

George Melvin, Headmaster, Tarves School

Mr George Melvin was born in Aberdeen in the year 1797. His father of the same name being a merchant that city. His mother, whose maiden name was Agnes Stewart, seems to have been a woman of considerable mental culture and great force of character and it is rather curious that when George Melvin was a little boy he accompanied his mother on more than one occasion to the Secession church at Craigmadam in this parish induced no doubt by early association and by the impressive services conducted by Peter Robertson the devout and excellent though erratic minister in that church.

The family of which Mr Melvin was a member consisted of three. The other two being James, afterwards the famous Doctor Melvin, and Agnes who later in life became the wife of Doctor *Dunn*, one of the masters in the celebrated old Grammar School of Aberdeen. Nor had the name of Melvin little to do in making this seminary of education what it was for Dr Melvin who was for many years rector or headmaster was regarded as one of the best Latin scholars of his day and a teacher of the highest order.

After passing with success and credit through the University Curriculum in his native city George Melvin became assistant teacher in the popular school at Udney after which he held, for a short time, the headmastership of Gordon Hospital or Sillerton and for many years after he had left that sort of duty a few of his former pupils – Sillerton Boys by whom he was dearly-loved paid their old teacher a visit of honour once a year. It was a great day in Tarves when a carriage and four with liveried outriders dashed into the quiet village and pulled up at the gate of the schoolhouse from which immediately emerged the prince of hosts to welcome his visitors.

It was in the year 1843 that George Melvin received the appointment to Tarves Parish School. It may be doubted whether this situation was either as honourable or congenial as the one which he had left but I am sure no-one ever heard a murmur pass these brave proud lips. He gave himself heart and soul not only to the place but to the people and the people gave themselves to him. He made Tarves his very own, served society with heart and hand and left all that he owned for the social improvement and enjoyment of its people. The splendid public hall in the village, the foundation of our excellent public library, and the collection of interesting antiquarian relics are the result of his dying bequest. And what have we done to commemorate such noble philanthropy? The people of Tarves have a duty to discharge. There is no monument in our churchyard to mark his last resting place nor does portrait or slab adorn the Melvin Public Hall. For the benefit of those who knew him not in the flesh I will try to describe George Melvin and his surroundings.

We use the bell or knocker and a housekeeper, who once was younger, ushers us into the well remembered parlour. Busy at the desk with his swift pen or recumbent on the substantial hair sofa with book in hand we find the master. What a big grasp

he gives us, what an emphatic welcome. He is a man of medium height, of powerful build, one leg and foot are diminutive and he uses a crutch. He is well dressed, wears a black dress coat and vest which leaves large display of linen and shepherd tweed trousers. But all this is forgotten in the presence of the man. His splendid head crowned with beautiful black hair carefully curled, his brow broad and high, his mouth indicating strength and determination, with eyes that speak without fear the thoughts his heart thinketh. His face is well formed and full of character. Ceaser, the bonnie black and white terrier whose sharp bark had heralded our entrance, lies curled up beside the other household favourite – a fine large grey and white cat. Nearly half the wall room is taken up with his cherished books, a few excellent portraits hang on other parts. They are Sir Walter Scott, Shakespeare, Burns and Byron, Duke of Wellington and his great rival the 1st Napoleon. Woman is represented by the Queen.

The furniture is good, plain and substantial for he hates what he calls flamgommery. His habits are simple and his wants few. He goes to bed early – from 2 to 3 am on the average and rises about 9 for a hurried breakfast and his school duties. Sometimes it is later but he gets little rest for the noise from the adjoining school must have been terrible. The door was opened early and left open – no shelter sheds in those days. Occasionally he had a party – at one time of the neighbouring householders to supper often as of favourite girl pupils. Tea and plain bread and butter with good home-made jam from his own garden. No biscuits of any kind. After the tea, down from the shelves came a few books to choose from – Sir Walter and Dickens being first favourites. The young guests did the choosing and the host the reading and every now and then there was a general discussion. Supper consisted of cold beef, bread and cheese. Before the party broke up every girl had her height taken and entered in a book to which reference was made a year after.

