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PROSPECTUS

OF A WORK TO BE INTITLED

THE LIVES

OF THE

GALEDONIAN BARDS;

WITH

*HISTORICAL, CRITICAL, AND PHILOLOGICAL OBSERVATIONS
UPON THEIR PRINCIPAL COMPOSITIONS,*

BY THE

REV. ALEXANDER IRVINE OF RANOCH.

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M DCCCL.



THIS

W O R K

PROPOSES THE ATTAINMENT OF THESE
OBJECTS :

- I. To collect the leading facts, which form the history of each Bard ; and illustrate the beauties and excellencies of his principal compositions.
- II. To consider the various species of Gaelic Poetry ; and appreciate the comparative merits of each author.
- III. To carry on, through the several periods under review, the History of Gaelic Poetry.
- IV.

IV. To demonstrate the capacity of the Gaelic Language, and subjoin a scheme for enlarging its bounds, and settling its orthography.

V. To mark and delineate, the manners and character of the Gaels or Caledonians, so far as connected with the subject.

Some

Some of the Advantages of this Work may be enumerated :

1. It will endeavour, from every consideration, to ascertain the æra, in which OSSIAN flourished, and try every means to settle the controversy, respecting the authenticity of the poems ascribed to him.

2. It will preserve the memory of those Bards, whose genius unaided by art, whose talents prompted by little or no reward, shone forth amid the obscurity of the time, reflected so much honour upon themselves, their native country, and indeed upon human kind.

3. It will illustrate some dark events, in the History of the Caledonians, (such as their emigrations and wars with surrounding states,) and account for the refinement of sentiment and manners, which characterized the Time of OSSIAN.

4. It will afford a delightful prospect to the mind, and lead it to observe the progress of human nature, and effects which climate, pursuits, property, government, and institutions in general, are calculated to produce.

5. It will discover to the present race of men, in some parts of Britain at least, the situation in which their fathers stood.

6. It will save the curious and speculative, the toil of examining the records of Monkish ages, and collect in one point of view, all that these afford upon this subject as interesting and useful to us.

7. It will endeavour to ascertain the leading characteristics of the provincial dialects, and the true pronunciation, of the Gaelic Language.

8. It may be of service to the Philologist, in tracing the meaning and etymology of other European languages, which hold some affinity with the Gaelic.

9. It may preserve that language from ruin, by diffusing a taste for its beauties, and shewing its powers in every species of composition.

10. It will offer a plan, shewing how modern terms might be incorporated into that language, and the language itself improved.

*The means of accomplishing this Design deserve to
be stated :*

The manners of the several periods under consideration, may be traced with some degree of accuracy among the Biographers, Annalists, Antiquaries, and Historians of other nations as well as of our own.

The memoirs of the Bards, especially the latter, are to be gathered chiefly from oral tradition. Their works are mostly either printed, or preserved in MS. collections of easy access. And it is not improbable that this design may discover more MSS. in the repositories of the curious.

On the part of the Proposer no diligence, no trouble shall be wanting to arrive at the truth, and attain the objects which he points out.

He has advantages which others may not possess: He is acquainted with most of those provinces where the Gaelic is spoken; and where this fails, he will extend his acquaintance
by

by travelling, or establish amanuenses, to collect what his time may not allow himself to do.

Others, of far superior abilities, promise their aid and encourage his perseverance. And if he is fortunate enough to gain the approbation of the Right Honourable and Honourable the Highland Society, he doubts not of engaging more in support of his design.

In addition to what is already said, he begs leave to call farther attention to the subject proposed. He conceives it worthy of notice.

Curiosity may in some measure be satisfied; wisdom enforced by example; amusement received by every class of men; industry and future exertion excited; and cavils and scepticism, regarding some points in our history, silenced, converted, or reprov'd.

Arts and sciences have now attained a degree of improvement unknown before; is it not laudable, under their auspices, to explore the ages that are past, do justice to the memory of our fathers, and preserve from ruin what remains of other years, undefaced by time, un-
plundered by violence?

‘ Luath,

- ‘ Luath, mar fhireun an adhair—
 ‘ ’San ioma ghaoth, na platha fo fgiathaibh,—
 ‘ Shuibhail an Dreach aillidh,
 ‘ S na aite, tha ’n Ceathach ciar dhubh—
 ‘ Tuille ni mairrean do Gholl ;
 ‘ Ach mairraidh e ’m fonn nan Teud ;
 ‘ Ni h’ amhuil a’s ceo air an fhrois,
 ‘ Cliu treife nan Treun Laoch——.’

