

II.

SOME ACCOUNT OF ROBERT WATSON, WITH REFERENCE TO A POR-
TRAIT OF HIM, PAINTED BY PROFESSOR VOGEL VON VOGEL-
STEIN, NOW PRESENTED TO THE MUSEUM. BY THE RIGHT REV.
ALEX. P. FORBES, D.C.L., BISHOP OF BRECHIN.

When I was at Munich in 1863 I had the honour of an introduction to Professor Vogel von Vogelstein. This gentleman, formerly court painter at the Court of Saxony, has latterly lived in Munich, where he is much respected.¹ In going over his studio he showed me a picture which he said was one which he had painted of a Scotsman of the name of Wat-

¹ Professor Vogel has died since this paper was read.

son, whom he had known in early youth—in fact, whose pupil he had been. I at once recognised the description to be that of the notorious Robert Watson, whose romantic life and miserable death have been in part made known to us by a note in the preface to the Glasgow “*Registrum Episcopatus Glasguensis*,” in which the curious history of the Stuart papers is given by Mr Cosmo Innes. Professor Vogel added that Watson had answered Burke on the French Revolution, had been paid to sort papers at Fontainebleau, and had been imprisoned by Savary.

In order to acquaint the members with what was previously known of Watson, I shall take the liberty of reading to them Mr Innes’s note as a fitting introduction to the rest of the information which I have been able to gather concerning this unfortunate man. The tale is altogether so romantic that I shall make no apology for reading the following extract :—

“Above thirty years after M’Pherson’s inquiry at St Omers, one Robert Watson came to Rome, and talking on this subject to the Abbé (M’Pherson), assured him that there was no truth in the alleged destruction of these documents ; indeed, he asserted that he knew where many of them were, and that he could recover them if L.50 were paid him. This information the Abbé wrote to Lord Stuart de Rothesay, then in Paris, who saw Watson, paid him the money, and did obtain some papers.

“This Watson had fled from Scotland, having been compromised in the seditious associations in 1794, and remained abroad till after the peace. Having become acquainted at Rome with an attorney, who had been confidential agent with the Cardinal York, he purchased from him for 100 scudi (L.22, 10s.) a large mass of papers, chiefly regarding the rebellions of 1715 and 1745, which had remained in his hands after the Cardinal’s death. Several carts were employed to transport them to a room which Watson had fitted up to receive them ; but having made great boasting of his prize, the matter reached Cardinal Gonsalvi, the minister of Pius VII., who directed the whole to be seized. Watson was offered repayment of the price and all the expenses, but he refused to accept of this, and left Rome protesting his right to the papers. The whole collection was subsequently sent to George IV. as a present from Pius VII., and is generally known as the Stuart Papers.

“The subsequent fate of Watson will appear from the following notice in the ‘Times,’ November 22 and 23, 1838:—‘On Tuesday, 20th November 1838, an inquest was held at the Blue Anchor Tavern, St Mary-at-Hill, Thames Street, London, on Mr Robert Watson, aged 88, who had strangled himself the preceding morning, when in bed, by twisting his neckcloth with a poker. He had arrived at that tavern in March from Boulogne, and after staying five weeks went to Bath, on his return from which he had an apoplectic fit. He generally lay in bed till two o’clock. The night before his death, he told the landlord he was secretary to Lord George Gordon in 1780; that he had been the intimate friend of Horne Tooke up to his death; that he had been tried at the Old Bailey for conspiracy and acquitted; that at another time, L.400 had been offered by Government for his apprehension, but he escaped by living in disguise in a lord’s house in London, and got away by the interest of Lady M.D. in a Swedish ship, in which he was nearly taken, on suspicion of being Thomas Hardy. He went afterwards to Paris, and was employed by Napoleon to teach him English, who made him President of the Scottish College there, with 5000 francs a year, which he held six years. That he had been to every Court in Europe, and had travelled to every part of the globe, and had been intimate with Washington, and was an avowed Deist. He went from France to Rome, where he discovered a mass of papers relative to the Stuart family, and of the greatest importance to England. That he entered upon a negotiation about them with Lord Castlereagh, who gave him a free pardon, and promised him L.3000 for the discovery. That he frequently visited the Pope on the subject, and at last obtained them for a large sum, and after further difficulties on the part of the Pope, he shipped them in a frigate sent on purpose from England, Lord Brougham being sent out by the Government to receive them. When he went to Bath, he had with him a box, which he declared contained important papers, and which he left there. He said he had an aunt in Edinburgh, 104 years old, and 84 years a widow, and was supposed to be uncle to a Dr Watson, a surgeon in Leith. He was a person of very reserved habits; and nineteen wounds were said to have been found on his body after death. Verdict—temporary insanity.’”

