

**William Forbes Skene, LL.D., D.C.L., Historiographer-Royal for Scotland, &c., &c. By Professor Mackinnon.**

(Read January 15, 1894.)

Among the notable Scotsmen of the nineteenth century, William Forbes Skene will have a foremost place. The author of *Celtic Scotland* was born at Inverie, in Kincardineshire, on the 9th of June 1809, and died in Edinburgh on the 29th of August 1893. His father was James Skene of Rubislaw, a member of an old Aberdeenshire family. His mother was Jane, daughter of Sir William Forbes, Baronet of Pitsligo. The family connections were numerous, and the future historian had, from earliest boyhood, unusually favourable opportunities of coming in contact with the men and women who in his day bore a worthy part in the life and literature of Scotland. His father was an intimate friend of Sir Walter Scott, and the son was more than once a welcome guest at Abbotsford.

Mr Skene was educated at the High School of this city, and afterwards attended the Universities of St Andrews and Edinburgh. Destined for the legal profession, he was apprenticed to a relative, Sir Henry Jardine, W.S. He became a member of the Society of Writers to the Signet in 1831, and was, for the long period of sixty-one years, a well known and honoured citizen of Edinburgh. He held an appointment in the Court of Session for many years, becoming latterly Depute-Clerk of the Court. In the meantime he had become the head of a prominent legal firm, a position which he retained till his death. In the public life of the city, whether political or municipal, Mr Skene took little part. A capable man of business, who had devoted attention to financial matters, he acted as Director of the Commercial Bank for over a quarter of a century. His philanthropic spirit and intimate acquaintance with the country and people, made him a most valuable Secretary to the Committee which administered the funds collected to relieve destitution in the Highlands and Islands after the failure of the potato crops in 1846 and subsequent

years. Mr Skene gave much time to this work, and wrote valuable reports describing the operations of the Committee. In the education of the people he was deeply interested. He served for a couple of years on the School Board of Edinburgh, devoting special attention to that branch of the Board's work which was directed to the education of destitute and neglected children. For many years he taught a Bible class on Sabbath, for which full notes were carefully prepared. Some of these he afterwards wrote out in connected form, and published under the title of *The Gospel History for the Young*. A member of the Episcopal Church, Mr Skene was connected with St Vincent's congregation, of which he was for many years the main prop and stay. St Vincent's belonged to what was called the English Episcopal Church in Scotland; but, mainly through the influence of Mr Skene, the congregation became united some years ago to the Scottish Episcopal Church.

A man of many gifts and graces—an accomplished linguist; a well-equipped theologian, specially conversant with the development of doctrine and ritual; a proficient in music; a good talker, with a fund of anecdote, and not destitute of humour—Mr Skene was known among his friends. In literature he will be remembered as the most profound student of this century of the history and institutions of the early inhabitants of Scotland. Capable men toiled in the same field before Mr Skene's day. Not to go further back than last century, there were the able, if prejudiced Pinkerton, the dispassionate Innes, the erudite Chalmers. Within the last fifty years, valuable additions to our stock of knowledge in one department or another of the subject have been made by such men as John Stuart, Joseph Robertson, Bishop Forbes, Dr M'Lauchlan, Sir Daniel Wilson, Dr Reeves, Dr Joseph Anderson, and others. Mr Skene entered into the labours of these and such men. All that was worth reading, and much that was not, of what predecessors and contemporaries wrote, he knew thoroughly.

His own work combined that of the pioneer and the settler. He explored the ground and tilled it. Mr Skene was fully alive to the supreme importance of the evidence supplied by the concrete facts of anthropology and archæology, where such

exist; but his own special labours lay in the departments of history and literary criticism. Very early he appreciated the truth that an original authority was foremost in value as in time. The first point was to ascertain what precisely the old authors wrote. With respect to many of them—the Roman writers, for example—once their exact words were known, the main difficulty was overcome. One had a reasonable guarantee that the fact was stated as these men saw it, the report as they heard it or read it. They were, as a rule, disinterested, and they must be regarded as on the whole trustworthy witnesses. With respect to native annalists, things were different. In the case of many of them the real difficulty may be said to commence after the accuracy of the text is established. Scottish historians had hitherto treated these authorities in one of two ways. They accepted them or rejected them *en bloc*. But this was surely unwise. The most imaginative among them occasionally writes history; the most prosaic frequently indulges in fiction. The task of the critic is to separate the fact from the fancy. For this purpose, accurate texts are indispensable; but accurate texts alone are not sufficient. The native chronicler must, at every step, be cross-examined and compared, not merely with himself, but as far as possible with contemporary writers, native and foreign. It is only when reliable material is thus obtained that the labour of the historian proper commences.