Although he had no ear for music he allowed a few songs in the course of the evening – good Scotch – Burns Lady Nairn *Tarnahill* being preferred. A Man's a Man for a' That or I'm Wearin Awa Jean would bring tears to his eyes. He detested *Negges* melodies – *Negges* nonsense he called them. He used to say 'he's not a good man that likes neither music nor bairns' I don't understand the music but I do love the bairns. Upstairs he had his workshop with turning lathe and large collection of tools. There he spent many an hour working till the sweat dripped from his nose. Here he had the complete apparatus for making electricity besides manyu curious and some rather ghastly relics including the skulls of several notorious criminals, which he used to exhibit pointing to the low foreheads and other parts of indicating low mental and moral power/capacity.

Occasionally he gave lectures on electricity which were greatly appreciated and when the school was struck with lightning during a great thunderstorm an old woman remarked that 'it was nae winner for that cratur winna haud frae that devilry'

If George Melvin was anything he was genuine out and out. Humbug and cant he abhorred. I remember a temperance meeting held in the school and which was largely attended. The speech of the evening was certainly a poor affair. The principal argument being that God did not create strong drink therefore it was bad. Mr Melvin replied with what scathing contempt. This poor body has told us that God did not create strong drink therefore it is bad, bad to make and bad to use. Good Heaven man God did not make barley meal, am I to want my good bar bap. A lecturer on mesmerism of the name of Lewis (of copper colour) entertained a great assembly in Tarves one night did a number of very smart things. Several of the audience were mesmerised and most were convinced. Not so Mr Melvin. He publicly challenged Mr Lewis to mesmerize him and the attempt was made. Mr Melvin sat like a statue as cold as marble, as stern as an old Roman warrior. Lewis tried all his arts but failed completely. He blamed Mr Melvin's want of faith. 'Faith' said Melvin 'man do you expect me to believe in childplay like this. A nigger forsooth to control the will of an Anglo Saxon – never'

Another rare evening entertainment took place in the old school under the presidency of Mr Melvin when Piper King, a strolling musician, whose long black coat had seen better days piped on a penny whistle to the elite of the Parish. In the middle of the performance the door opened, the minister's man with all the consequence of office went thumping up the schoolroom and intimated 'Maister Knox was wantit directly' Melvin's glance should have withered up the rude intruder but the Piper was equal to any such emergency. He sprang from his elevated seat, grasped the beadle by the throat, hurled him back to the door and gave him such an exit.

When Melvin went abroad on business or society bent he drove a phaeton with four wheels and a seat for his coachman behind. One that could be opened our or closed up according to the occasion. His faithful attendant James Mitchell either driving or directing his master in the driving of Jack and Jib, two very pretty grey ponies, with which every boy and girl were on terms of friendship. Of Jack and Jib, the phaeton and the burly maister's man Jeemes I could write a book. Let ane incident suffice. The Oldmeldrum branch of the G.N. of S.R. had been opened with eclat worthy of the occasion. The eating and drinking had been promiscuous (well especially the drinking) and in the small hours of a beautiful summer morning among the later departures the phaeton of Melvin took to the road. Mr Melvin and his bosom friend John Duncan of Newseat occupy the front seat, the slip seat being occupied by Jeemes who was comfortable, Forbes Morrison and his fiddle and Mr Melvin's crutch. The spirits of all were high. John Duncan, the king of drivers was on the reins and Jack and Jib flew. The Auquhorthies road was rough but it was short. Alas, however, they did not care for roads and the mair hurry the less speed. A special jolt about Kirsty Browns, the fastenings of the back seat gave way, its occupants dropped on the road with cushion, crutch and fiddle. James shouted long and loud but shouted in vain. 'Some midnight reveller' said Melvin to his companion

and faster than ever flew the lightened trap. Soon Tarves was reached but it was the maister that called in vain. Jeemes, Jeemes ye vagabond, you're asleep. At length our worthies realized that the rear cargo had disappeared and they were in a fix for John Duncan was unwilling to budge and Melvin couldn't without the crutch. So there they sat till Jeemes and Fiddler trudged from Auquhorthies and assisted them to alight not without much wrangling between his man and the maister in which the man as usual had the last word and took the place of the maister. Speaking of John Duncan one of the most gentlemanly of men and a prince of hospitality.

