

Janet Hamilton

(14 October 1795 – 30 October 1873)

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BOOKS: *Poems and Essays of a Miscellaneous Character on Subjects of General Interest* (Glasgow: Thomas Murray / Edinburgh: Paton & Ritchie / London: Arthur Hall, 1863);

Poems of Purpose and Sketches in Prose of Scottish Peasant Life and Character in Auld Langsyne, Sketches of Local Scenes and Characters, with a Glossary, by Janet Hamilton, Authoress of "Poems and Essays" (Glasgow: Thomas Murray / Edinburgh: William Ritchie / London: James Nibet, 1865);

Poems and Ballads (Glasgow: James Maclehose, 1868);

Poems, Essays and Sketches. A Selection from the First Two Volumes, "Poems and Essays," and "Poems and Sketches," with Several New Pieces (Glasgow: James Maclehose, 1870); enlarged as *Poems, Essays, and Sketches: Comprising the Principal Pieces from Her Complete Works*, edited by James Hamilton (Glasgow: James Maclehose, 1880); republished as *Poems, Sketches, and Essays* (Glasgow: James Maclehose, 1885).

Janet Hamilton may have been the most widely read and appreciated working-class poet of Victorian Scotland. Her vigorous, satiric, and recollective poems in English and her native Doric (Lowland Scots) exemplified the values of a region and vanished time and provided rare insight into the developed views of an imaginative elderly woman who never attended school, remained poor all her life, raised a large family, and overcame illiteracy and blindness to record verses she composed in her head. An upright woman of mildly reformist inclinations, angered by the devastating consequences of urban industrial blight, Hamilton eventually became an articulate spokeswoman for the working class and a remarkable example of an elderly oral poet whose verses found wide circulation in print.

She was born on 14 October 1795 at Shotts, in Lanark (formerly a county in central Scotland), the child of James Thomson, a shoemaker, and Mary Brownlee Thomson. Through her mother Janet



Thomson was descended from John Whitelaw of Stand, Monkland, a devout Covenanter who was executed for his beliefs at the Old Tolbooth, Edinburgh, in 1683, four years after he took part in the battle of Bothwell Bridge. Hamilton memorialized her great-great-grandfather's death in prose and verse and celebrated in other reminiscences the words and deeds of other strong-minded Presbyterian ancestors, among them her grandparents.

When Janet was about seven, her parents' bad health led them to move to Langloan in the parish of Old Monkland, then a small village and later a subdivision of Coatbridge, and she lived there until her death. Her parents worked for two years as field laborers on the nearby Drumpellier estate, and Janet sat at home to complete her day's labor of spinning "two hanks of sale yarn." When she was nine, she

began to work as a tambourer, or weaver and embroidress, and she followed this occupation until she became blind at about sixty. Her mother "left the out-door labour," and it seems likely that mother and daughter worked side by side, perhaps discussing points of faith and the biblical lore dear to Mary Thomson. Hamilton believed throughout her life that women should contribute to their family's income as well as instruct their children at home, a pattern made easier by the home-based craftwork she and her mother both plied.

As a child Janet Thomson received no formal schooling, but taught by her mother, she read before she was five and quickly applied herself to ballads, songs, and stories, as well as to the constantly available religious texts. Hamilton's accounts of her ancestors' strict Sabbatarian practices blended respect with memories of the restiveness she recalled feeling when she could not hear tales or explore the outdoors. At eight she saw a copy of John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1674) and a book of Allan Ramsay's poetry on a loom in a weaver's cottage, borrowed the books, and read them with delight. In the village library she found and read a number of histories and collections of essays (including Plutarch's *Lives* and volumes of *The Spectator* and *The Rambler*) and the poems of Robert Fergusson and Robert Burns, but few novels were available to her since many Presbyterians disapproved of them. Hamilton adhered to the religion of her upbringing in most other ways, but her taste in literature was eclectic, and she avidly read Shakespeare and other literary works disapproved of by her pious friends. She later told Alexander Wallace that she "could scarcely remember the time when her love of books was not her ruling passion," and she continued to read till two or so each morning of her sighted life.

When James Thomson returned to his former occupation of shoemaking in Langloan, he employed as an assistant John Hamilton, whom Janet married in February 1809, when she was thirteen and he twenty-five. She remembered their wedding with fondness: one cold February day the couple walked the twelve miles from Langloan to Glasgow, where they were married by Dr. Lockhart of College Church, a preacher they had never met. They returned after dark and began housekeeping with their "plenishing" (household goods) and one Spanish dollar. Biographical accounts mention that the couple had ten children, whose names were recorded in the Old Monkland Parish registers and in the Hamilton family bible. A daughter and two sons seem to have died in infancy, but the other seven children survived into adulthood and at least five of them outlived their mother. Those whose births

were recorded were Archibald, born June 1810; Mary, born May 1812; James, born July 1814; William, born August 1816; John, born August 1816 (a twin of William, he may have died young since the name was used again); John, born August 1818; Charles, born May 1820; Marion ("Mirren"), born June 1824; and Janet, born July 1825 (who lived only five weeks). Hamilton therefore bore her first child at fourteen and her last before she was thirty. In her "Reminiscences of the Radical Time" she remembers "crying amongst my five young children" in April of 1820, when she feared the Radical militia would attack her husband and other men of the village who refused to join them.