Mr Skene was, in many ways, exceptionally fitted for the work which he took in hand. A busy man all his life, he still could command leisure. He had a vigorous intellect, a powerful memory, a judgment in the main calm and clear. He possessed, in no small measure, the constructive faculty that was able to fit together into one reticulated whole isolated facts gathered from many quarters, the historical imagination that could clothe the dry bones with flesh and skin, and make the dead past live again. One most essential qualification Mr Skene possessed to which none of his predecessors could lay claim. Important light is thrown on many points of early Scottish history by Norse Saga and Welsh Triad. But, apart from the Roman period, the great mass of material is to be found in the works of native authors, written in old Gaelic or in Latin. Mr Skene's predecessors, as matter of course, could all read Latin, and one or two of them may have acquired a smatter-

ing of Welsh and Norse. But, among Scottish historians of the first rank, he was the only one since the days of George Buchanan who was able to read a Gaelic manuscript. While a growing lad his health was delicate, and, on the advice of Sir Walter Scott, his father sent him for a season to reside with the Rev. Dr Mackintosh MacKay, minister of Laggan in Badenoch, an accomplished gentleman, and, at the time, one of the most scholarly Gaelic students living. Under this competent guide young Skene studied modern Scottish Gaelic, a step which very probably shaped the future course of his intellectual history. In after years he extended his Celtic researches, not merely to the sister dialects of Irish and Manx, but to the kindred Brythonic tongues, especially Welsh. When, in 1853, Zeuss opened up in his *Grammatica Celtica* the old forms of the Celtic dialects to the world, Mr Skene entered upon the study of old Gaelic with ardour. His previous training, combined with his command of French and German, enabled him to follow with ease the development of Celtic studies abroad by Ebel, Schleicher, Windisch, Gaidoz, D'Arbois, Loth, and others. He was one of the very few in Scotland who bought and read the continental magazines devoted to linguistic, and largely to Celtic studies—the now defunct *Beiträge zur Vergleichenden Sprachforschung*, the *Zeitschrift für Vergleichende Sprachforschung*, and the *Revue Celtique*. For some years back Celtic scholarship in the hands of Stokes, Zimmer, Thurneysen, Rhys, and others has occupied itself largely with sounds and forms and accents—the blood, bone, and muscle of grammar. Here a good grounding in phonetics, a minute verbal study of texts, and an acquaintance with living dialects are essential. Perhaps Mr Skene was not in full sympathy with this latest development in Celtic philology. He ceased to buy *Kuhn's Zeitschrift* many years ago, and even the *Revue Celtique* was dropped by him in 1887. Throughout several of his published works, one observes now and again a failure on the part of the author to grasp the subtleties of Gaelic and Welsh grammar. One example must suffice. The title of his great work is *Celtic Scotland: a History of Ancient Alban*. In a note (*Celtic Scotland*, vol. i. p. 1), the author explains how he adopts the genitive *Alban* in preference to “what he ventures to call the pedantic affectation of using the form

Alba," which is the old nominative. "A nominative form derived from the genitive is," he says, "also found; and the names of places ending in a vowel seem to have a tendency to fall into this form in current speech." In Gaelic, as in other tongues, an oblique case, through the loss of flexion, is frequently raised to the nominative. The particular case selected for this preference is that most frequently heard in current speech, and in place names the case raised to the nominative is in Gaelic always the locative-dative,—the genitive never. In this particular instance, the choice lies not between the old nominative *Alba* and the old genitive *Alban*, but between the old nominative *Alba* and the old dative *Albin*. The fact is, *Alban* and *Aran* are, like *Iona*, names invented for use in books and maps only. The correct forms, like *Erin* and *Rathlín*, are *Albin* and *Arin* (in Gaelic orthography *Albainn*, *Araínn*).

