

A PAPER ON THE SUBJECT OF BURNS'S PISTOLS. BY THE RIGHT REV.
BISHOP GILLIS.

This communication having, at the request of the Members, been printed for sale as a separate pamphlet (8vo, pp. 44), it is not considered necessary to reprint the whole of its controversial statements, but simply, with a brief introductory notice, to extract the passages that relate more immediately to Bishop Gillis's gift to the Society.

It will be recollected that on the occasion of the recent celebration in memory of Burns, Bishop Gillis presented to the Society a brace of pistols as those which had belonged to the National Bard. It was stated that they had been given to the late Dr Maxwell, of Dumfries, by the poet when on his deathbed; that Dr Maxwell had brought them with him when he removed to Edinburgh in 1834, and that they had remained in the same custody from the period of his death till the present time.

Shortly after the Centenary, a paragraph appeared in the "Illustrated London News," in which the writer, after sneering at the idea of the genuineness of the pistols thus presented to the Society, brought to light other two brace of pistols claiming to be those of Burns. The one belonged to the grandson of the person to whom Dr Maxwell had presented them; but this brace was also pronounced to be spurious. The other brace of pistols, it was alleged, had been bought in 1834 by Allan Cunningham the poet, to whose widow they still belonged, and these pistols were declared to be the only genuine relics of the bard.

Bishop Gillis commenced his paper by acknowledging a mistake into which he had fallen when he presented the poet's pistols to the Society. These, after the death of Dr Maxwell, came into the possession of his cousin, the late Mr Menzies of Pitfoddels, in whose house at Greenhill Dr Maxwell died, and in which house the pistols remained after the death of Mr Menzies. Bishop Gillis was not aware that Mr Menzies was possessed of any pistols except those inherited by him from Dr Maxwell,

and sent a pair which caught his eye shortly before the Centenary, in the belief that they were the much-prized weapons of the Bard. These turned out to be a pair bought by Mr Menzies from Mr John Barton in 1813; and it was only after attention had been directed to the circumstances that a fresh search was made, which led to the discovery of the genuine pistols of the poet, lying quite close to the place where the first brace had been stowed.

As both the other competing braces of pistols were also alleged to have been given by the poet to Dr Maxwell, and to have been bought at the sale of his effects, Bishop Gillis proceeded in his paper to give a history of their descent. The first set, now belonging to the grandson of the person to whom Dr Maxwell is said to have presented them, was shown to have belonged to Provost Fraser of Dumfries; and it appeared that the daughter of this gentleman never heard him speak of the pistols as those of Burns; and farther, that although Provost Fraser had bought them at the sale of Dr Maxwell's effects, it was proved, by various witnesses, that the pistols of Burns were specially reserved from that sale, and sent to Dr Maxwell's residence in Edinburgh. It was therefore plain that the pistols referred to by the correspondent of the "Illustrated London News" had no claim to be considered those of Burns.

Bishop Gillis commenced his paper as follows:—

"In availing myself of the privilege you have so kindly granted me, of submitting in person to your learned Society the Paper I now rise to read on the subject of Burns's Pistols, I cannot but feel that the first duty I have to perform, is to apologise, as I now beg leave to do, for a mistake, —easily accounted for and rectified,—and into which I have both *unfortunately* and *fortunately* fallen, with reference to these relics of our national Bard. Unfortunately, in as far as it has proved the occasion of a sneering remark by an anonymous writer in a London newspaper, against your too confiding reliance on my accuracy; yet fortunately, since it has forced upon myself, as a work of atonement, the pleasing task of gathering together for your acceptance, such a body of evidence on the vexed question before us, as must, I think, satisfy any reasonable man that the claims to the possession of Burns's pistols, set up by Allan Cunningham and others, have at last been incontestably exploded; and that no one

can in future pretend to seek for the genuine weapons of the poet but where they now are, and ought to be—viz., within the Halls of the Society of the Antiquaries of Scotland. . . .