Watson declared that he was 88. By the favour of Mr Seton, I have

obtained two extracts from the Register of Births and Baptisms of the parish of Elgin, the contents of which are as follows :—

“*June 29th, 1746.*

“Robert Watson, hyrer in Elgin, and Catherine Demster, his spous, had a child bap. caled Robert. Robt. Ross, Robt. Simpson, Robt. Laing, Margt. Brodie, Margt. Leslie, wits.”

“*August 7, 1769.*

“Adam Watson, merch. in Elgin, and Jean Forbas, his spouse, had a child bap., name Robert. Robert Forbas, surgeon in Nairn, Robt. Gordon, vint., and Agnes Shaw, daughter to B. Shaw, witnesses.”

N.B.—The above entries are extracted from the Register of Births and Baptisms for the parish of Elgin, which has been searched from 1740 to 1769, and no other Robert Watsons have been found.

It will be seen that the first of these entries makes Watson 92 at the time of his death, the second 69. Now, it seems impossible to crowd all the events of Watson's eventful life into the shorter period, and, therefore, though the alternative is not absolutely certain, there is more than a presumption that we must accept the earlier period. If so, the case of a suicide at 92 is a fact unparalleled in the annals of sorrow.

I have been enabled by the kindness of Professor Vogel to procure this interesting picture for the collection.

On the back of the picture, there is the following epigraph :—

“Dr ROBERT WATSON, born at Elgin in Scotland : drawn from nature,
at Rome, 1817, by C. Vogel.”

“Dr Watson fought in his early days for independence in America, and, on his return to Scotland, went to the University and took the degree of M.D. Then he went to London, where, after confuting the work of Edmund Burke against the French Revolution of 1792, he united with some members of the *Corresponding Society*, and became its president. He afterwards had to escape by a Swedish vessel to France, and L.200 were offered (by the Government) for his capture. From that he came with a French Swiss to Rome to cultivate indigo and cotton, in which he failed, as the rain came on too soon. The artist made his acquaintance in Rome, through Mr Millingin, the archæologist, in 1815. He went

to take lessons in the English language from him. In 1817 Dr Watson was fortunate enough to discover under the roof of a Roman house the archives of the late Royal Family of Stuart, and to save the papers. These archives were soon confiscated by Cardinal Gonsalvi, and the English Government hearing of it, sent a ship to take them. By the sudden departure of Watson to Fontainebleau in search of other documents of the same character this portrait remains unfinished."