When Mr Skene took up his abode permanently in Edinburgh, he and several gentlemen interested in Celtic literature and history founded the Iona Club. The club came to an end on the death, in 1837, of one of its most active members, the late Donald Gregory, W.S., author of a valuable *History of the Western Highlands and Isles of Scotland*. The club published but one volume of *Transactions*, a book now rarely met with, the *Collectanea de rebus Albanicis*, in which are printed extracts from family charters, national records, Gaelic MSS., Irish annals and Norse sagas, which throw valuable light on the history of the tribes and clans of the North of Scotland. In these early years the Highland Society of London offered a premium for "the best History of the Highland Clans." Mr Skene competed, and his essay proved the successful one. It was afterwards enlarged and published in two volumes in 1837. *The Highlanders of Scotland*, as this work is entitled, is now a somewhat rare book. With the confidence of youth, Mr Skene states that in the preparation of this essay he had given a long and attentive examination to the early authorities in Scottish history, and had thoroughly investigated two new and most valuable sources—the Icelandic Sagas in their original language, and the Irish Annals. The author afterwards found cause to modify several of the views advanced in this early work; but in its main features the juvenile production is characterised by the

same qualities which distinguish the writer's maturer labours—fulness of information, clearness of statement, soberness of judgment, and a dignified courtesy which ever ruled the pen as well as the speech and bearing of Mr Skene.

It was in 1859 that Mr Skene became a member of the Royal Society. A valuable paper by him, afterwards printed in *The Four Ancient Books of Wales* (vol. i. p. 141), on "The Celtic Topography of Scotland, and the Dialectic Differences indicated by it," was read before the Society in 1865, and printed in vol. xxiii. of its *Transactions*. He joined the Society of Antiquaries in 1831; became a vice-president of that Society in 1852; and was throughout a frequent contributor to its *Proceedings*. Papers from his pen on linguistic, literary, genealogical, and historical subjects appear frequently from 1852 till 1886. Some of the early papers—*e.g.*, "On Ancient Gaelic Inscriptions in Scotland" (*Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, vol. i. p. 81), "On the Ogham Inscriptions on the Newton Stone" (*Ibid.*, v. 289)—are now superseded. Others—*e.g.*, "The Earldom of Caithness" (*Ibid.*, xii. 571) and "The Authenticity of the Letters Patent said to have been granted by King William the Lion to the Earl of Mar in 1171" (*Ibid.*, xii. 603)—are reprinted as appendices in *Celtic Scotland* (vol. iii. 441, 448). An elaborate treatise on "The Coronation Stone" (*Proc. Soc. of Ant. of Scot.*, viii. p. 68) was afterwards published separately. The greater number of these valuable papers are special studies on obscure points in Scottish history and bibliography, the conclusions arrived at being, as a rule, accepted as established in the author's more elaborate works.

The services of Mr Skene to Celtic history and literature may well be termed great. The fact that a man of his ability and culture set himself resolutely to study the Celtic dialects as an essential preliminary to the investigation of the history of the tribes who spoke these dialects, gave an importance and a distinction to these studies which, in this country, they much needed but did not always receive. He cannot, indeed, be said to have expelled the linguistic charlatan from his chief stronghold on European soil. We have still among us educated men who will undertake to explain obscure Gaelic names without learning to decline a Gaelic noun, and to correct Highland maps though they cannot spell a Gaelic word.