The marriage was evidently a good one and John Hamilton consistently supported his wife's marked desires to read and write. Alexander Wallace, a minister who visited the couple, recorded in a brief sketch prefaced to *Poems and Ballads* (1868) that

It was very amusing to hear her "ain gudeman," John, telling with great glee, how that after she had "used up" the village library, he went to another at some distance, and brought one armful of books after another, and continued his journeys till this other librarian was also compelled to acknowledge that he had never known a case of such *fell* reading before.

At her own expense Hamilton started a small circulating library for the benefit of her neighbors, but this venture failed when users did not return the books, and she lost her entire supply. According to her later memories, Hamilton also turned her attention to her children's education with zeal. She taught sons and daughters alike to perform household tasks, and each child began to read at five, with the Shorter Catechism and the Gospel of John as texts.

Though she could read, Hamilton could not write. Between the ages of seventeen and nineteen she composed in her head about twenty poems, all religious, and her husband transcribed them for her, but after the birth of her third child she left off composition for about thirty years. When she was about fifty she taught herself to write in a rough script (of her own invention) and began to write essays for an annual supplement to Cassell's periodical, *The Working Man's Friend*. She wrote these early essays and her earliest published poems in standard English but gradually began to insert more details of Scottish setting and speech into her later volumes, and her style became more personal and direct as her confidence grew. Hamilton's fervent support for European independence movements suggests that her social and political views may also have broadened somewhat as she

made a wider range of choices and interacted more directly with the outside world. At one point a grandson in the colonies sent her a small gold bar to have made into a ring, but she sold it instead and gave the entire proceeds to the Garibaldi Fund for Italian independence. Even after she became blind, she was eager to have the newspaper read to her.

James Hamilton recorded the environment in which she managed to write: "My mother's pieces were mostly all composed amid the bustle and noise incident to the affairs of a family being conducted in a small house, or while she was engaged in conversation with her family and friends." Unfortunately, Hamilton was partially blind by sixty and fully blind by seventy-one. In many of her later poems she laments her inability to see beloved natural objects. Her lifelong habit of memorizing long passages of poetry, including her own verses, helped her write through her blindness, and her son James transcribed her poems—composed, in her husband's words, "when the burning thochts within winna let her rest." Her firm-mindedness and independence are mentioned in James's preface to the 1880 edition of her poems:

Having been my mother's amanuensis, I may say that when I wrote a piece from her dictation, and afterwards read it over to her, she rarely made a correction on it. When her books were being printed, although unable from want of sight to read a line, she never would allow any one but herself to make any correction on the proofs. I read them; she sat and listened, and an alteration of a word or a syllable from her own she would detect at once. She said if her writings possessed any merit, it would be her own; and if there were blemishes in them, they, too, would be her own.

Hamilton's first book, *Poems and Essays of a Miscellaneous Character on Subjects of General Interest*, appeared by subscription in 1863, when the author was sixty-eight. Her later *Poems and Ballads* (1868) was "lovingly and respectfully inscribed by the Authoress to her Brothers, the Men of the Working Class," but the earlier *Poems and Essays* bore a conventional dedication to a member of the upper classes: "To Colonel D. C. R. C. Buchanan, DrumPELLIER, This Volume is by permission respectfully dedicated." Buchanan was a neighboring landowner and heir of the estate on which Hamilton's parents had worked, and she praised him as "the liberal supporter of every benevolent and educational institution in the large and populous district in which he resides." The 1863 volume also includes a preface and gentle appeal for critical forbearance, which Hamilton signed in her characteristic script:

I hope the critics will lay the rod lightly across the shoulders of an old woman of threescore-and-ten, whose only school-room was a shoemaker's hearth, and her only teacher a hard-working mother, who, while she plied the spinning-wheel, taught me at her knee to read the Bible—the only education she or I, her daughter, ever received.

This first volume earned highly praiseful reviews in many newspapers in London and Scotland, and its immediate successors appeared with introductions by Alexander Wallace, D.D., and George Gilfillian, a well-known critic and patron of Scottish poetry.

Hamilton's work found an unusual range of reviewers in both Scotland and England. As one might expect, reviewers for religious and temperance papers such as *The League Journal*, *The Christian News*, the *United Presbyterian Magazine*, and the *Evangelical Repository* liked her work, but so did writers for major Scottish newspapers and several London papers, including the *Pall Mall Gazette*, the *Athenaeum*, the *St. James Gazette*, and *Punch*. Reactions tended to follow regional lines—the Scottish newspapers praised her Doric verses and the English ones her clear standard-English style—but most singled out "Effie: A Ballad," the tale of a young motherless woman betrayed by her lover in favor of a wealthier woman, for special praise. A typical Scottish reaction comes from the *Glasgow Herald* (28 November 1868):

The name of Janet Hamilton is one of the most remarkable in the history of Scottish poesy. That a woman in humble life, who did not enjoy the advantages of the usual elementary branches of a school education, should, at the age of 73, and while now blind, be capable of writing or composing verse at all, is singular enough; but that these verses should possess the *verve*, pathos, and genuine truthfulness of a Tannahill, and even, in all but his best pieces, of a Burns, can only be accounted for by the inheritance of genius. The ballad, "Effie," for tenderness, simplicity, and beauty, deserves to be placed alongside of the immortal "Auld Robin Gray" of Lady Ann Lindsay.

