

THURSDAY, JUNE 8, 1899.

A FAMOUS PRECENTOR.

THE LATE MR MURDO MACLENNAN.

LAST Saturday the grave closed over the mortal remains of one who for a very long time was well and widely known and respected in the North of Scotland, and to whose melodious and tuneful voice thousands of people used to listen with delight as he "lifted" the psalm so grandly solemn at church or Sacrament.

He was born in Contin on the 15th July, 1808, the youngest son of a weaver, whose trade he learned but did not keep up. Contin had even in those early days a good school, and not a few went from there to the University, his eldest brother among the number. He entered the Indian Civil Service, and after taking high rank there, fell a victim to the climate. His second brother, Roderick, was schoolmaster of Dalblair, in the parish of Fintray, Aberdeenshire for upwards of 46 years; and he, the last of a gifted family, sleeps with his fathers in the peaceful "Island." He made his first appearance as a singer

When Only Sixteen Years of Age.

being called upon to fill the place of his father, the precentor, who, with other of "the men," had gone to the Burn of Ferintosh, at that time a place of high festival at communion seasons. While his father was able to lead in Contin, he officiated in Fodderty, and was present on that tragic day on which the saintly Mr Noble reproved a couple who openly misconducted themselves and scoffed at the preacher, and whose remains were laid, side by side, in the grave before the next Sabbath came round. An old friend once told the writer that coming down the brae below the Spa Hotel, when the Communion was at Blairninch in the open air—the words of the Psalm could be distinctly heard. At his father's death he returned to Contin, and the Sunday after the Disruption carried the Bible and Psalm book out into the churchyard, where the Free Church with which he was so long connected began its career.

In 1845 he precented at the Assembly, which met in Inverness, when he was presented by Mr Walter Hatley with a beautifully bound volume of psalmody in memory of the occasion.

Dr Beith, in his little book describing Dr Candlish's tour in the Highlands during the same year, makes the following interesting reference to him:—"The best Gaelic precentor in the North had been selected to lead the psalmody. He was a quiet looking young man, about 30 years of age, of grave, but not of austere or pretentious aspect, dressed in the ordinary dress—the Sunday dress of a farm servant—his hair brushed down on his brow, his ungloved hands coarse and red with rustic toil, his demeanour modest, though quite self-possessed. He had faced assemblies as large before, although he had never sung in the presence of learned doctors or of fine gentlemen. The first line of the psalm to be sung was read by the minister. The precentor chose one of the most plaintive and one of the sweetest of the old long tunes. Some voices joined in the music almost at the outset, as soon as they perceived what the tune selected was. When the precentor himself read the second line in the grand style in which such precentors do read it,

The Burst of Swelling Melody

which arose was magnificent and overwhelming. His voice extended everywhere without any apparent effort. All heard, and all seemed to be fully qualified to join. Join they did, and as one wave after another of fast harmonious sound rolled upon the ears of those who listened, but could not join, to judge from the expression of the countenance, the effect was such as music had never produced upon them before, so touching, so sweet, so passing sweet. Friends from the South who had not before heard the old church tunes with their beautiful prolonged variations, looked at each other for an instant, as if to say that now, for the first time, they were listening to the sound of praise as it ought always to be heard. Their looks were those of surprise, soon changed to looks of the deepest devotion."

Forty-Three Years After

he closed the Assembly singing, also at Inverness, when he was 80 years of age, Dr Aird and one other being all that was left of the former Assembly. For some years after the Disruption he held psalmody classes throughout Inverness, Ross, and Sutherland for the purpose of teaching the people to sing the English without the recitative, or giving out the line. He used to relate an amusing incident in connection with this. During the building of Dunrobin Castle so many workmen from the south were employed that special English services had to be provided. Mr Macleennan was engaged to conduct the singing, but the old elders objected to the innovation of singing without giving out the line, and when the young precentor stepped into the box, they took up their Bibles, and, one by one, slowly left the church. With ready tact, he chose a tune of their own, and when

The Familiar Strains of Colmahill

swelled out in solemn majesty, one after another they slipped into church and took their seats, and before the end of the service their prejudices had banished for ever. One feature of the old Sacrament time has passed away entirely with him, namely, the singing of the old tunes. Wonderful compositions of slurring, trilling, and wailing.

The late Professor Blackie, on hearing him sing one of these, went up to him and said he must have got that tune from the Pope of Rome. Dr Joseph Manzie took them down from his voice, and had them published, but few if any would have the courage to lead a congregation with one of them now. He had many interesting reminiscences of the men and ministers of his day—a class of men who are fast disappearing from our midst. Most of them of noble form and courtly grace of manner, which particularly marked the deceased, and made his services to be sought on many auspicious occasions, notably as spokesman for the young men of his day, when going to seek their brides. He also was chief letter-writer for the district, spending many an evening with the old father and mother who used to come to the cottage with their notepaper and candle to get him to write a letter to

The Boy Who had Ventured far from Home.

and for whom their hearts longed. Love letters also were entrusted to him, yet, though frank and suave to a degree, the joys and sorrows of others were always sacred things with him. He was greatly beloved by a large and devoted family, and was laid to rest with the loving care of sons and grandsons, and a large circle of friends and neighbours who paid him all honour and respect. Rev. Mr Cameron, Free Church, conducted a most impressive service at the house, and also at the grave. Whither he has gone as "a sheaf of corn fully ripe."—Communicated.