"To complete the article of the 'Times,' 22d and 23d November 1838, about the late Dr Robert Watson, from Elgin, in Scotland. During my first staying in Rome (1813 to 1820), having been induced by some English friends to learn their language, the late Mr Millingen, a celebrated archæologist, whom I saw often in the highly interesting evening parties at the Princess Gortorinska and Countess Schouwadoff, introduced me, in 1816, to Dr Watson, a little lame man, of about sixty years of age. His lameness, occasioned by a wound received in the war for the independence of the United States of America, which gave him, on his retirement, the rank of a colonel, and some land, which he sold soon after. After his return he took his degree at the University in Scotland. When living in London, and being in hopes of becoming Secretary of the newly-appointed Lord Governor of India, he used to dine with some friends. One of them came once with the just published book of Edmund Burke against the French Jacobins, and pretending that there could be no valuable answer given to it, which struck Watson's mind so much, that he bought it immediately, and during the whole night he wrote a pamphlet against it, which had the greatest success amongst the republican party then in London, who came to make him president of their secret meetings, called the 'Corresponding Society.' This event he used to call often the reef on which his life-vessel made shipwreck, because the English Government, taking notice of this dangerous society, seized all their papers and some members. Fortunately Dr Watson escaped on a Swedish vessel to France, from which, some years after, he had been brought to Rome by a French Swiss to cultivate, in the Pontine marshes, cotton and indigo,¹ in order to gain the prize of 100,000 francs offered by Napoleon on the importation of these articles to France having been prevented by English Government. But as the rainy time came before the indigo could be ripe, every hope

¹ For which he pretended to have some notion.

was lost; and Dr Watson left by the French Swiss, remained in Rome, under indigent circumstances, when I made his acquaintance.

“His knowledge in politics, history, and geography made these lessons, during about two years and a half, very interesting to me, though I could not partake his radicalism and his indifference in religious matters. We read, amongst others, the ‘Essay on Man,’ by Pope, the ‘School for Scandal,’ by Sheridan, the ‘History of Charles V.,’ by Robertson, &c. Besides these books, we read the ‘Galignani’s Messenger.’ For translating into English, I have translated nearly the whole ‘Esprit de Lois,’ by Montesquieu, &c.

“Once—I believe it was at the end of the year 1818—he told me he was now in possession of the archives of the late royal family Stuart, found under the ceiling of an old Romish palazzo, where lived formerly the Homme d’Affaires of the late Cardinal York Stuart, and now in possession of his heiress, from whom he bought it for 100 scudi. Then I went very often to read in these papers of the highest interest, besides the letters of the King of France and Popes of that time, those of their secret agents at the different courts. There was particularly a large book in which the Queen had copied, by her own hand, all the letters sent to these secret agents. At that time Lord Brougham, then leader of the opposition in Parliament, came to Rome, and offered Dr Watson L.1000 to publish twelve letters of these archives; but he did not agree, intending to sell them together. One morning returning to these papers, I found the room shut up, and a gendarme before it; and Dr W. told me that the Cardinal Gonsalvi had taken this measure, pretending that, being on too friendly terms with the English Government, he could not allow such papers to go into private hands, but he would warmly recommend Dr W. to the Prince Regent. I heard him often exclaim, ‘I have been always convinced that all Governments are rogues and tyrants, and now I have had too much confidence, instead of escaping with them to America.’ Soon after an English vessel came to take these papers, and the annul of the warrant against him, of which he showed me once the public paper, in which was offered by Government L.400 to seize Dr Watson. At the same time Prince Regent gave him a pension of L.200 to go to Fontainebleau in search of some papers belonging to the same archives. When I returned from Bracciano to Rome, in the summer 1819, we met on the high way, he going

to France. Since I did not see him again, and this is the reason why his portrait could not be entirely finished, though very like. Afterwards the unhappy Miss Curran, daughter of the late Master of the Rolls for Ireland, showed me a letter lately written by Dr Watson, in which he proposed to marry her.

C. VOGEL VON VOGELSTEIN.

“MUNICH, 12th Sept. 1863.”