In several early poems Hamilton expressed ambivalent support for Britain's military campaign in the Crimea, but none of her political poems thereafter favored any colonial venture or conflict. In other poems she voiced contempt for the "sport" of hunting, attacked wars of oppression, and denounced American "Slavery's vile Draconian code / Of lawless laws, that flout the laws of God" ("Lines Addressed to Mrs. H. B. Stowe"). Hamilton was or became an ardent supporter of assorted liberal-populist revolutionary movements in Europe—praising independence movements in Spain, Hungary,

Poland, Greece, and Italy and expressing particular anger and distress at internecine slaughter in Poland. Some of this political verse affirmed more general democratic and egalitarian political ideals, and she often associated those ideals with "Auld Mither Scotland."

Hamilton's political opinions evolved as she wrote. Initially, for example, she remembered the activists of the 1819-1820 Radical uprising as violent malcontents dissatisfied with a (relatively) "good" lot. Even then, however, she asked rhetorically whether "if our misguided brethren of the times we refer to had enjoyed the same privileges [of electoral representation], they would ever have, even in their trying circumstances, supplied us with materials for writing *Radical Reminiscences*." Later contacts with a variety of workingmen's organizations acquainted her with a wider range of reformist and educational causes, and she supported them all.

Hamilton expressed her cultural nationalist views rather conventionally in her first volume. Several dramatic narratives record the persecutions of her dissenting ancestors and their fellows, and other poems celebrate Scotland's natural beauty and historic independence. In later poems she began to personify her beloved Scotland in clear self-image, as a loving if contentious old mother and indefatigable source of critical advice. In "Auld Mither Scotland," for example, the speaker frames a sharp critique of unequal British exploitation: "It's England's meteor flag that burns / Abune oor battle plains; / Oor victories, baith by sea an' lan', / It's England aye that gains." She also feared both illiteracy and the disappearance of Doric, and correctly observed that "mang baith auld an' young, / There's mony noo that canna read / Their printit mither tongue." Indeed, the "mither tongue" was more than a metaphor and mark of cultural identity to her—it became the emblematic source of most of her matriarchal memories and literary models. Her nationalism was Scottish-cultural rather than British-imperialist, and her early poems display an unabashed enjoyment of Scots usages, usually in informal contexts. Writing a "bit scrift" verse to "frien' Tammie" in "Verses Inscribed to Mr. Thomas Duncan, Glasgow," she reports that she had bidden her Muse "lea her trantels ahint her," but the Muse had resisted Doric: "An' wow she was cadgie an' gidgin' ful' fain, / An' tae skirl the Doric her pip didna hain." The problem of appropriate usage, however, was firmly resolved by the time she published "A Plea for the Doric" in 1865, in which the speaker apologizes for her "Par-nassian" efforts, in standard English, "to busk oot my sang wi' the prood Southron tongue." She also expresses skepticism and regret at the long line of

distinguished Scottish journalists and intellectuals who had left Edinburgh (known affectionately as "Auld Reekie," or "Old Smokey") for London and notes with sarcasm that:

I'm wae for Auld Reekie; her big men o' print
To Lunnon ha'e gane, to be nearer the mint;
But the coinage o' brain looks no a'e haet better,
Though Doric is banish'd frae sang, tale, and letter.

Hamilton's vigorous defense of Scots vernacular is noteworthy, especially when one considers the social constraints to which elderly women without formal education were subject and the "genteel" emulative pressures to which many male working-class poets succumbed. Her egalitarian pride in her "national" history and language freed her to develop her natural gift for satiric mimicry and vernacular metaphor and fostered her growing respect for others' aspirations to national identity and independence.

During Hamilton's lifetime, local discoveries of extensive coal and iron lodes, explosive growth of rail and canal networks, new iron-smelting techniques, and explicit exemption from the modest constraints of the Public Health Acts (until 1885) inflicted on her natal Coatbridge and its environs some of the most intensely rapacious industrialization ever seen in the British Isles. Coatbridge quadrupled in size between 1821 and 1851 and suffered terribly from the ravages of such unregulated industrial development. Many of Hamilton's poems describe the effects of the new forms of work on Langloan and its surrounding villages—filth, noise, crowding, colliery explosions, and loss of livelihood and craft identity for the region's weavers. Some of Hamilton's most mordant lines appear in background descriptions of these conditions, often embedded in poems on other topics. Here, for instance, the environs of a pub is described in "Our Local Scenery":

There's chappin' an' clippin' an' sawin' o' aim;
Burnin' and soterin', reengin' and chokin'.
Gizzen'd and dry ilka thrapple and mouth,
Like cracks in the yird in a het simmer drought. . . .