Translation by Dr SMITH—

‘ But a few moments on their eagle pinion
 pass ; the Sun shuts his eye of light ; the blast
 whirls that way his rustling course, and a dark
 mist is all that remains of the gay form.—It is
 all, O Gaul ! that remains of thee !—But thy
 memory, Chief of Fingal’s heroes shall remain.
 No cloud that shall pass away on its own gray
 wings, is thy fame.’—*Gaul, p. 170.*

These sacred fragments, so useful to help our
 researches, like Sybil leaves, offer themselves
 now to our possession. It is prudence to seize
 them, ere they be placed for ever beyond
 our reach.

If it be useful to promote improvement, and
 introduce new modes of life into the High-
 lands, let it be observed, that these expell or al-
 ter former manners, which can now only re-
 main on the page of history.

Nothing

Nothing is more efficacious to excite a spirit of industry and application to the arts of peace, attachment to the authors of our welfare, and gratitude to the unremitting exertions of establishments, constituted for the purpose of directing national improvements, than to hold forth to men, the examples which the history of their fathers affords.

Strangers to the Gaelic language, have taxed it with unwarrantable harshness. Deceived, or misled, by a dress, with which they were not acquainted, they passed too hasty a judgment. It is just to rectify their error, guide their opinion, and convince their inexperience.

Polished language evinces a polished people at some period. An enquiry into the state of the Gaelic, may lead to discover what its authors were. May not the finer arts of Greece be traced to Gaul, before they visited Latium? Are we to suppose that the Celtic colonies relapsed into barbarism upon their settlement in Britain, and preserved no vestige of their former arts or manners? Let the progress of civilization be traced on ancient undisputed records, and love of singularity be abashed by the evidence of facts.

Our libraries teem with Tours and Journals of the Highlands and Isles. Some of these, in-
attentive

attentive or forgetful of what we once were, and now are, seem to betray deficiency of intelligence, deduce ill founded conclusions from insulated circumstances, that made, perhaps, a momentary impression; heat the imagination to swell its productions, exaggerate distresses, which probably were never felt, and which received their colours, if not existence, from the love of wonder, the desire of book-building, or recording a name.

Unfortunately, romantic travelling, and ill humoured assertions, gain credit with the undiscerning multitude, and lead the understanding astray, by receiving for truth what better information would have regarded with disdain. The matter may, however, rest upon a more solid foundation, than massy indigested volumes, and cursory inspection.

New language naturally follows the introduction of new customs. The English language, by forced marches, gains the ascendant in the Highlands; and may, in a few years, perform, by insensible advances, what coercion would have in vain attempted. It would be a pity, to allow a language, which boasts the sublime genius of Ossian, and finished (I would almost say divine) character of Fingal, as well as that
of

of many others, to expire or degenerate without establishing its merits.

Those volumes of original beautiful poems, which have, at separate times, been offered to the public, are many of them so mutilated, the orthography so imperfect, the sense, in some instances, so obscure, that unless they are revised, corrected, or unfolded, their beauties must, ere long, cease to be relished or understood.

The Gaelic Muse entreats her countrymen to rescue her sons from impending darkness, and place them on that eminence which their works deserve. Though obscurity, indigence, and in some measure ignorance of letters, sorely tried her patience, and circumscribed her exertions; she commanded esteem, admiration, and attention.—She wants not the arts to please—Harmony of numbers, tenderness of sentiment, dignity of manner, refinement of taste, strength of description, intimate acquaintance with the diversity of the human character; she makes all these her own to adorn and perfect her theme. In almost every species of poetry she excels: Serious, gay, or ludicrous, she pleases: Nature was her tutor; not the forced conceits, the hackneyed phrases, and scholastic rules of an age, more critical than original, in its performances.

If

If she did not laugh in the comic, nor weep in the tragic scene; it was not that she could not, but that it was not the fashion of her country; she furnishes, however, pieces which extort a smile from stern age, and a tear from the eye unaccustomed to weep. She equals, in what she attempted, the Bards of Greece or Rome; and, in exciting the tender feelings of the heart, leaves far behind the moderns who tried the same path.