To Mr Skene is due the credit of bringing together the very valuable collection of Gaelic MSS. now deposited for preservation and reference in the Advocates' Library, Edinburgh. The Faculty of Advocates themselves possessed four such MSS. When a committee of the Highland Society of Scotland (now the Highland and Agricultural) undertook to conduct an inquiry into the authenticity of Ossian's Poems, Gaelic MSS. were sent by the Highland Society of London and others, with the view to aid the committee in their labours. The late Major M'Lachlan of Kilbride was the possessor of a considerable number of such MSS. ; these had disappeared, but were eventually found in Glasgow. Through Mr Skene's representations the Highland Society and the custodian of the Kilbride MSS. agreed to deposit their collections in the Advocates' Library. A few others were added, and a general catalogue of the whole was prepared by Mr Skene.<sup>1</sup> One of these Gaelic MSS. consists of a large collection of verse made by James MacGregor, Dean of Lismore, in the early part of the sixteenth century (Adv. Lib. Coll., xxxvii.). The late Dr M'Lauchlan of Edinburgh transcribed, translated, and annotated large extracts from this manuscript, which were published under the title of *The Book of the Dean of Lismore* by Edmonston & Douglas, of this city, in 1862. To this volume Mr Skene contributed valuable notes, and an elaborate introduction on the history of Gaelic, and especially Ossianic, literature. In 1868 appeared the *Four Ancient Books of Wales* in two large volumes, published by the same Edinburgh firm. The second volume contains copious extracts from the poems in the Black Book of Carmarthen, the Book of Aneurin, the Book of Taliessin, and the Red Book of Hergest, with notes, appendices, and index. The first volume gives a translation of the Welsh poems into English by the Rev. D. Silvan Evans and the Rev. Robert Williams, with an elaborate introduction by Mr Skene, embracing chapters on the Races of Britain, the Celtic Dialects, the Pictish Language, the Celtic Topography of Scotland, as well as on the Ethnology and the early Literature and History of Wales.

Mr Skene's contributions to the history proper of Early Scotland

<sup>1</sup> In course of time, Skene became himself the possessor of several Celtic MSS., which he bequeathed to the Advocates' Library collection, but unfortunately those of most value seem to have disappeared.

are of a two-fold character. There is first of all the collecting, sifting, and arranging of the raw materials for such a history; and there is besides the stately pile which he himself constructed out of these materials. In addition to the papers already spoken of, contributed to the *Transactions of the Iona Club* and the *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries*, falls to be mentioned a translation, with introduction, notes, and illustrations, of John of Fordun's *Chronicle of the Scottish Nation*, a work which forms vols. i. and iv. of the *Historians of Scotland* series. Vol. vi. of the same series is an adaptation of Dr Reeves's great work, *Adamnan's Life of St Columba*. In the Scottish edition of this monumental book a translation of Adamnan's Latin text by the late Bishop of Brechin is given, while Dr Reeves's learned and exhaustive notes are condensed and recast by Mr Skene. The most important contribution of this description to Scottish history made by Skene is the large volume known as the *Chronicles of the Picts and Scots*, edited by him, and published under the direction of the Lord Clerk-Register of Scotland in 1867. In addition to the *Chronicle of the Picts* and the *Chronicle of the Scots*, there are here gathered together "as complete a collection as possible of the fragments which still remain of the *Early Chronicles and Memorials of Scotland*, prior to the publication of Fordun's *History*." The extracts written in Saxon, Welsh, and Gaelic are accompanied by a translation; those written in Latin are left untranslated. In all, fifty-eight documents, in whole or in part, are printed, with a preface extending to nearly 200 pages of large octavo, giving a description and examination of the documents. "The first piece, both in point of time and of importance, is that usually known by the name of the *Pictish Chronicle*." It is in three parts, and Mr Skene is of opinion that the second and third divisions have been translated from an old Gaelic original by a scholar who did not always understand his text. A Gaelic word or phrase is occasionally left untranslated, e.g., "Athelstan filius Advar *rig Saxon*,"—*rig Saxon* being Gaelic for "King of the Saxons." The editor concludes that the *Chronicle* proper was written originally in Gaelic at Brechin between the years 977 and 995.

Mr Skene's reputation as an historian will rest on his *chef-d'œuvre*, *Celtic Scotland*. This important work, the outcome of



over forty years' study and research, was published in three volumes by David Douglas, Edinburgh, 1876–80. Each volume is practically an independent work in itself. The first treats of the early races of Scotland, and records the civil and political history of the various peoples down to the death of Alexander III., when the purely Celtic dynasty became extinct. The second volume is entitled "Church and Culture." The ecclesiastical history closes with the twelfth century, when the old Celtic Church came to an end, and in Scotland Columbanism gave place to Romanism. A single chapter on the language and learning of the people gives in outline the leading facts in the literary history of the Scottish Gael to the middle of last century. The title of the third volume is "Land and People." Here the attempt is made to picture the social life of the tribes in early times, and of the Highland clans down to our own day; the relation of the various classes to each other; their land tenure, mode of agriculture, privileges, and exactions.

