the teacher. This method would impart a stimulus in our schools to the youthful mind, such as does not at present exist, and be the most effectual for imparting not only the knowledge of both languages, but the knowledge of the great salvation also to our countrymen. Should the schoolmasters go on as at present, backed as they are by their patrons, teaching no Gaelic whatever to their scholars, not even the alphabet, that race of men that was at one time called "The Perthshire Highlanders," shall cease to exist; and I have no hesitation in affirming that, taking them as a whole, a nobler race of men did not exist under the British dominions. Should that ever take place, their descendants might become men of intellect, but without the warm hearts that animated their forefathers. If men were all intellect, without affections, the English language would certainly be the best; but men constituted as they are, I affirm, without fear of contradiction, that it is not the best. Those but partially acquainted with the Gaelic have scarcely any idea of its great power over the soul; it will stir up affections and awaken feelings that the English would scarcely move at all.

I was grieved to find several of the ministers averse to the Gaelic, and sincerely wishing that it would die a natural death. Not accustomed to speak it in the family circle, and very seldom in conversing with their parishioners, it has become irksome to them to preach in it. The energy of their souls is put forth in delivering their well studied, well composed, superfine English discourses; and by the time they commence

the Gaelic service their strength is gone. Their hearers are aware of this, and many of them retire, leaving them to perform their uphill, their disagreeable, task to the few that remain. Their concluding wish, though not expressed, is that the schoolmaster would hasten his work and help to introduce that millenium when Gaelic preaching shall cease,—when nothing but pure English shall be taught in all the pulpits from John o'Groat's to Lands end.

Dr Alex. Stewart of iNloulin, sixty years'ago, preached the gospel as purely as any in the Highla, nds of Perthshire, .and yet I am convinced that his English discourses had comparatively but little effect. That, however, was not the case with his Gaelic discourses—they were the power of God to the salvation of many. He put forth all the energy of his great soul in delivering them, conscious that he was using God's appointed instrument for pulling down the strongholds of Satan, Being a first-rate Gaelic scholar, and constantly in the habit of using it freely^in'his intercourse with his parishioners, he always felt at home in preaching in it, I am convinced more so than in English, Doctor as he was, because he was aware that he was addressing the people about the great concerns of their souls in the language of their hearts and their homes. It was in his time that Farquharson, a native of Glentilt, with his Gaelic preaching, set in flames and find the children tawght in all the other branches of education, but not able to read the history of His own birth, and life, and death, and resursection in their mother tongue? Would He not frown upon the teacher and his patrons with a frown to them so intolerable, as to wish the earth w^ould open its mouth and swallow them alive, to hide them from His dread presence. Were those who have the management of our schools truly under the influence of real Christianity, I have no doubt that they would come to the unanimous conclusion that the Gaelic ought first to be taught ; which would not only be the Christian, but also the natural and the rational, way of teaching our youth. Understanding the words they read would exercise their judgments as well as their memory, and be a source of greater encouragement to them than to be groping their way like the blind in reading

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With regard to those native Highlanders who are anxious that the Gaelic should die away, I am at a loss to account for their strange wish. I cannot understand what stuff they are made of at all. Are they men? If so, what men are they? Are they Highlanders, or Lowlanders, or what? They cannot be Highlanders, they are ashamed to be considered as such; they are deserters. They cannot be Lowlanders either. What then are they? They are nothing; no men at all. Like them, T am also a native Highlander, and cannot easily conceive how they have such different views and feelings. The more I feel myself to be a Christian, the more I feel myself to be a man; and if there is anything at all that makes me feel proud as a man, it is this—that I am a Gaelic-speaking native Highlander; and as for those who are differently minded, I am convinced there must be some cause for it. It would appear that the real cause is this: They have become influenced by something foreign to their nature. Some are influenced by a desire to become genteel, polite, fashionable, and imagine that speaking