I am tempted to tell another story. The harvest time had come round again at Newseat. The chair is well supported by such choice spirits as George Melvin, the merchant, the doctor Roy Sudman from Aberdeen and the auld smith Jeemes Joss. The Aberdeen seedsman a great way finding himself at the elbow of the auld blacksmith to whom he was a stranger could not resist the temptation to have a little play, represented himself as a traveller for an ironmonger and devised very much to open an account with his new friend. By and by opportunity offered Roy on his feet and in eloquent terms proposed the health of his friend Mr Joss who he tells the company had arranged to become his customer for horse nails and iron. The auld smith, a droll looking little man, replied and thanked the would-be dealer 'But' says he 'I'm nae very sure about ye. Ye're terrible like a chiel that cam roon here in the spring and selt a the folk sadducees.' 'What do you mean smith?' cried Roy. 'I mean' says Jeemes 'that your onion seed was like the sadducees they had hae resurrection'

I have said that Melvin hated cant. Spirit rapping, ghosts and black art were to him intolerable. Here is a story he enjoyed.

A young officer of cavalry was in the north visiting his uncle, a douce, worthy old parish clergyman. (Story of Ghost.)

Mr Melvin was a bachelor till near the end of his life. He had a great respect for women and was never more at home than in the society of ladies especially if they were intelligent beings full of repartee. Once, however, he was completely put to rout. A young lady, an old pupil and a great favourite and who at the time was engaged to be married arranged with several young friends to have a lark with their old teacher. It was the 29th February and the conspirators were to meet their victim at a small party. The tea was over and all bright and happy when the actress rose with the style of a *Siddons* and in a neat and clever speech offered her hand to George Melvin. For once no word would come. His face grew white. Dr Irvine who was present recommended brandy in ridicule. Melvin simply rose, kissed the fair proposer and subsided into a constraint that somehow affected all present. Afterwards he sent the lady a magnificent work box and a beautiful letter, much to her confusion.

Melvins great pride was in his country for truth. For honour, for pluck give him an English man. In 1851 he visited the Great Exhibition in London and paid also a short to Paris with the result that he thought more highly of everything English than of anything French. Speak of their fruits and wines, I would not give a feed of my own *Langley* greens and a drop of mountain dew on all their grapes and sour wines. He especially extolled the police of London. Scarcely had he and his companion alighted at the metropolis when they got into a dispute over a cab fare. Up stepped a policeman with "what is wrong gentlemen?" The matter is explained, the proper charge stated and paid, the cabman's number taken. "I'll see to you. Good morning Gentlemen" and off walked an Englishman.

On their way to London they had a curious episode (story of detective at railway station)

Not withstanding his lameness he was a very brave man. I remember one afternoon when he had left the school he encountered three rough looking tramps who had thoroughly frightened the housekeeper and being well off the street assailed the master. 'Blackguards' shouts Melvin and with one tremendous blow he felled the biggest bully like an ox, the other two beat a quick retreat.

Nowhere did the striking individuality of Melvin appear more than in the school. His system was surely his own. There was neither a grammar nor a geography book in the school. His patience was sorely tried by the little ones who he called – that little boy or the varmints. The bible was read daily and his comments were decidedly curious. David and his men (when he had fled from Saul) were dubbed highway robbers and one day the class was startled when reading the account of Jael when she put Sisera to death by the emphatic pronouncement from the master "the infernal rip".

He strongly impressed on his boys that they should be manly, truthful and courteous to the girls. A fair stand up fight he saw no harm in and fights were the order of the day. For boys to learn the filthy habits of smoking or snuffing was declared to be abominable. He himself was a martyr to snuff and a warning to every boy to eschew a habit which had long since become his master. He won a bet by abstaining for 12 calendar months which expired while he sat in church. Oh the pinch he there enjoyed. "It went to my big toe"

(This document appears to have been copied from an earlier written account. Items in italics were presumable difficult to read and guesses made.)