The outstanding features of this great work are the fulness and accuracy of the author's knowledge, and the conspicuous fairness with which facts are grouped and conclusions drawn. The style, one cannot help thinking, is to a certain extent coloured by the profession of the writer. The reader will look in vain here for the stately periods of Gibbon, still less for the brilliant rhetoric of Macaulay. Mr Skene's style is always dignified, occasionally rising to eloquence. But, in reading his pages, one is rather reminded of a memorial for counsel drawn by a masterly hand, the relevant facts all marshalled with skill, and justifying the "Opinion," which is always argued with ability, and not infrequently with ingenuity and subtlety.

The plan of the work is not without its disadvantages. The civil and ecclesiastical cannot always be kept separate. The ethnological chapters of vol. i., and the discussion on the legendary origin of tribes and clans in vol. iii., necessarily overlap. The early history of Scotland presents many difficult problems; but the most insoluble are those dealt with by Mr Skene in his third volume. The social and domestic life of the Pict is practically unknown. A glimpse is given in the Book of Deer; all else is dark. There *mormaer* and *toisech* and chief of clan

appear, subordinate to the king who is supreme, and with inherent though undefined rights in the soil. That the *normaer* became eventually the earl, and the *toisech* the thane (chief and captain of clan among the modern Highlanders) seems to be established. But the relationship of these dignitaries to each other, to the king, and to the mass of the people; their mode of life; their beliefs; their judicial system, are shadowy in the extreme. The materials for filling in the vague outline given in the Book of Deer are to be gathered from stray notices and allusions in native records, but chiefly by comparison and analogy from Irish, Welsh, Saxon, and Norse sources, and these have by no means been exhausted by Mr Skene.

The case is different with respect to the ecclesiastical history of these people. The chapter on the literature of the Scottish Celt is meagre; but the history of the old Church of Scotland, as written by Mr Skene, is full and reliable. Additional facts are daily coming to light; but the main conclusions arrived at in this volume are not likely to be materially shaken. In this field the record is fuller, and the author was perhaps more in sympathy with his subject. Vol. ii. of *Celtic Scotland* is virtually accepted as authoritative, being quoted as such by writers of various creeds. The mission of Nennius is overshadowed by that of Columba. The early Scottish Church is essentially Columban, an offshoot of the Church of Ireland. The creed, organisation, and discipline of the old Church of Scotland have been the subject of hot controversy. The Apostle of the Picts was, as Bede says, a presbyter. Mainly because of this fact, some have held that the Columban Church was Presbyterian. There were bishops in Iona in early days. To that extent, at least, the old Gaelic Church in Scotland was Episcopal. But these bishops had no dioceses, and in the monastery they were under the jurisdiction of the abbot, who was supreme. One thing is clear. The early Church of Ireland and of Scotland was not Roman. During the fifth and sixth centuries, the Church in the British Isles was in practical isolation from the Church abroad. Considerable differences had meanwhile emerged. But when Columbanus came into collision with the bishops in France, instead of adopting their views on the matters in dispute, he stoutly asserted his independence both of them and of Rome; and in the great conference at