By 1865 she had even begun to question some of the concrete uses to which human knowledge and science were put, as in "Rhymes for the Times. IV.—1865." For although

. . . knowledge increases, abune an' below;
The yird's like a riddle, pits, tunnels, an' bores,
Whaur bodies, like mowdies, by hunners an' scores
Are houkin', an' holin', an' blastin' the rocks;
An' dronin's an' burnin's, explosions an' shocks, . . .

Oh, mony's the slain in the battle o' life!
 It's Mammon we worship, wi' graspin' an' greed,
 Wi' sailin' an' railin' at telegraph speed,
 Get gowd oot the ironstane, an' siller frae coal,
 An' thoosan's on thoosan's draw oot o' ae hole.

These changes also give a characteristic Hamiltonian inflection to the retrospective poem of memory, in which a speaker walks to a place she has known and contrasts its past and present fortunes. In "A Wheen Aul' Memories," for example, the speaker, cane in hand, visits nearby Gartsherrie, once a rural village in her girlhood:

Noo the bodies are gane an' their dwallin's awa',
 And the place whaur they stood I scarce ken noo ava,
 For there's roarin' o' steam, an' there's reengin' o' wheels,
 Men workin', an' sweatin', an' swearin' like deils.

And the flame-tappit furnaces staun' in a raw,
 A' bleezin', an' blawin', an' smeekin' awa,
 Their eerie licht brichtenin' the laigh hingin' chuds,
 Gleamin' far ower the loch an' the mirk lanely wuds.

Hamilton evolved from a mild supporter of working-class causes into a wryly embittered observer of the squalor and depredation of industrial development. She became a marked skeptic about all forms of "progress" and "development" that blighted the lives of working people and destroyed the quiet community and environs of her youth.

Nineteenth-century temperance movements now attract little interest and literary expressions of support for them even less, but many Scottish temperance-movement activists were women, and the Scottish temperance movement fostered a wide range of working-class social organizations, such as the Band of Hope (a children's league), insurance agencies, and Friendly Societies. Hamilton's anger about the consequences of working-class alcoholism brought out some of her sharpest abilities, and the immediacy and passionate specificity of her descriptions suggest that she may have written from personal experience.

About half of the early essays Hamilton began to publish in the 1850s explore the consequences of alcoholism, and her essays on the subject call for personal abstinence rather than governmental intervention. Their poetic counterparts dramatize the grim effects of addiction on Scottish working-class family life and provide detailed portrayals of the abuse of wives by alcoholic husbands and of parents by their sons. Some of the best of these poems might be described as satiric Doric rants in a Scottish tradition of stylized oral declamation. The effects of these tours de force are cumulative, and some of them—parts of "Oor Location" and "Our Local

Scenery," for example—shade over into the broader forms of social commentary mentioned above. The opening passage of "Oor Location," for example, segues into a description of the combative atmosphere of yet another Coatbridge pub:

Boatmen, banksmen, rough and rattlin',
 'Bout the wecht wi' colliers battlin',
 Sweatin', swearin', fecthin', drinkin',
 Change-house bells an' gill-stoups clinkin',
 Police-ready men and willin'—
 Aye at han' when stoups are fillin',
 Clerks, an' counter-louper plenty,
 Wi' trim moustache and whiskers dainty—
 Chaps that winna staun at trifles,
 Min' ye they can han'le rifles.

Like many others, Hamilton felt special contempt for petty profiteers and manipulators of human weakness—the proprietor of "The Three Golden Balls," for example, whose pawnshop shelves are "laden / With spoils of man, wife, child, and maiden, . . . / Vampire like, the blood he drains / From the drunkard's burning veins."

One of Hamilton's "walking poems," "Sketches of Village Character," provides a natural frame for such a blend of informal description, nostalgia, and reflection. The speaker guides her reader through an area once inhabited by prosperous weavers and narrates the fates of seven carefully individuated local pub owners. In one case the owner and his wife had "focht like twa cocks, an' aft she was seen / Gaun stoiten about wi' a pair o' black een." The weavers of her youth, of course, were gone ("The men o' the furnace, the forge, an' the mine, / Tak' the place o' the weavers in days o' langsyne"), but the publican's successors would flourish forever: "There's nae change in ae thing, that's drinkin', I trow; / We drink, but oor drouth is ne'er slocken'd, I think." Even better times might not help: "The higher the wages the deeper we drink."

Other poems describe or allude to the suffering of women married to alcoholics and wife beaters. In "The Feast of the Mutches," for example, the speaker recognizes one of her acquaintances among the attenders at a banquet the city has held for some of its old women and observes that "there's a puir heid that's been cutit and clour'd, / But Heaven an' hersel' kens what she endured / Lang years frae a drucken il-deedie gudeman: / He's yirded, an' sae are the sorrows o' Nan."

Hamilton seems to have written most directly about the sorrows and ravages caused by alcoholic children—in the essay "Intemperance *Versus* the Moral Law," for example, she reports:

We have known, ay, and seen—alas! that we should say so; it was not a solitary instance—a grey-haired mother, on her own hearth, shrinking from the presence of her own son, who, with murderous threats, uplifted hand, and eyes flaming with patricidal fires, was demanding from her the means to procure further indulgence in his depraved and brutal tastes. We have seen a father, day after day, forgetting to eat his bread, and nightly steeping his couch with tears, for the dishonour and apparent perdition of his son. . . .