“In answer, then, to the question which the irony of its first paragraph is intended to set off—viz., ‘Are these the pistols worn by the illustrious poet on his excise expeditions against the smugglers on the coast of Solway?’ I can now have no hesitation in saying, *They are not*—as will at once appear from the following receipt:—

“‘Received, Feb. 20th, 1813, of Mr MENZIES, Thirty-one pounds, ten shillings, for a pair of double-barrelled pistols, and a mahogany case and apparatus.

“‘L.31, 10s.

JOHN BARTON.’

“Having thus candidly avowed my mistake, let me briefly account for it; and, after setting aside all opposing claims, establish beyond a doubt that the genuine pistols of Robert Burns are those now lying on the table before you.

“Twenty years and more had passed away—years for me replete with other thoughts than any connected with the Ayrshire Bard—since my eye had happened to light on these painful memorials of his country’s ingratitude. The recollection, however, of the gauger’s pistols, had remained in my mind, associated with the idea of green baize coverings; and on my attention being accidentally called, shortly before the Centenary, to the case containing Barton’s pistols—which case is also conspicuous for its green baize linings—I naturally enough mistook one set of pistols for the other, never, that I remember, having given credit to my extremely pacific friend, the late Mr Menzies of Pitfodds, for being possessed of any such deadly weapons; although the soiled state of the powder-flask I can now easily account for, from what I know to have been the habits of several of his young friends, and his own kindness towards them.

“Within very few days after the appearance of the article in the columns of the ‘Illustrated News,’ the Bard’s pistols, in their green baize bags, were discovered, in a box near the very spot whence Barton’s had been taken; when, of course, the nature of my mistake immediately flashed upon me, as well as the circumstance which had led to it. . . .

“Here, again, comes Mr Alexander Howat’s own mother, Provost Fraser’s daughter, admitting anew that ‘she never heard her father say that these pistols belonged to Burns,’ and that the only evidence for supposing them to be such was, ‘that they were bought at the sale of Dr Maxwell’s property.’ But if bought for Provost Fraser, as they unquestionably were, at the sale of Dr Maxwell’s property in Dumfries in May 1834, they could not possibly have been given to Provost Fraser by Dr Maxwell, when ‘he died’ here in Edinburgh some five months later.

“In further refutation of the alleged deathbed gift by Dr Maxwell to Mr Hastings’ ‘aged friend;’ I may add, that from the time Dr Maxwell left Dumfries, previous to the sale, about the latter end of May 1834, to the day of his death, on the 13th of October following, I lived constantly with him here in Edinburgh in the same house, and as a member of the same family; having every opportunity of knowing the state of health he was then in, and which was such, that during all that time he saw no one from without, save his medical advisers, until ‘he died,’ I may say, in my arms; and I can, therefore, safely aver, that at no time during the whole of that period was any such gentleman as Provost Fraser ever heard of as having set his foot within the door.

“Finally, as irrefragible testimony that the pistols in question were not given by Dr Maxwell to Provost Fraser, but were bought for the latter at Dr Maxwell’s sale, I beg to produce here for inspection, the original roup roll, where stands at p. 21, the following entry, bearing witness to the article sold, to the name of the purchaser, and to the price paid for it:—

‘A CASE OF PISTOLS—PROVOST FRASER—L.2, 6s.’”