Whitby, Colman of Lindisfarne upheld the authority of St John and St Columba as equal to that of St Peter and the Pope. Mr Skene shows clearly that the early Gaelic Church was not Presbyterian, Episcopal, or Roman, as we understand these terms nowadays. It had at least two distinguishing and praiseworthy features: it combined great missionary zeal with literary enthusiasm. Several ideas and practices, among them its intense monasticism and the passion for an eremitic life, the old Gaelic Church, by ways and channels which we do not as yet fully know, borrowed from the East. Its most peculiar feature was the manner in which the tribal organisation of the Gael was adapted to the government and discipline of the monastery. The headship of the tribe or clan was as to family hereditary; but, in theory at least, elective as to the individual. In Iona the bishop, though often spoken of, was a subordinate person; the abbot was all and in all. The abbot of the monastery was, like the head of the clan, selected out of the family of the person who founded the monastery. This peculiar arrangement took root and prospered among the Gael. The idea was native, and very probably it helped to make the Gaelic Church so intensely national, or, more properly speaking, racial. By the beginning of the thirteenth century the Columban Church was externally extinct in Scotland. It is to be regretted that the limit which Mr Skene had imposed upon himself precluded him from inquiring to what extent, if any, the old ideas and ways survived under the Roman organisation that displaced them. A chapter from his pen on the Highland Church from the thirteenth to the sixteenth century would be a valuable contribution to the ecclesiastical history of Scotland.

The civil and political history of Scotland in early times is written by Skene with a fulness hitherto unattempted. The portion of Scotland conquered by the Romans was held but for a limited period, and upon a precarious tenure. After the withdrawal of the legions the thick darkness that followed is broken by the landing in Argyleshire of a colony of Irish Gaels in 503. During the next 350 years four peoples struggle for the mastery on Scottish soil—the Gael of Dalriada, the Britons of Strathclyde, the Saxons of the south-east, and the Picts, who lived beyond the Forth, and, according to Skene, in Galloway. Eventually these races

were so far consolidated under Kenneth MacAlpin, a Dalriad, whose line, amid many vicissitudes, held the throne of Scotland till the close of the Celtic period. In his chapters on ethnology Skene discusses the language and race relationship of the Picts, and comes to the conclusion that they were Celts of the Gaelic rather than of the British type. The view advanced by Pinkerton, and upheld by Oldbuck of Monkbarrow, that these people were Teutons who spoke a Gothic dialect, is now exploded. It does not follow that Mr Skene's must be accepted. Within the last few years Professor Rhys, with great learning and no small ingenuity, has argued that the Picts were of Turanian stock, whose speech was largely overlaid by loans borrowed from their Gaelic and Brythonic neighbours. Mr Skene's proof is mainly linguistic, and is two-fold. If the ancestors of the Northern Highlanders spoke a language other than Gaelic, some remains of it would have survived. Again, only on two occasions is Columba spoken of as using an interpreter when preaching to the Picts, the inference being that, as a rule, the saint's Gaelic speech must have been understood by these people.

The problem cannot, however, be solved on such narrow issues as these. The questions of blood and language must always be kept distinct. Anthropology and archæology may hereafter yield concrete evidence which will be decisive of the matter. As things are, the following facts must be kept in the fore-front. Among the Picts, succession was through the female. This custom is unknown among Celts; it is indeed, so far as we know, non-Aryan. Again, Bede regarded Pictish as a separate language. The Gael of Ireland and Scotland looked upon the Picts or Cruithnig, to use the native term, as a people different from themselves. Cormac, the first Gaelic lexicographer, gives one or two Pictish words, quoting them as foreign words, at a time when, presumably, Pictish was still a living language. The Norsemen called the Pentland Firth *Pettland*, *i.e.*, *Pictland Fjörd*, while the Minch was *Skotland Fjörd*. Mr Whitley Stokes, after examining all the words in the old records presumably Pictish, says: "The foregoing list of names and words contains much that is still obscure; but on the whole it shows that Pictish, so far as regards its vocabulary, is an Indo-European and especially Celtic speech. Its phonetics, so far as we can ascertain them, resemble those of Welsh rather than of Irish."

This splendid record of good work done was duly acknowledged at home and abroad. As was natural, Celtic societies in Ireland and Wales, as well as in Scotland, felt pride in honouring the distinguished historian. The University of Edinburgh conferred the degree of LL.D. upon Mr Skene in 1865. He became D.C.L. of Oxford in 1879. Upon the death of Mr Hill Burton in 1881, the Government of the day, with the full approval of educated Scotsmen of all classes and creeds, made him Historiographer-Royal for Scotland. And in 1888, friends and admirers commissioned Sir George Reid, now President of the Royal Scottish Academy, to paint his portrait; the portrait to remain with Mr Skene during his lifetime, and at his death to be sent to the National Portrait Gallery.