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# Sir Alexander Gray, 1882-1968

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With the death of Sir Alexander Gray, Scotland has lost a considerable scholar and an accomplished poet. On his work as an economist—he was for many years Professor of Political Economy in the Universities of Aberdeen and Edinburgh—I am not competent to comment, but it is a pleasure to recall his *The Socialist Tradition* as one of the funniest, as well as informative, of learned works. In poetry, his achievement was built up over some forty years, from *Songs and Ballads chiefly from Heine* (1920) to *Historical Ballads of Denmark* (1958). In between, there were four other volumes of translation—*Songs from Heine* (1928), *Arrows* (1932), *Sir Halewyn* (1949) and *Four-and-Forty* (1954)—three volumes of his original verse in Scots and English, *Any Man's Life* (1924), *Poems* (1925) and *Gossip* (1928), and a book of *Selected Poems,* original and translated, in 1948.

Through all the vagaries of poetical taste between 1920 and his death, Sir Alexander never lost his hold upon the public, and his fellow-poets continued to read him with admiration. His verse has given him an assured place in the tradition of Scottish translators, the tradition which produced its master-work in Gawain Douglas's version of the *Aeneid* in the early sixteenth century and has fought a running battle with tendencies towards parochialism and insularity ever since. If that battle still continues to-day, this is due to a considerable extent to Gray, who—in his translations, at least—waged it through a lifetime of endeavour.

Even his earliest work remains as delightfully fresh now as when he first composed it all those decades ago.

> You say you dinna lo'e me, Jean?
> That winna gar me dee.
> Just let me see your bonny een,
> And wha sae blithe as me?
>
> I hear your bonny reid lips say
> You hate me, lass! O fie!
> Just let me kiss them micht and day—
> And what the deil care I?

In a broadcast talk delivered in the late forties, Sir Alexander remarked on "how supremely impressive may be the simplicity of dialect in treating of simple things," adding that "the most astonishing thing about dialect is the amazing dignity and rightness of phrases which transmuted into English would be completely banal." But the

seeming simplicity of "You say you dinna lo'e me, Jean" is in fact an exercise in the apparent artlessness which conceals considerable art. Far from being a rural rhymer "warbling his native wood-notes wild," the author is a sophisticated scholar translating into Scots from the German of Heine, "Du liebst mich nicht, du liebst mich nicht." Sir Alexander has effected the transference of the lyrical impulse from one tongue, one culture, into another, transforming Heine into a Scot while losing scarcely an ounce of impact, scarcely an iota of emotional authenticity. Yet his art is so skilfully translucent that the personality of the original writer still shines through.

In his later work, Sir Alexander translated from a varied and vigorous range of folksong and balladry in German, Dutch and Danish, and almost always his versions have such authenticity of feeling and tone that they read like indigenous Scottish songs. The passionate concentration of mingled sorrow and savagery in "The auld sangs, soored and cankered"; the translucent tenderness which shines through the delicate simplicity of a poem transforming scripture into fairytale, "There were three Kings cam frae the East"; the style of high romantic balladry in "The Mither's Ghaist," intense, dramatic, stripped to the bone, the frisson of horror thrilling through the lyricism; the cut-and-thrust of dialogue enchancing the relentless speed of the narrative line in "The Fause Kelpie"; the comic irony, on the danger of judging by appearances, in "The Prideful Lass," and—on the same theme—the ironical grimness of "Sir Halewyn," where the hero/villain loses his head (quite literally) to the heroine; the rare delicacy of "The Dream," where the pathos which shimmers like unshed tears in so many Scots love songs finds memorable expression—such was Sir Alexander's superb command of Scots, and such his own individual lyrical gift, that his translations combine rhythmical subtlety and swiftness, emotional veracity, and the singing lilt even when he works within the narrowest of limits, as in his version of the German love-song, "Dat du min Leevsten büst, dat du wull weest":

> That you're my ain true love,
> Weel you can see.
> Come in the nicht, come in the nicht.
> Whisper: 'It's me.'
>
> Juist come straicht ben, my lad,
> When it stricks twel'.
> Father sleeps, mither sleeps,
> I'm by mysel'.
>
> Tirl at the chawmer door;
> Lift the sneck high.

Father says: 'What a wind.'
Mither says: 'Ay.'

Four naked legs together in one bed have been the source of inspiration for so many Scottish lyrics that it might seem practically impossible to add another to the tradition without the appearance of pastiche. Yet Sir Alexander's contribution to the genre, even although translated from another language, sounds as completely indigenous, and as fresh and vital, as an authentic Scottish folk-song. Since he possessed rather more than his fair share of our native gallusness, he delighted in the innumerable variations played upon this theme in all the Teutonic tongues, working from a Dutch original to provide its most gloriously outrageous expression in "The Fine Fechtin Moose"—the immoral immortalised. Again, his comic ballad "The Hey," from the German, has all the "coorse" wit of that anonymous Scots masterpiece, "Our gudeman cam' hame at e'en."

Although the range of Sir Alexander's translation is so wide, it pleased his modesty, and his sense of humour, to present himself to the public as a much less complex, a much more limited, writer than the scope of his work shows him to have been. He gave his radio talk on "the speech of Scotland" the title "Lallans: A Plea for the Kailyard," and claimed that contemporary Scots verse must needs limit itself to "those things which make up the lives of those who naturally speak in dialect," with the poet "forced . . . to go back to his village . . . and project himself into the life which he might have led there," producing "a somewhat nostalgic literature of the Kailyard."

Despite those remarks, Sir Alexander's translations are remarkable for an immediacy of effect at the opposite pole of feeling from nostalgia, while the saccharine sweetness of Kailyard reminiscence is replaced by mordant wit and bare passion. His original verse in Scots, however, shows the damaging effect of his theory upon his practice—for if a sophisticated scholar consciously plays the character part of a rural rhymer there is likely to be some incongruity in the performance. It is only when he draws upon his experience of contemporary city life, as in "Babylon in Retrospect," that his original Scots verse moves beyond pastiche into poetry, with its own individual voice, strong, spare, sardonic, and utterly direct.

Like many Scotsmen of his generation, Sir Alexander was much more at ease in Scots than in English, and his verse in the latter language is seldom entirely free of "the smell of the lamp." He is at his best in English when he writes with his eye on the object, as in the opening four stanzas of his most-anthologised poem, "Scotland"—

> Scooped out like a saucer,
> The land lies before me;
> The waters, once scattered,
> Flow orderly now
> Through fields where the ghosts
> Of the marsh and the moorland
> Still ride the old marches,
> Despising the plough.

Despite the poem's generalised title, these verses describe one particular part of the country, a certain valley in the north of Kincardineshire, and Sir Alexander's grasp of the essentials of the scene is unerring. But the latter part of the work degenerates into the abstract rhetoric of "Scotland, stern Mother," addressed in the second person singular, when the mechanical jauntiness of the *Hiawatha* rhythms in which the whole poem is cast becomes all too apparent.

The original poems, both Scots and English, in which Sir Alexander expressed the events and emotions of his own life, have already dated; but the translations in which he gave a Scots expression to events and emotions of the past are still vividly alive. If this seems paradoxical, the solution of the paradox would appear to lie in Sir Alexander's own personality, characteristically Scottish in its outward reserve and its inner passion. He needed to wear a mask before he felt himself free to sing.

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