The oldest of Hamilton's sons would have been about forty when this was written, and the most likely source of such details was personal experience. In a poem, "Midnight Vigil," the speaker mourns the "burning wound" of "my sons" who are lost in "depths defiling / Of intemperance. . . ." Another temperance essay, "Counteracting Influences," concludes with an untitled poem that mentions that "a monster so hideous, so hateful, and dire, / It seems as it moved in a circle of fire" has dragged two of a mother's children "to his den, / And turned them to brutes in the likeness of men." That same essay, however, also decries "that monstrous libel on womanhood" that is the "female drunkard" and the fear-inducing "reeling footsteps of him who is misnamed husband and father." One must be careful not to conflate set pieces of propaganda with autobiography but Hamilton's focus on the harm inflicted by adult alcoholics on their parents is unusual.

The mother of seven surviving children, Hamilton also saw mothers and "grannies" everywhere—from "Mother Earth" to "Auld Mither Scotland" to her own mother and those among her friends who grieved at the death of a child—and she constantly viewed events through the eyes of women, often old women. "The Way o' the Warl" must surely have been one of the few critiques of public opinion that firmly urges its readers to "Lippen [trust] aye maist tae Heaven, tae yersel', an' yer mither," in that order. She also populated many poems with young girls—herself in memory, neighborhood girls, her daughter—and her empathy for her fellow women often extended across class boundaries. In "Craignethan Castle," for example, Hamilton evinces more sympathy for Mary, Queen of Scots than one might expect from someone of her Presbyterian origins, and she decries the pathetic murder of a young heiress in "The Deserted Mansion." Hamilton did not romanticize such class distinctions, but she clearly believed that certain emotions and moral imperatives were independent of the "accidents of birth and fortune."

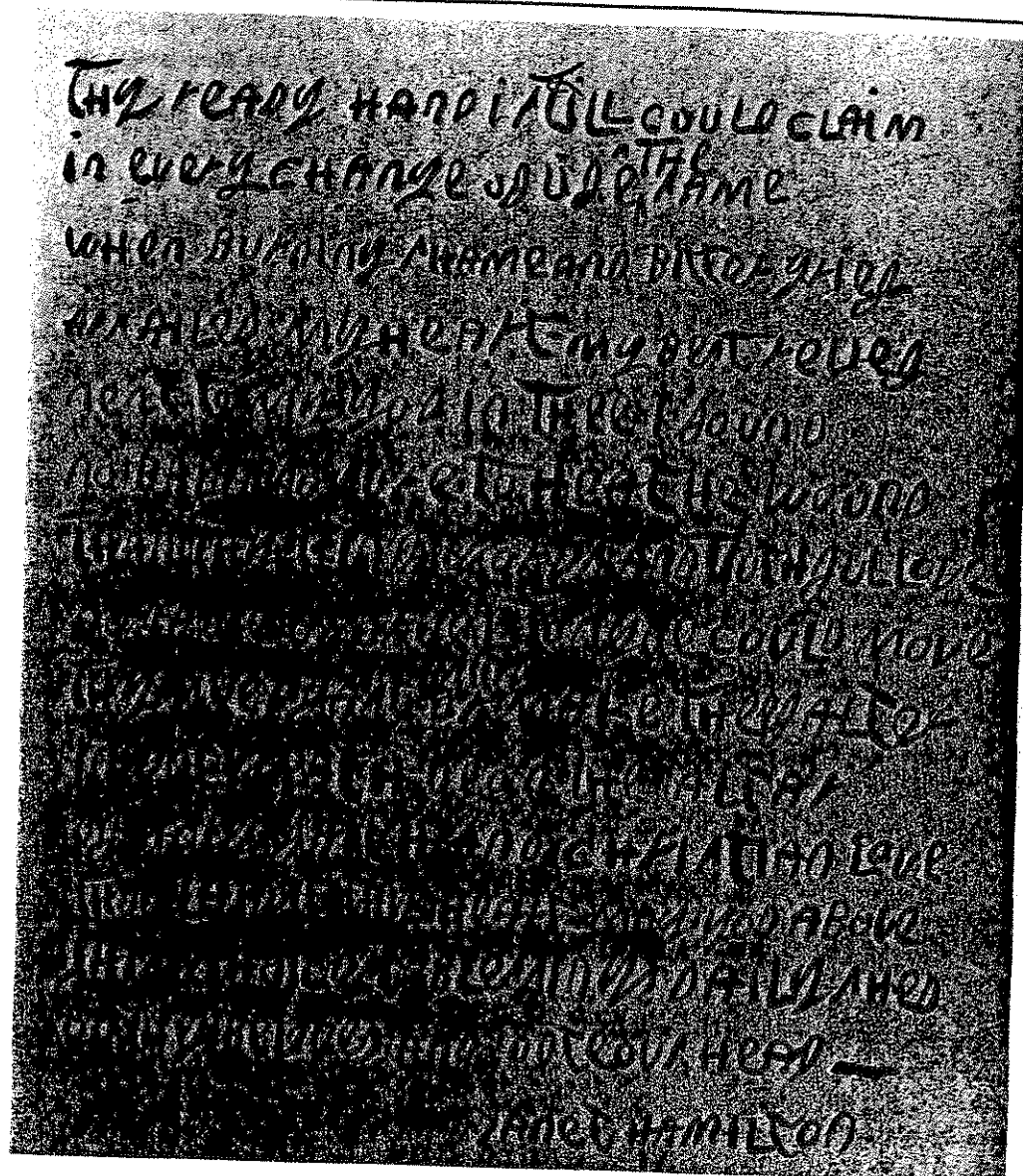
Many of Hamilton's Scots ballads and cautionary tales also express a particular concern for

