

THE OSSIANIC SOCIETY OF FIFTY YEARS AGO,
1899-1900

Fifty years ago the Glasgow University Ossianic Society was entering its sixty-eighth session. From a small body of enthusiasts it had grown to be an integral part of the life of the University. That it had adhered to the principles laid down by its founders is proved by the fact that in the previous session 1898-1899, the members of the Society sent a strong petition to the University Court, pressing for the establishment of a Celtic chair at the University—a petition which, unhappily, has not yet been fully answered. Moreover, the syllabus for the session under consideration shows the culture and variety of the Society's interests.

The Honorary President for 1899-1900 was, appropriately, a stalwart Gael. He was Dr Norman MacLeod, of Inverness, a son of Dr John MacLeod, the "High Priest of Morven," and a cousin of the other Dr Norman MacLeod, the great "Caraid nan Gaidheal," to whose efforts the Ossianic Society owes its existence. Norman of Inverness was a churchman *par excellence*—a minister whose oratory on all great occasions was renowned, and who, in this year as Honorary President, was also Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. Born in Morven, Gaelic was his mother tongue, and he never lost his love for it, or fluency in speaking it, although he served in Lowland charges before going to Inverness. His Presidential address was entitled: "The aims of a University Celtic Society," and it is to be regretted that the Ossianic minutes give nothing like the verbatim report that the importance of both speaker and subject would appear to warrant.

At the beginning of this session, and indeed during previous ones, Ossianic Society meetings were held in the Union on Fridays at three o'clock in the afternoon. But at the fourth meeting of this session, it was decided to alter the time of meeting to the more suitable hour of seven o'clock, and since that time the Society has continued to meet about that hour.

In 1899 membership was on the increase; indeed hardly a meeting passed without the introduction of new members, and the session was noteworthy because of the first admittance of woman members into active participation in the Society's activities. Meetings were not held as frequently as at the present time, and were devoted almost wholly to intellectual pursuits. When we come to look at the syllabus we cannot but admire the earnestness with which the Society studied not only Highland culture and Highland problems, but also the much wider field of general literature and current problems.

And so to the syllabus. The President for 1899-1900, Neil MacColl by name, chose for his address, "Social progress and development in the Highlands," thus conforming to the tradition that can be traced from the Society's inception, that the President should speak on some subject dealing with the Highlands and Highlanders. There was one Gaelic debate entitled "Am bheil gràdh dùthcha nan Gaidheal a' dol air ais?" (Is the Highlander's regard for his country declining?) and a Gaelic essay, "Cait' am bheil na Gaidheal?" (Where are the Highlanders?). The only English

debate was, "Should military service be compulsory?", a subject which was topical at the time because of the Boer War. It is interesting to note that the leader for the negative strongly asserted Britain's invulnerability from attack because of her insularity, and also that the Society decided against conscription by the narrow majority of two votes. Happy age that knew not the aeroplane nor the atomic bomb.

The remaining meetings of the session, apart from one social evening, were devoted to symposiums and essays read by members of the Society. The versatility of members in choosing their subjects is rather startling. As befitted a Celtic Society they had a symposium on Rob Donn, Ewen MacLachlan and William Ross, essays on Duncan Bàn MacIntyre and Dugald Buchanan. They are to be admired for bringing these giants of Celtic literature to the notice of all who attended the Society's meetings. But they were not so hide-bound by Celtic tradition that they did not recognise that Celtic culture is but one branch of the world's learning. And so they had one symposium on Sir Walter Scott and his work, another on Béranger, Heine and Burns, an essay on Keats and also one on Tolstoi. All the subjects were treated in a vigorous style, and the discussions that followed appeared to have been mature and interesting.

The social side of the Society was not so well catered for as at the present day, being limited to one Social Evening and a *Conversazione*, which took the place of our Annual Reunion, and was held in the Cockburn Hotel, Bath Street. This function was reported in the press, and took the form of a supper and dance, and according to a newspaper cutting inserted in the minutes "broke up at a seasonable hour!"

Can we then, the Ossianic Society of 1949-1950 learn something from our predecessors of fifty years ago? Admittedly our Society has seen some changes through these intervening years, and a few are certainly for the better. But we can emulate their desire to augment, however feebly, the welfare of the Highlands and of Highlanders. Yet we would do well to realise, as they assuredly did, that in striving to this end, we do not view Highland problems out of proportion. A Highlander who has Highland welfare nearest his heart, yet keeps that precious ability to see and appreciate the vaster panorama of world culture and welfare, is of greater value than one who can see no further than Skye or Lewis. It is up to us, the Ossianic of today, to keep alive this tradition and so to contribute something of infinite value to our day and generation as our Ossianic predecessors gave to theirs.

MAIRI K. MACKINNON.

(The minutes of the Society are deposited in Glasgow University Library.)

What a wonderful bird the frog are!
When he walk he fly almost;
When he sing, he cry almost.
He ain't got no tail hardly, either,
He sit on what he ain't got almost.