‘Tha i cruadalach cruaidh fgairtal,
 ‘Do dhaoin’ uaisle, reachdar laidir,
 ‘An am treuntais, na gaisgè,
 ‘’S i as deas’ f hac’laich ’fna blaraibh. †
 ‘Tha i ciun an cuifain fialaidh,
 ‘Chur an gnìomh, a briathra blatha,
 ‘Tha i corr fgoiltadh riasain
 ‘Chum sluagh gun chiall a chur samhach.
 ‘Tha i iular fiofrach, caoineil
 ‘Freagarach, faoineachdach, baigheil
 ‘’S meafail a labhairt ’s a h’eifdachd;
 ‘A chur gach deud air fiamh an gairè;
 ‘A fagra, ’s a bruighean le chèile,
 ‘A togail eibhnas, mir’ as manran,
 ‘Siobhalta, farafda, beufach,
 ‘Am beul gach neach ata nàrach.’*

‘With

† Alias fìn ait ud.

* Ran don Ghaelic, &c.

‘ With high-born chiefs, strong, active, free
and brave,

‘ She rides triumphant, like the Atlantic wave,

‘ Loud as the torrent thundering to the main,

‘ She speaks in valour on the martial plain.

‘ The chief throws wide the hospitable gate ;

‘ With warmth, she welcomes, till the storm
abate :

‘ She bids each guest his aching care forego,

‘ And draughts of cordial banish all his woe.

‘ When scholars argue on the field of fame,

‘ For truth and reason fights the conq’ring dame ;

‘ On darken’d sceptics pours the flood of day,

‘ Stops senseless cavils, and proclaims the way :

‘ In converse sweet, should witty friends en-
gage,

‘ Of science, learned, she explores the page ;

‘ In question artful, skill’d the truth to find,

‘ In contest gentle, ruffles not the mind.

‘ Esteem, and honour, listen to her voice,

‘ And mirth and laughter raise the pleasing
noise.

‘ The table spread—the festive song goes round,

‘ Love, joy, and wit, in splendid halls abound :

‘ The damsel fair in modest blushes glows,

‘ From crimson lips, the note melodious flows.

‘ Her

‘ Her darling swain lies low among the dead,
 ‘ She strews the leaves around his narrow bed.

She also affords many examples to justify the precepts of the Apulian Bard.

‘ *Tristia moestum*

‘ *Vultum verba decent ; iratum plena minarum.*

‘ *Ludentem, lasciva ; severum seria dicta.*

‘ *Sit Medea ferox invictaque, flebilis Ino ;*

‘ *Perfidus Ixion : Io vaga : tristis Orestes.**

‘ The varying face should every passion shew,

‘ And words of sorrow, wear the garb of woe !

‘ Let it in joy, assume a vivid air ;

‘ Fierce when in rage ; in seriousness severe :—

‘ With untamed fury let Medea glow,

‘ And Ino’s tears in ceaseless anguish flow ;

‘ From realm to realm her griefs let Io bear,

‘ And sad Orestes rave in deep despair.

Homer, with the Poets of old, live in their works ; and, when every other monument of human art decays, give celebrity to their country. The English Bards found a Johnson ; the Irish a Walker ; and Welch a Jones, to record their names and appreciate their merits. Shall Caledonia want vigour or willingness to add a few more to the roll of fame ? It would be superfluous to say more upon the merits of the subject.

This

* Horace, Art of Poetry by Francis.

This Prospectus is submitted to the consideration of the Honourable the Highland Society of Scotland; and, if found worthy of notice, their patronage and encouragement is solicited by him who shall ever feel himself their

most obliged,

their most grateful,

and devoted humble servant,

ALEX. IRVINE.

HIGHLAND SOCIETY HALL, 13th Jan. 1800.

The Prospectus of a WORK, prepared by the Rev. Mr ALEX. IRVINE, missionary minister of Ranoch, Perthshire, intituled, "The Lives of the Caledonian Bards, with Historical, Critical, and Philological Observations upon their principal Compositions, &c." was laid before the Meeting, which being considered as particularly connected with the original objects of the Institution, and from the character of the Author, as deserving of patronage, the Society remitted to the Directors to afford him such encouragement as they deemed proper; and as he seemed, for the present, only desirous to have the countenance of the Society, it was resolved unanimously to recommend to all the Members, particularly the Noblemen and Gentlemen connected with the Highlands, especially the Clergy, and others conversant in the subject, to furnish Mr Irvine with such local facts, ancient manuscripts, poetry, &c. as may tend to elucidate his subject, either addressed to him, as above, or to the Depute Secretary of the Society.