women deceived or abandoned by men. Seduction and desertion are romantic staples, of course, but Hamilton gave special attention to the harm caused to women and their families. Her wary expectation of male sexual dishonesty gave poems such as "Effie—A Ballad," "Mysie, An Aul' Warl' But Ower True Story," and "The Ballad o' Mary Muiren" at times a mildly feminist tone.

Hamilton also preached quite ardently the need for women to educate their children, a view that gradually led her to embrace wider appeals for women's self-culture and equal status in working-class education reform movements. She became, in fact, an unshakably committed believer in women's education but assumed this need not take place in schools—none of which, after all, she had ever attended. Her poems and essays often praise women who had learned to read and taught their children, enjoin others to follow their example, and return again and again to the cardinal social virtues of such activities. Two of her ten essays on social topics advocate working people's self-education, and three focus specifically on women's self-education and their education of children.

In her advocacy of women's education Hamilton also took note of contemporary debates about women's roles. Quite skeptical of proposals by middle-class women reformers at first, she later came to accept ideas she thought could be adapted to the actual circumstances of working-class life. In the early "On Self-Education," for example, Hamilton still insists that education of the young was more important than public speaking and argues rather dubiously that a woman with a public mission could "always find a vent for her opinions and feelings on such subjects through the press." She had come to accept the work of such politically active women in "Rhymes for the Times, II," however, and asks only that those who would "tak up puir women's quarrels" should also "touch her heart an' teach her saul." When "neebour Johnie," finally, "a douce aul' farrant eldrin' chiel," sneers at speakers at Glasgow College who advocate women's access to higher education, Hamilton's speaker rebukes him in pointed terms: "Noo, John, quo I, haud aff oor taes, / A woman best kens woman's ways. . . ."

In the same year Hamilton's "Address to Working-Women" (1863) also includes an almost anguished plea for a higher education standard for poor women: "We must confess that we have fallen immeasurably short of the standard attained by the females of the upper and middle classes, who by a zealous improvement of their mental resources—by reading, thinking, and composing—have strengthened and embellished their minds, while they have adorned and enriched the literature of their coun-



Manuscript for an untitled poem by Hamilton, written in the script she invented for herself (from Poems, Essays, and Sketches: Comprising the Principal Pieces from Her Complete Works, 1880)

try." That some women remained illiterate was especially bitter to her ("Alas for the woman who is thus engaged in the battle of life!"), but she pointedly called working men to task for "that spirit of predominance and exclusiveness which, with a few exceptions, has met [women] at every turn."

Workingmen who truly wished "a good time coming" would also have to include "the females of your class, and more particularly the young, the future mothers of future men, in every movement for furthering the intellectual advance of your order." Hamilton was partly dependent on her working-class "brothers" for the publication and circulation of her works, and some of her views were controver-

sial in a decade marked by the establishment and consolidation of male-only "working-men's" schools and colleges. In this context her criticisms reflected her courage.

Several of Hamilton's poems also celebrate women's economic contributions. In "A Lay of the Tambour Frame," for example, the lifelong tambourer denounces the men who exploits her and her sisters:

Selfish, unfeeling men!
 Have ye not had your will?
 High pay, short hours; yet your cry, like the leech,
 Is, Give us, give us still.
 She who tambours—tambours

For fifteen hours a day—
 Would have shoes on her feet, and dress for church,
 Had she a third of your pay.

Hamilton came late to feminism, but she always identified broadly with other members of her sex and devoted herself throughout her work to the experiences and well-being of women. Her particular preoccupation with women's roles as educators and workers was integral to her life experience and eventually led her to criticize the blatant bias against women in working-class movements of her time.

Many of Hamilton's most attractive verses are "ballads of memorie," in which she blends commentary on the present with remembrances of things past. Several of these poems reflect her strong belief in the value of oral history, transmitted within a family from one generation to another, and most record social interactions with an aged and beloved storyteller who points a moral of constancy, integrity, and loyalty in the face of duress. The storyteller is usually a grandmother, whose conversations with a bright little girl, recalled by the girl grown old, reach out to readers in their turn.

Most "grannie poems" pay tribute to Hamilton's paternal grandmother, from whom she learned both songs and the wisdom to value them. These verses therefore bridge fifty years and more and offer a cumulative poetic account of an old woman's sense of personal and communal identity. Many record stories of Covenanters and others who showed great faith or resilience under the tests of poverty, isolation, and famine and experienced striking visions and other quasi-psychic events. Hamilton clearly designed such tales as moral *exempla* but sometimes evoked allegedly divine foreknowledge and prophetic attributes as a means to her end.

