

Classic Poetry Series

William Hamilton
- poems -

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William Hamilton(1704-1754)

Best known for his Scottish dialect poem, 'The Braes of Yarrow', William Hamilton was born in Bangour and succeeded to the Bangour family estate after his brother's death in 1750. His health is said to have been delicate, leading him to spend a deal of his time indoors, in study; where he became enthusiastic about literature, and began to write poetry.

Hamilton has been described as an 'adventurer in English literature.' Many Scottish poets before Hamilton's time had composed their works in Latin. Hamilton was among the first to write in English and Scottish dialect. Some single poems were published in Allan Ramsay's Teatable Miscellany in 1723; his first published collection was a pirated publication in 1748, without his name, consent or knowledge, and full of errors. He was abroad when it appeared, and though on his return to Scotland he corrected and edited many of those poems, it would be his friends who would publish the first genuine volume - Poems on Several Occasions - after his death.

The volume appeared in 1760, and did not attract much notice at first, until it was praised in a criticism by Professor Richardson of Glasgow, appearing in The Lounger. 'The poems of Hamilton display regular design, just sentiments, fanciful invention, pleasing sensibility, elegant diction, and smooth versification... Mr Hamilton's imagination is employed among beautiful and engaging.. engaging tenderness.' This judgement was backed up by stronger praise from Mr M'Kenzie, the editor of The Lounger, and echoed by Lord Woodhouselee.

Hamilton is often spoken of as a Jacobite, but his involvement was something of a flirtation. He joined the cause of Prince Charles (Bonny Prince Charlie) in the insurrection of 1745, gaining the Jacobite label and forced exile to France after the prince's defeat at the Battle of Culloden. His health would deteriorate as a cause of his trials, though he would be pardoned as a result of his friends' influence in the space of a few years.

Hamilton wrote a great deal of love poetry which, over the years, have appeared in various anthologies and collections.

The Braes Of Yarrow

'BUSK ye, busk ye, my bonnie, bonnie bride!
Busk ye, busk ye, my winsome marrow!
Busk ye, busk ye, my bonnie, bonnie bride!
And think nae mair on the braes of Yarrow!'

'Where got ye that bonnie, bonnie bride?
Where got ye that winsome marrow?'
'I got her where I durst not well be seen—
Pu'ing the birks on the braes of Yarrow.'

'Weep not, weep not, my bonnie, bonnie bride!
Weep not, weep not, my winsome marrow!
Nor let thy heart lament to leave
Pu'ing the birks on the braes of Yarrow.'

'Why does she weep, thy bonnie, bonnie bride?
Why does she weep, thy winsome marrow?
And why dare ye nae mair weel be seen
Pu'ing the birks on the braes of Yarrow?'

'Lang maun she weep, lang maun she, maun she weep,
Lang maun she weep with dule and sorrow;
And lang maun I nae weel be seen
Pu'ing the birks on the braes of Yarrow.

'For she has tint her lover, lover dear—
Her lover dear, the cause of sorrow;
And I have slain the comeliest swain
That ever pu'ed birks on the braes of Yarrow.

'Why runs thy stream O Yarrow, Yarrow, reid?
Why on thy braes is heard the voice of sorrow?
And why yon melancholious weeds
Hung on the bonnie birks of Yarrow.

'What's yonder floats on the rueful, rueful flood?
What's yonder floats? O dule and sorrow!
'Tis he, the comely swain I slew
Upon the duleful braes of Yarrow.

'Wash, O wash his wounds, his wounds in tears,
His wounds in tears of dule and sorrow;
And wrap his limbs in mourning weeds,
And lay him on the braes of Yarrow.

'Then build, then build, ye sisters, sisters sad,
Ye sisters sad, his tomb with sorrow:
And weep around, in woeful wise,
His hapless fate on the braes of Yarrow.

'Curse ye, curse ye, his useless, useless shield,
My arm that wrought the deed of sorrow,
The fatal spear that pierced his breast—
His comely breast on the braes of Yarrow!

'Did I not warn thee not to, not to love,
And warn from fight? But, to my sorrow,
Too rashly bold, a stronger arm
Thou met'st, and fell on the braes of Yarrow.'

'Sweet smells the birk, green grows, green grows the grass,
Yellow on Yarrow's braes the gowan;
Fair hangs the apple frae the rock,
Sweet the wave of Yarrow flowing!'

'Flows Yarrow sweet? As sweet, as sweet flows Tweed;
As green its grass, its gowan as yellow;
As sweet smells on its braes the birk,
The apple from its rocks as mellow.