the Gaelic would make them low, vulgar, disrespectful. These would-be ladies and gentlemen are traitors to the Gaelic, a disgrace to their countrymen, and the very scum of the whole Highlands. Others are influenced by their families, none of which speaks anything but pure English. The Highlander has been fairly vanquished in his own house—completely carried away by the current. Had he been differently circumstanced, he no doubt would be a different man. If they are men they ought to be men to the backbone, and not to be ashamed to own, before the whole world, that they are true, hearty, Gaelic-speaking Christian Highlanders. There are many, however, in the Highlands who cannot speak the Gaelic, and yet who would consider it an honour to be able to do so. It is a shame and a lasting disgrace to Highlanders, yes and to Lowlanders too, to stand by with folded arms and closed lips, like abject slaves, witnessing the treatment which their respective languages are receiving from those who have the management of their schools; which are completely laid aside, trampled upon, despised. It is true that the language taught in their schools (if properly understood, but that's the difficulty), is the best that could be used for informing the mind, convincing the judgment, and enlightening the understanding; but not the best for influencing the soul and moving the affections: and how can it be so, seeing it is destitute of that subduing melody inherent in the Gaelic. To say that melody does not affect the souls of men is as absurd as to say that the meridian sun does not impart heat. I believe it is an understood fact that the English language has no melody compared with the broad Scotch. The Gaelic may not surpass the latter in the melody that soothes and pleases the mind, but certainly it does surpass it in the melody that stirs up and moves the affections. The former resembles the shrill sweet tones of the violin, the latter the soft tones of the organ, had they a little of the stirring pipe and bagpipe. The former would make a man exceedingly pleased, the latter arouse him to action. Were Scotchmen, besides their knowledge of the English, able also to speak their own native languages well, they would, with the exception of Welshmen, be exalted in point of

privilege above any in Great Britain, having the best of languages for the understanding and for the affections—for giving them clear heads and warm hearts—which Englishmen might well envy. But by not speaking their own native languages, the one cannot with any degree of propriety be called Scotchmen, nor the others Scotch Highlanders, which shuts them out from the privilege and the satisfaction they would otherwise enjoy. I ask to what are we indebted for the sweet, the delicious melodies of our native country? To what? but to the broad Scotch and our Highland Gaelic. And are Scotchmen to allow the Master of Arts, with his artificial English, to banish the languages that gave birth to these melodies entirely out of the country ?

I have been led to believe that the Gaelic is more respected at present by the upper class of society in the Highlands of Perthshire than it has been for a long time. Her gracious Majesty's known partiality to Highlanders has had a tendency to fan the flame. His Grace the Duke of Athole speaks it, and his children are taught to do so too. Indeed, I have been told that they speak nothing else. May the Atholites follow his example in that respect, and ever deserve the name of Athole Highlanders ! May the rapid Tilt ever influence, imparting the strength of its velocity to the Garry, the Tummel, and the Tay, all the way to Dunkeld.

The Gaelic also has never been so much respected in the city of London as at present. The Highlanders there are uniting, and instead of losing it are actually acquiring more knowledge of it, and more fluency in speaking it. A man at the diggings in Australia, who had scarcely any Gaelic at all, was forced to acquire the knowledge of it for his own safety. He considered his life safe only amongst Highlanders. In every part of the world where they have settled, the Gaelic is more respected by them than it is by those they have left. Wherever they go they take their associations along with them, and never forget that they are Highlanders. A Mr Sinclair, the successor of Dr Macgregor, Nova Scotia, lately visited the land of his forefathers, the Island of Tiree, and I question if there are half-a-dozen in the whole Highlands who speak the Gaelic more purely, more correctly, and with

greater energy and fluency than he does. He spoke in very high terms of several of the Athole people who settled in that quarter, declaring that they had succeeded much better than many of those who left the Western Islands. And I have no doubt that the Atholites in Nova Scotia speak much better Gaelic than the Atholites in Athole itself.

As a Christian, in the sincerity of my heart I would say to Highlanders, rally round your Gaelic, have it taught to your children, let it ever be the language of your firesides, of your devotions in surrounding the family altar, and never, never be ashamed of it while the pulse of life beats within. By so doing you will show yourselves men, and gain more respect from Englishmen and Lowlanders than by forsaking it. I have studied the English more than I have done the Gaelic, and even prefer it as a written language in prose, but never in verse for being sung, or as spoken. It has neither the sweet melody to gratify my ear, nor the pathetic glow to warm my heart at all which the Gaelic has. A region where nothing but pure English was spokea would be too cold for my nature.

While it is desirable that Highlanders should ever be a Gaelic-speaking and a Gaelic-reading race, it is equally desirable that they should also be an English-reading, an English-writing, and, when occasion requires it, an English-speaking, race also.

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