In "Grannie's Tale. A Ballad of Memorie," for example, a father who had complained about the birth of a fifth child in a time of famine later struggles to cope with the deaths of the other four and his wife. In "Grannie's Crack About the Famine in Auld Scotlan' in 1739-40" a grandfather feels a flash of anger when his "witless bairns" waste food, but his more tactful wife pauses to tell them about a winter starvation in 1739, when people foraged for nettles and watched their children die. She remarks sadly that "some, perhaps, like silver seven times purified, / Cam' oot the furnace pure at last" but hopes the children will be spared so harsh an alembic.

Hamilton's deepest expression of a bond with her grandmother appears in "Grannie Visited at Blackhill, Shotts, July, 1805." Little Janet is bored

when her grandfather discusses cattle and sheep prices but feels a lovely sense of epiphanic intimacy when grandmother sits spinning, "[a]ye croonin' o'er some godly saum," and her wrinkled face "brichen't wi' a holy calm." Grannie pauses in one of her pious stories to bless the child: "God bless thee, bairn—my Jamie's bairn," / She said, an' strakit down my hair; / "O may the martyrs' God be thine, / And make thee His peculiar care." The child then lays her head in Grannie's lap, and looks up to see her "dicht / A tear that tremilt on her cheek." The speaker has seen "a length o' days synsyne" but "ne'er forgat / That simmer gloamin' at Blackhill," when the old woman tries to impart her best values to the child and confers a protective blessing. "Pictures of Memory," by contrast, is Hamilton's only poem of a remembered moment with her venerated but apparently rather austere mother. Unlike the "grandmother poems," it also offers a vignette of a child's assertion of the importance of imagination to her identity. The girl in "Pictures" had eagerly brought her mother a volume of fairy tales and ballads, only to hear the maternal reproof that "such reading may amuse, / But will not make you good and wise." In a noncombative but instantaneous response the little girl "warbled clear an old Scotch ditty," and her mother is moved in spite of herself: "her eyes / Were brimming o'er with love and pity." At last, "She smiled, and softly laid her hand / Upon the fair child's shining hair, / Who, like a dancing sunbeam, pass'd / Away into the summer air." The tie between mother and child is unbroken, but the child remains free to follow "the burning thochts within [that] winna let her rest."

A concomitant belief in the dignity and moral importance of the tale-teller's role informed Hamilton's conception of her own literary purpose. The only surviving depiction of Hamilton shows her in a mutch, and her "Feast of the 'Mutches'" wryly proclaims a sense of community with her fellow old women. Glossed as "verses commemorative of the annual supper given to the poor old women, in the City Hall, Glasgow, on January 3, 1868," when nearly two thousand were present, "all wearing white mutches," Hamilton's poem marvels over the visual effect of two hundred white heads, reflects on the lives of three individual grannies, and closes with a clear self-referential image and benison:

God bless ye, aul' grannies! I wish ye a' weel,
 Ye're wearin' awa' to the Lan' o' the Leal;
 May ye in the Lan' o' the Leal an' the true
 Meet the aul' blin' grannie that sings to ye nool! . . .
 We bless ye, kind gentles, an' leddies sae fair,
 That oot o' yer plenty hae something to spare

For white heided grannies. O may it be given
To gendes an' grannies to meet yet in Heaven!

In 1868 Queen Victoria granted the seventy-three-year-old poet a Civil List pension. It was no longer possible for Hamilton to use the money for reading or travel, but she was deeply gratified by good reviews, public interest, and the concern of her friends. Hamilton added her final preface to the second edition of *Poems and Ballads* in May 1873, five months before her death, and used the occasion to comment briefly on her blindness and bedridden state, bid her readers farewell, and offer "sincere thanks to my friends, the press and the public, for the genial reception my literary efforts received from them."

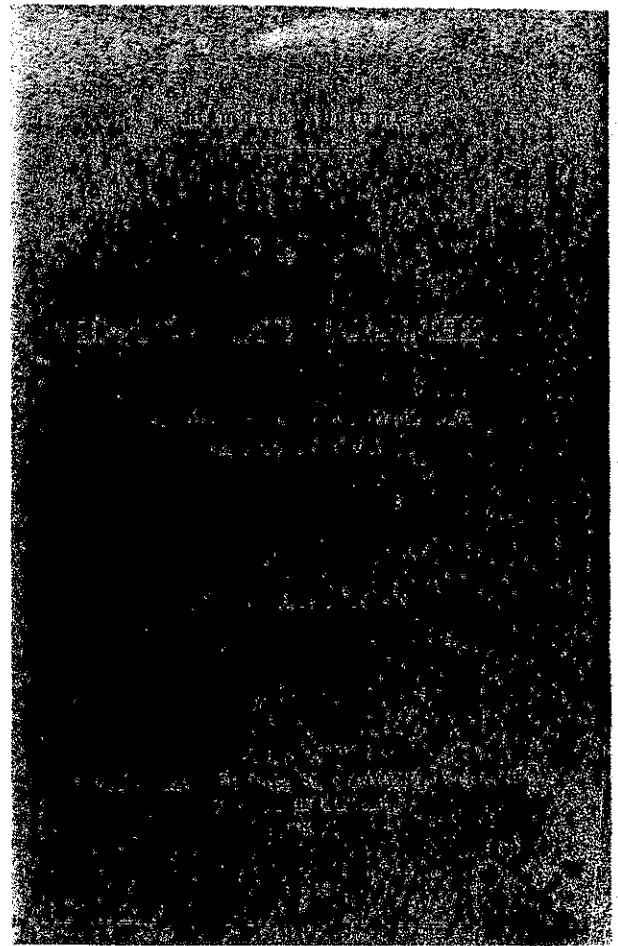
After a three-year illness that prevented her from leaving her bed for more than an hour a day, Hamilton died 30 October 1873 at age seventy-eight, and her much older husband followed shortly thereafter. Their daughter Mirren cared for both of them in their final illnesses, and their son James wrote of his mother in her last years:

During all her long years of severe pain and blindness, I never heard her utter a word of complaint or murmuring for herself. . . . Her feelings of sympathy and concern were all for others. I have often heard her express a regret that the want of the means many times prevented her from assisting others to the extent she desired.

Regional newspapers reported her death, and more than four hundred mourners came from Glasgow and nearby towns to the funeral in Langloan. Many have become acquainted with her through workingmen's organizations and temperance societies in the Glasgow and Coatbridge region, but others must have known her only through her work, which clearly reached a wide range of working- and middle-class readers.

Literary criticism of working-class poetry has tended to focus on issues of middle-class patronage, censorship, and cooptation. Most of the records that might clarify how Hamilton's publications reached a wide audience have disappeared, but she probably benefited from the efforts of regional societies whose members subscribed to her works. Her essays and poems clearly had broad social and political resonance, in any case, and her reception in the 1860s and 1870s also benefited from an interest in "people's literature" fostered by reformist anthologists and newspaper editors.

Eulogistic poems published after her death and poetic echoes of some of her more striking verses in late-century volumes by Scottish working-class women poets suggest that Hamilton's poetic



Title page for the collection of Hamilton's works edited by her son James Hamilton (courtesy of Special Collections, Thomas Cooper Library, University of South Carolina)

legacy did influence younger working-class poets, but it is difficult to say how much. No extended later studies of her work have appeared, in part perhaps because her work does not lend itself to certain forms of textual analysis and in part because Scots language and regional verse fell into critical disfavor. Commentators typically dismiss her as "traditional," and Brian Maidment even called her poetry and essays "a compendium of ferociously conservative attitudes" in his *Poorhouse Fugitives: Self-Taught Poets and Poetry in Victorian Britain* (1987). One must temper such judgments with appreciation of her political evolution and the importance of temperance and self-education for nineteenth-century working-class women.

Indeed, Hamilton's works resist neat ideological labels. Unlike many of the authors included in Maidment's study, who struggled to master middle-class tradition, she wrote unapologetically for members of her own class, but her strong-minded advo-

cacy of vernacular usage and oral tradition paradoxically convey a consistent faith in the universality of her work. Her poems also suggest something of the great range of emotional and linguistic experience possible for a nineteenth-century working-class woman, and some of her satiric verse is genuinely brilliant. Her abilities to articulate the values of a regional culture now nearly lost to memory merit serious attention from students of nineteenth-century poetry and Scottish popular culture, for their humor, public spiritedness, and linguistic and social realism convey some of the ideals of Victorian Scottish working-class life.

Hamilton deeply loved literature and education, denounced the illiteracy, wife battering and child abuse she saw, and came to demand a wider range of political opportunities for working-class women. This ideological descendant of non-complying Covenanters also identified the values of her rural past with movements toward European democracy and self-determination, and she responded with growing skepticism to war, empire, and the actions of British imperialism.

Her works are also formally diverse. She was deeply introspective and "sentimental," but her bilingual poems display a wide curiosity and fascination with education and processes of change and deploy an extensive array of dramatic situations and poetic forms. Her Scots satiric poems are virtuoso tours de force, and her "ballads of memorie" are models of the use of poetic narrative for "people's history." Her political poems also have more than antiquarian interest for at least two reasons: her "defenses" of the Doric bluntly denounce the cultural destruction wrought by linguistic conformity, and her mordant descriptions of everyday Glaswegian life brilliantly document the side effects of urbanization and industrial blight.

In short, Hamilton's poems provide some of the clearest views possible of the opinions and sensibility of a nineteenth-century Scottish woman who never attended school and observed her environs evolve in fifty years' time from rural village to industrial working-class tenements. As the author of these works, Hamilton broke several stereotypes and undercut many generalizations. It can no longer be said that no unschooled woman left a significant

literary legacy, that all women "dialect" poets shied away from social criticism, or that nineteenth-century women's poetic language lacked iconoclasm or sardonic wit. Hamilton was not only a poet who overcame obstacles but also a Scottish working-class writer who succeeded in conveying a complex maternal sensibility in two languages, and her poems and essays manifest a deep understanding of women's experiences at many levels.

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