The Scottish College in Paris, originating in an endowment given by David, Bishop of Moray, A.D. 1315, maintained its corporate existence till the first French Revolution. The Manor of Grisi, which was part of its endowment in 1316, still belongs to the Roman Catholics in Scotland. In consequence of their refusal to take the republican oaths the members of the college had to escape to Scotland in November 1792, and Innes, the principal, being caught, only escaped death by the opportune overthrow of Robespierre. In 1799 a republican university, called the *Prytanée Française*, claimed the college property. Principal Innes reclaimed against this; and after certain *arrêts* of the consuls it was arranged that the property of the Scots College should be placed provisionally under the direction of the *Prytanée*, and that a number of bursaries were to be reserved for natives of Scotland. Innes, after reclaiming, was deprived in 1800 of the management of the property. Napoleon, in 1801, restored the property not sold, and with pretended magnanimity feigned to collect and preserve the remains of the Scots property. He centralised all the colleges under the *Établissement Britannique et College des trois nations réunis*. Two Irishmen, Walsh and Kerney, were appointed to manage this; and Robert Watson, who had been implicated in the British seditious associations of 1794, who had fled to France and become English tutor to Napoleon, was made by him Principal of the Scots College, at a salary which he held for six years.

On turning to Watt's "*Bibliotheca Britannica*," published in 1824, I find two works attributed to Watson—the "*Life of Lord George Gordon, with a Philosophical Review of his Political Conduct.*" Lond., 1795, 8vo; and an "*Account of Extraordinary Disease of the Skin, and its Cure*," in the *Philosophical Transactions*, 1754 (Abr. x. 475). The first of these works is written with a great deal of vigour and genius—a curious picture of the politics of the times. It is full of fierce denunciations of

kings and priests, and is an interesting specimen of that fierce and rampant invective which was so popular among the sympathisers with the earlier stages of the French Revolution. I have been unable to trace his second work, or to discover in what shape he answered Mr Burke, if it be true that he did so.¹

Watson also published in 1798 the political works of Fletcher of Salton with notes, &c., to which is prefixed a sketch of his life, with observations more philosophical than political. Both the life and the notes contain very violent statements, and at the end there is a statement that the Bow Street Officers, under a warrant from the Duke of Portland, had carried off his papers on a suspicion of treasonable correspondence with the French, and that he had suffered imprisonment for two years and three months in Newgate, upon a groundless suspicion of having intended to raise a rebellion against the King. He also promises to translate the "De Jure Regni" of George Buchanan, "who was the father of pure republicanism."

In the obituary in the "Gentleman's Magazine" for 1839, p. 237, besides the information given, it states that a Colonel Macerone testified to the truth of the particulars of Watson's life, and stated that he had paid the money to bury him. He had only got L.2 from Brougham, none from Mr A. Galloway and the rest of his political associates, so that the body of the old man was eventually conveyed to the grave as a pauper at the expense of the parish.

The following letter was written by this "Elgin Celebrity" to the late Mr Macfarlane, of Edinkillie, to whom he had been preceptor:—

"PARIS, 3d February 1825.

"MY DEAREST FRIEND,—Little did I think, when we parted on the banks of Lossie, that we should have remained so many long years without renewing that correspondence which was the pride of my early life; the fates, however, have decreed it so. The blame, I must confess, is entirely mine; and from your philosophic mode of life, I am conscious I am the greatest loser. I have seen a great deal of the world, and have had many

¹ Watt is mistaken in attributing the medical work to the subject of this notice. I am enabled, by favour of Mr David Laing, to state that the author was another Robert Watson, who was elected Fellow of the Royal Society on the 7th of February 1750, and who died on the 2d of March 1756.

opportunities of associating freely with those who have played a conspicuous part in it. The smiling plains of Italy, and the still more enchanting valleys of Greece, have alternately been the object of my admiration; but they left an empty space in my mind, and nothing has ever yet supplied that generous friendship, that sympathetic feeling, which the recollection of our rambles at Urquhart and Boghead awakens in my breast. As you used to say, I cannot but remember that such things were, and were right dear to me.

