

Dorothea Primrose Campbell

(1793–1863)

Born and raised in what was then the remote coastal town of Lerwick, in the Shetland Islands, to the north of Scotland, Dorothea Primrose Campbell was the oldest child of Elizabeth (“Betty”) and Duncan Campbell, a surgeon. Her family was impoverished first by the debts of her grandfather and then by the death of her father. In desperation, she took her poems to a bookseller and printer in Inverness, J. Young. In his preface to her volume, dated 15 April 1811, he explained,

These Poems are the productions of a young female who had not attained her seventeenth year when they were put to the Press; and were undoubtedly written without any view to publication, until the distresses of a numerous family, of which she is the eldest, induced the Authoress to offer the greater part of them to the Publisher for any trifle he might think proper to give for them. Struck with the beauty and simplicity which, in his opinion, they appeared to possess, and feeling for the helpless situation of one who seemed so unconscious of their value, he could not in justice take advantage of that which was so much in his power. He therefore proposed to Publish them by Subscription for the sole benefit of the Authoress; and trusting to a liberal and humane circle of friends by whom he has been powerfully aided, he has the happiness to state that the means which they have afforded have conferred advantages on the Authoress which she could not otherways have enjoyed; . . .

Campbell dedicated the volume to Jane, duchess of Gordon. Young cited the poet’s “extreme timidity and inexperience” to explain why he, and not Campbell, had penned the preface. But the poems themselves show a good deal of familiarity with the dreary and sometimes treacherous ways of the world. In her poetic universe, lovers are often faithless, children drown, husbands die in battle, the innocent suffer, siblings betray each other, and ordinary people go mad. Even so, true love can triumph, though usually only in an idyllic afterlife; justice can prevail, with the faithless or cruel punished, sometimes through supernatural forces; and a neglected orphan can be saved,

in a fairy-tale-like narrative. Several of the poems are explicitly anti-war, and others urge social consciousness upon the wealthy. Campbell valorizes the working-class life and condemns the materialistic values of the rich. In "Lubin to Silvia" she suggests that women diminish themselves by becoming beautiful ornaments, urging, "Turn from thy treach'rous glass, dear maid! / And view thy much neglected mind."

In 1812 Campbell opened a school at Lerwick. When Walter Scott, a distant relative, visited the Northern Isles in 1814, she met him, and in 1816, when her book was reprinted with some additions, she dedicated it to Scott. But because of the financial difficulties of the publisher, Baldwin, Cradock and Joy, she did not profit from this second edition. Plagued by illness, poverty, and her mother's addiction to opium, she managed to keep going. Scott probably sent her money, but he told William Erskine in 1821, "I have a long miserable letter from the miserable Miss Campbell. I enclose a part of it, and the rest relating to circumstances which seem confidential. I suspect she is very imprudent."¹ Campbell published a novel, *Harley Radington*, in 1821, but A. K. Newman, the publisher, paid her only in copies. Newman promised money for a second tale, but it appears not to have been published and is now untraced. After this period, Campbell seems to have given up writing for publication. In 1842 she moved to England to work as a governess, but this job evaporated when her employer fell on hard times. The Royal Literary Fund paid her thirty pounds in 1844. She died in 1863 in Kentish Town, London, at an asylum for aged governesses.

MAJOR WORKS: *Poems* (Inverness, 1811), republished with additions and revisions as *Poems by Miss D. P. Campbell of Zetland* (London, 1816); *Harley Radington; a Tale*, 2 vols. (London, 1821).

TEXT USED: Text of "The Shetland Fisherman" from *Poems* (1811).

1. The letter is dated 27 September 1821 from Abbotsford in *The Letters of Sir Walter Scott*, ed. Herbert J. C. Grierson, vol. 7 (London, 1934), 12 and n. Scott's great-grandmother was from the clan Campbell.

The Shetland Fisherman

O, fair arose the summer dawn,
No sullen mist was seen to lour,
Night's dreary shadows were withdrawn,
And Morning brought her golden hour.

Soft was the air, and breathing balm,
The sea-fowl clamour'd on the shore,
The sky serene, the ocean calm,
And hushed the breakers' deafening roar.

And, slowly in the glittering east,
The sun now raised his orient head, 10
His beamy glories, round him cast,
On rock and steep their radiance shed.

A trembling stream of glory lay
Across the ocean's rippling bed,
And quick his bright beams sipp'd away
The dew-drops from each grassy blade.

The soaring lark soon mock'd the eye,
But still was heard his matin song,
The sea-gull floats with ominous cry,
The hungry raven flits along. 20

And heard was many a female voice,
That echoed o'er the rocky shore;
And lisping children gay rejoice,
And listen for the distant oar.

At length the six-oar'd boat appears,
Slow moving o'er the unruffled tide;
Their long, long stay, with artless tears,
Their little prattlers fondly chide.

30 “How could thee stay so long at sea?
 High blew the wind, and Mammy wept,
 Tom could not sleep, but thought on thee,
 Tho’ sweetly little Mary slept.”

Anxious the wife her husband views,
 Who weary drags his limbs along;
 Hey Kate! he gayly cries, what news?
 Then carols blithe his morning song,

40 “How couldst thou, William, stay so long
 Upon the dark and stormy sea;
 Where tempests sweep, and dangers throng,
 So far from thy dear babes and me?”

O! dark and dismal was the night,
 And fearful was the tempest’s roar;—
 And many a sheeted ghost, or sprite,
 Shriek’d wildly on the sea-beat shore.

I listen’d fearful to the wind,
 And heard a groan in every blast!
 A thousand fears disturb’d my mind,
 E’en when the tempest’s rage was past.”

50 [“]But we’ve successful been, dear Kate,
 Behold, my lass, that plenteous load!—
 To-day, I mean, to dine in state!
 On haddock, turbot, ling, and cod.”

The hardy swain, with raptur’d eyes,
 Kisses his rose-lipp’d babes and Kate,
 Then to his humble home he hies,
 And blesses Heaven with heart elate.

60 Tho’ coarse his fare, yet sweet to toil
 The morsel seems, to hunger sweet!
 The scanty produce of the soil,
 By Kate prepared both clean and neat.

Then on his straw bed careless thrown,
He sinks into the arms of sleep;
Leaves it to paltry Wealth to groan,
And pamper'd Luxury to weep.
(1811)