Bishop Gillis, in the course of his communication, produced the various letters, roup-rolls, and receipts, proving beyond all question that no articles presented by Burns to Dr Maxwell were included among the effects disposed of at the sale of his household property in Edinburgh, and pointing out the two strange contradictory statements by Allan Cunningham in the first and second editions of his “Life of Burns,” regarding the brace of pistols in his own custody. Bishop Gillis summed up the discussion in the following terms:—

“I trust, Mr Chairman and Gentlemen, I may not now be deemed over bold, if I venture to think that I have satisfactorily disproved the claim

set up by Allan Cunningham to the possession of Burns's pistols—having produced incontrovertible evidence as to the fact, that whereas the pistols given by Burns to Dr Maxwell were not, as asserted, sold 'at a public auction in 1834;' those bought towards the end of that year for Allan Cunningham, as the pistols of the poet, were one of two sets purchased at Dr Maxwell's sale, but neither of which had ever belonged to Burns. Until Allan Cunningham's statement, then, in reference to the alleged *present* from Blair of Birmingham, be thoroughly purged of all its awkward unlikeliness, it remains matter of the merest indifference what name of maker may or may not be on the genuine pistols of the poet—whether that of Blair, or Johnson, or Barton, or any other—the proof of their genuineness resting exclusively on its being satisfactorily established that they are *the* pistols given by Burns to Dr Maxwell; those reserved at the sale of the Doctor's effects at Dumfries in May 1834; those subsequently forwarded to Edinburgh, and identified by Dr Maxwell's own daughter, to whom they had been from her infancy familiar objects as well as a valued treasure; and jealously preserved at Greenhill, her residence, as well as mine, for the last four-and-twenty years, until the period of her death, which only recently occurred, on the 12th of September last.

"Now, as most of the above has been already thoroughly demonstrated in one or other portion of the present paper, my only remaining task is to show when, how, and by whom the pistols in question were forwarded to Edinburgh. I shall do so in very few words, by quoting here from a letter to which allusion has already been made; and written by Mrs Maxwell of Kirkconnell, on the 20th of October 1834, to the late Miss Maxwell, Dr Maxwell's daughter:—

"I received your letter at Mr Attwood's this morning, and am very sorry you have been so uneasy and so much annoyed about Burns's pistols. Before you receive this, I hope you will have got them; as I went immediately to Burnside's, who was out, also his son; but his wife sent a man with me to Mr Reid's, who had heard what sort of box they were in.¹ Mr Reid came to the opening, and we found them directly; and I took them to Miss Johnstone's, who goes to Edinburgh to-morrow. She

¹ "Mr Reid was the resident Catholic clergyman of Dumfries, at the time."

promised to send them to you by her brother on her arrival; and I dare say she will, as Mr Johnstone seemed as unhappy about them as you did, and he had written to his sister to call on me regarding them, which she did, just after I had got your letter.'

"It may here be noticed, from the tenor of the above letter, how very much on the alert all Dr Maxwell's friends were as to the safe preservation of the pistols given to him by Burns. When, therefore, Dr Maxwell's daughter returned from Ireland, in the beginning of 1835, and expressed her entire satisfaction as to the pistols brought to Edinburgh by Miss Johnstone being the identical relics of the poet—as I myself have, not once, but frequently heard her do, for it was she who first drew my attention to them—I hold I am justified in saying that, taking into account accumulated evidence already here adduced, apart entirely from any weight to which my own testimony may be entitled, all reasonable doubt ought henceforth to be at an end, both as to the spurious claims of Allan Cunningham and others, and as to the true nature of the pistols at present before you, and which I have now such unfeigned pleasure in committing to the guardianship of your learned and patriotic Society."

Mr ROBERT CHAMBERS, in moving that the special thanks of the Society be presented to Bishop Gillis for his interesting gift to the Museum, and for the great pains which he had taken in proving its authenticity, congratulated the Bishop on the completeness of his statement, which had set the matter beyond the reach of cavil. He must add, that while he entertained a great respect for the genius of Allan Cunningham as a poet, yet he had had too much experience of his inaccuracies not to regret that he should have entered the field as a biographer or historian.

Mr Chambers's motion was unanimously agreed to—Mr JOHN MACMILLAN, M.A., one of the Members, remarking that at the time of Dr Maxwell's sale he was resident in Dumfries, and in a position which made it almost impossible that he should not have heard of the sale of any relic of Burns, if it had taken place.