“ Before I left England, which was about six months ago, the Commission appointed under the great seal had given in their report respecting the archives of the Stewart family; and, though I do not expect an indemnity equal to their value, I have every reason to believe something handsome will be done. The Ministry, at various periods during the examination of the Commission, have advanced me three thousand one hundred pounds as an alimentary subsistence; and I trust their next vote will afford me a sufficiency to pass the remainder of my days comfortably in my native land. Indeed, it is now time for me to cast anchor; but I have not forgotten the words of a northern bard, which you frequently applied to me:—

“ ‘ Fortune and Bob, e’er since his birth,
 Could never yet agree;
 And now he’s kicked him from the earth,
 To try his fate at sea.’

When I come north, which I trust in God will be in the course of the ensuing summer, I shall bring a valuable collection along with me. Amongst other things, I am proprietor of the original Chronicle of St Denis, the Constantinople Bible, the missal of Mary Queen of Scots, the baton of Marshal Ney, the carriage of Bonaparte taken at the battle of Waterloo, with a variety of other articles both curious and valuable.

“ How are Mr James and your worthy mother? I hope and trust they are well, and enjoying their *otium cum dignitate*. I beg to be most respectfully remembered to them. Although appearances are against me, I have still some claim to their recollection, for a day never passes without my thinking of your family; and if wishes could make you happy, you would be the happiest of mortals.

“ Upon my arrival from Greece, a few days ago, I expected to have found at Paris a Mr Smith, a gentleman from Glasgow, who has long been in the habit of acting as my banker, and of supplying me with such pecuniary assistance as I stood in need of. Unfortunately, he is now travelling in Russia, and I do not even know the province in which he has spent the winter. His absence has deranged my plans and put me to much inconvenience, as I have some *sacred engagements to fulfil*, and a highly valuable collection, which must be lost unless I can command a certain sum of ready money. Thus situated, I have recourse to my dear Macfarlane, who never refused me anything, and who never shall be refused by me, and have to request you to send me one hundred pounds sterling. The opulent circumstances in which Providence has placed you, will, I trust, enable you, without any material inconvenience, to oblige your preceptor and your friend. Your refusal, which I never can anticipate, would prove a death-blow to my feelings, and cause the loss of more than one hundred times the sum required. You have only to apply to my bankers in Forres or Elgin, who, through the medium of their correspondents in Edinburgh or London, will forward the said sum to Robert Watson, Esq., chez Monsr. Ashley, Rue Vivienne, No. 16, à Paris, taking care to acquaint me with the transaction, and to pay the postage of your letter, without which it cannot reach the Continent. Messrs Lafitte and Co., bankers here, are generally the persons through whose agency money is remitted from Great Britain; but that is not material.

“ As sure as I paid James his celebrated dollar, which then composed his whole stock, so sure shall you be faithfully reimbursed in the course of six months from this date, provided I am not the bearer myself before that period expires. I am in excellent health; and when I neglect consulting my looking-glass, I am scarcely sensible of the approaches of age. I hope you enjoy that state of health and tranquillity of mind which your merit deserves, and without which the goods of this life are scarcely a blessing.

“ Farewell, my dearest Macfarlane. You have no doubt more regular correspondents than I; but you never had, nor never can have, a friend more faithful and true.—Your most respectfully till death,

R. WATSON.

“ P.S.—I shall expect to hear from you *upon receipt*, as the least

delay must prove injurious to my interest. Is our friend Mr Macpherson still alive? If he be, pray remember me to him.—R. W.”

In the “Illustrated London News” of 10th February 1866, under the head “Magazines,” it is said, “Mr Woodward, the Queen’s librarian, writes (in the ‘Gentleman’s Magazine’) the interesting history of the Pretender’s MSS. now in his custody. He omits to state that Dr Watson, the adventurer through whose agency they were procured, was the original of Gashford in Barnaby Rudge.” A good many years ago a brother or cousin of Dr Watson had a small retail shop in High Street, Elgin, now the interior portion of the premises occupied by Mr Sutherland, hairdresser. This gentleman at one time was so imbued with the political ideas prevalent in France during and subsequent to the Revolution, that he was pretty generally known by the sobriquet “Bonaparte.” —*Elgin and Morayshire Courier*, Dec. 20, 1867.