'Fair was thy love, fair, fair indeed thy love;
In flowery bands thou didst him fetter:
Though he was fair, and well beloved again
Than me, he never loved thee better.

'Busk ye then, busk, my bonnie, bonnie bride!
Busk, ye, busk ye, my winsome marrow!
Busk ye, and lo'e me on the banks of Tweed,
And think nae mair on the braes of Yarrow!'

'How can I busk, a bonnie, bonnie bride?

How can I busk, a winsome marrow?
How lo'e him on the banks of Tweed
That slew my love on the braes of Yarrow!

'O Yarrow fields, may never, never rain
Nor dew thy tender blossoms cover!
For there was basely slain my love—
My love as he had not been a lover.

'The boy put on his robes, his robes of green,
His purple vest—'twas my ain sewing:
Ah, wretched me! I little, little knew
He was in these to meet his ruin!

'The boy took out his milk-white, milk-white steed,
Unheedful of my dule and sorrow;
But ere the to-fall of the night
He lay a corpse on the braes of Yarrow.

'Much I rejoiced, that woeful, woeful day;
I sang, my voice the woods returning;
But lang ere night the spear was flown
That slew my love and left me mourning.

'What can my barbarous, barbarous father do,
But with his cruel rage pursue me?
My lover's blood is on thy spear;
How canst thou, barbarous man, then woo me?

'My happy sisters may be, may be proud—
With cruel and ungentle scoffin'
May bid me seek, on Yarrow's braes,
My lover nailed in his coffin.

'My brother Douglas may upbraid,
And strive with threat'ning words to move me:
My lover's blood is on thy spear,
How canst thou ever bid me love thee?

'Yes, yes, prepare the bed, the bed of love!
With bridal sheets my body cover!
Unbar, ye bridal maids, the door;

Let in the expected husband lover!

'But who the expected husband, husband is?
His hands, methinks, are bathed in slaughter.
Ah me! what ghastly spectre's yon,
Comes in his pale shroud bleeding after?

'Pale as he is, here lay him, lay him down;
O lay his cold head on my pillow:
Take off, take off these bridal weeds,
And crown my careful head with willow.

'Pale though thou art, yet best, yet best beloved!
Oh! could my warmth to life restore thee,
Ye'd lie all night between my breasts!
No youth lay ever there before thee.

'Pale, pale indeed! O lovely, lovely youth!
Forgive, forgive so foul a slaughter;
And lie all night between my breasts!
No youth shall ever lie there after.'

Return, return, O mournful, mournful bride!
Return, and dry thy useless sorrow!
Thy lover heeds nought of thy sighs—
He lies a corpse on the braes of Yarrow."

William Hamilton

The Faithful Few: An Ode

While Pow'r triumphant bears unrival'd Sway,
Propt by the Aid of all-prevailing Gold;
While bold Corruption blasts the Face of Day,
And Men, in Herds, are offer'd to be sold;
Select, Urania, from the venal Throng,
The Faithful Few, to grace the deathless Song!

To thee, chaste Nymph, by Jove and Fate, is giv'n
The sacred Charge of the Celestial Bays;
Thou raisest Heroes to their native Heav'n,
And point'st the Objects of eternal Praise.
And in thy Records, dear to future Fame,
Each Son of Liberty inscribes his Name.

When o'er a Nation Fraud and Guilt prevail,
And, fane, all Question and Enquiry shun,
Thine is the impartial Sword,-and thine the Scale
To weigh the Crime, and make the Actors known:
From Britain's Eyes the deadly Mist to cast,
And bid her waken, lest she sleep her last!

Begin, bright Goddess, the celestial Strain;
To lofty Notes accord the tuneful Lyre:
Almeria shall lead on the shining Train,
Whose Looks the Love of Liberty inspire.
Let lower Beauties fetter those who fee;
None should behold a Pallas, but the Free.

So when great Juno came near Latium's Land,
Detain'd, by Fate, the Guardian Vessel stood,
No human Force could make it touch the Strand,
Fix'd, it remain'd, in Tyber's rapid Flood,
Till one bright Vestal, (such is Virtue's Pow'r!)
Dissolv'd the Charm, and drew the Gift on Shore.

Nor less the Chief, whom, bless'd in Myra's Charms,
The sacred Love of Liberty inspires;
Whose generous Breast the same great Passion warms,
That brightly glow'd in his Heroic Sires.
How justly are the Patriot-Names ally'd,
How softly pair'd, a Douglas and a Hyde.

See Hamilton, with Lustre, next appear,
A Prince descended from a Royal Race.
Behold his easy Mien, and graceful Air;
What noble Freedom triumphs in his Face?
Bright may his Virtues ever be confest,
As the fair Star that guards his Patriot Breast.

