III. An Ode on the Popular Superstitions of the Highlands of Scotland, considered as the Subject of Poetry. Written by the late Mr William Collins: And communicated to the Royal Society of Edinburgh, by Alexander Carlyle, D. D. F. R. S. Edin. Minister of Inveresk, and Chaplain in ordinary to his Majesty.

INTRODUCTION TO THE POEM.

At a meeting of the Literary Class of the Royal Society, held on Monday 19th April 1784, the Reverend Dr Carlyle read an ode, written by the late Mr William Collins, and addressed to John Home, Esq; (author of Douglas, &c.) on his return to Scotland in 1749. The committee appointed to superintend the publication of the Society’s Transactions, having judged this ode to be extremely deserving of a place in that collection, requested Mr Alex. Fraser Tytler, one of their number, to procure from Dr Carlyle every degree of information which he could give concerning it. This information, which forms a proper introduction to the poem itself, is contained in the two following letters.

Letter from Mr Alex. Fraser Tytler to Mr John Robison, General Secretary of the Royal Society of Edinburgh.

Dear Sir,

At the desire of the Committee for publishing the Royal Society’s Transactions, I wrote to Dr Carlyle, requesting of him an account of all such particulars regarding Mr Collins’s poem as were known to him, and which were, in his opinion, proper to be communicated to the public. I received from him the inclosed
inclosed answer, and he transmitted to me, at the same time, the original manuscript in Mr Collins's handwriting. It is evidently the prima cura of the poem, as you will perceive from the alterations made in the manuscript, by deleting many lines and words, and substituting others, which are written above them. In particular, the greatest part of the twelfth stanza is new-modelled in that manner. These variations I have marked in notes on the copy which is inclosed, and I think they should be printed: For literary people are not indifferent to information of this kind, which shews the progressive improvement of a thought in the mind of a man of genius.

This ode is, beyond all doubt, the poem alluded to in the life of Collins by Johnson, who, mentioning a visit made by Dr Warton and his brother to the poet in his last illness, says, "He shewed them, at the same time, an ode, inscribed to "Mr John Home, on the superstitions of the Highlands, " which they thought superior to his other works, but which "no search has yet found." Collins himself, it appears from this passage, had kept a copy of the poem, which, considering the unhappy circumstances that attended his last illness, it is no wonder was mislaid or lost; and, but for that fortunate hint given by Johnson, it appears from Dr Carlyle's letter, that the original manuscript would, in all probability, have undergone the same fate.

Struck with the singular beauty of this poem, of which, I believe, no man of taste will say that Dr Warton and his brother have over-rated the merit, I could not help regretting the mutilated form in which it appeared; and, in talking on that subject to my friend Mr Henry Mackenzie of the Exchequer, (a gentleman well known to the literary world by many ingenious productions) I proposed to him the task of supplying the fifth stanza, and the half of the sixth, which were entirely lost. How well he has executed that task, the public will judge; who, unless warned by the inverted commas that distinguish the
An ODE of Mr Collins.

the supplemental verses, would probably never have discovered the chasm. Several hemistichs, and words left blank by Mr Collins, had before been very happily supplied by Dr Carlyle. These are likewise marked by inverted commas. They are a proof that this poem, as Dr Carlyle has remarked, was hastily composed; but this circumstance evinces, at the same time, the vigour of the author's imagination, and the ready command he possessed of harmonious numbers.

I am, dear Sir,

Yours, &c.

To Alex. Fraser Tytler, Esq;

S I R,

I send you inclosed the original manuscript of Mr Collins's poem, that, by comparing with it the copy which I read to the Society, you may be able to answer most of the queries put to me by the Committee of the Royal Society.

The manuscript is in Mr Collins's handwriting, and fell into my hands among the papers of a friend of mine and Mr John Home's, who died as long ago as the year 1754. Soon after I found the poem, I shewed it to Mr Home, who told me that it had been addressed to him by Mr Collins, on his leaving London in the year 1749: That it was hastily composed and incorrect; but that he would one day find leisure to look it over with care. Mr Collins and Mr Home had been made acquainted by Mr John Barrow, (the cordial youth mentioned in the first stanza), who had been, for some time, at the university of Edinburgh; had been a volunteer, along with Mr Home, in the year 1746; had been taken prisoner with him at the battle of Falkirk, and had escaped, together with him and five or six other gentlemen, from the castle of Down. Mr Barrow resided in 1749 at Winchester, where Mr Collins and Mr Home were,
were, for a week or two, together on a visit. Mr Barrow was paymaster in America, in the war that commenced in 1756, and died in that country.

I thought no more of the poem, till a few years ago, when, on reading Dr Johnson's life of Collins, I conjectured that it might be the very copy of verses which he mentions, which he says was much prized by some of his friends, and for the loss of which he expresses regret. I sought for it among my papers; and perceiving that a stanza and a half were wanting, I made the most diligent search I could for them, but in vain. Whether or not this great chasm was in the poem when it first came into my hands, is more than I can remember, at this distance of time.

As a curious and valuable fragment, I thought it could not appear with more advantage than in the Collection of the Royal Society.

I am, Sir,
Your most obedient servant,

Alex. Carlyle.

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