Descended from an ancient faithful Line,
Assume, Montrose, thy undisputed Place.
Who doubts the Virtues of thy Race are thine,
May read a Confutation in thy Face:
Where Grandeur is with Goodness temper'd seen;
Soft Beams of Light, that shew the Day within.

Nor shall the Muse, great Ker, thy Name conceal,
Admir'd in Counsels, as in Arts polite;
Till Knowledge sink, and publick Spirit fail,
Thy Merit shall appear in all its Light.
Still may the Azure Band embrace thy Knee,
Evil to him that Evil thinks of thee.

But who approaches next Urania's View,
Sedate, with calm and philosophick Air?
Soon, Tweeddale, must the Muse acknowledge you,
In Youth a Sage, in Grandeur still sincere;
The Friend of Men. Continue, with Applause,
The firm Assertor of your Country's Cause.

Nor thou, the Pride of thy illustrious Race,

Round whom united Virtues form a Day!
Shall in the fair Procession want thy Place.
The Courts no longer shed their tinsel Ray.
In Britain's Annals shall a Rothes shine
Amongst the foremost Heroes of his Line.

Buchan, to Truth and sacred Honour just!
The Muse with Pride thy Title would repeat
Who rather than betray a Nation's Trust,
Unblemish'd chose with Glory to retreat;
Thine shall the Praise remain-when Life is done,
And all the Sons of Slavery sleep unknown.

Mild Haddington, whose Breast's with Learning fraught,
Receive the Tribute of unpurchas'd Praise;
Thine is the Honour to retire unbought,
And persevere in Virtue's sacred Ways!
Nor less becomes the Man the Muses love,
And all the Friends of Liberty approve.

Great Aberdeen, whose penetrating Sight,
Thro' ministerial Cobwebs well can spy;
Can bring the Depths of State-Deceit to Light,
The Muse unnotic'd must not pass you by:
Tho' Britain's Senate hears your Sense no more,
Your Country still regards you as before.

Marchmont, whose Wisdom different Courts have found,
Whose freeborn Soul has never chang'd its State;
For Knowledge fam'd, and Eloquence renown'd,
In whom the honest Statesman shines compleat!
Accept this Homage which the Muses pay,
And still deserve Applause the Patriot-Way!

But oh! if Worth exalts the Pride of Blood,
If Virtue can the Blaze of Courts outshine!
The Muse beholds a Man both great and good;

The blended Wreaths, immortal Stair, are thine!
And like the Spartan Chief's Retreat of old,
With equal Glory shall thine own be told!

Nor thou, unblemish'd Peer! whose steady Soul
Corruption's bold Assaults, unmov'd, defy'd;
Sustain'd the Shock, collected firm and whole,
And kept inflexible the juster Side.
Still, Elphinstone, preserve the spotless Name,
And leave the fair Example dear to Fame!

These are the Chiefs our hardy Climate breeds,
That, deaf to Interest's or Ambition's Charms,
Can shew, by greatly meritorious Deeds,
How much the sacred Love of Freedom warms:
Souls made like these deserve a Pindar's Strain,
Whom Crowns would tempt to Ill, but tempt in vain!

To These, nor want we Patriot Names to join
Souls uncorrupt, tho' in a lower Sphere;
Who slight the Charms of either India's Mine,
And make a Nation's Happiness their Care!
While firm, oppos'd, the powerful Flood they stand,
And risque themselves to save a sinking Land.

Such the Dalrymples, Father and the Son,
Whose virtuous Minds no servile Chains can wear;
Such Erskine is, who laid the Purple down,
Whom Britain's Senate shall with Pleasure hear:
And He, who now retires, with Honour crown'd,
To the soft Cares of his Paternal Ground.

Nor shall the Muse, Dundas, omit thy Name,
Who, fearless, in the Face of Pow'r and Pride,
Has dar'd the Rights of Britain to sustain,
And joyn the Juster, but unequal Side.
In thee the Roman Orator appears,

And all his Virtues shine, without his Fears.

Such are the Spirits firm to LIBERTY,
That with their Influence bless our Northern Coast.
So the bright Planets gild a wint'ry Sky,
And shine serenest in the chilling Frost!
Unnumber'd Stars around their Passage glow,
And serve to cheer the darken'd World below.

When Britain's present Ague-Fit is past,
When safe she sits amidst her subject Seas,
These Names shall dear to future Ages last,
And Time shall gild them with his latest Rays.
Virtue shall triumph, over Envy's Spite.
Clouds are but Foils, to make us love the Light.

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William Hamilton