

Oxford Dictionary of National Biography

Hamilton [*née Thomson*], Janet (1795–1873),
poet and essayist

by Florence S. Boos

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Hamilton [*née Thomson*], Janet (1795–1873), poet and essayist, was born near Carshill, Shotts, Lanarkshire, on 14 October 1795, the daughter of James Thomson, a shoemaker, and his wife, Mary Brownlee (c.1769–1852), a tambourer and descendant of covenanters. She spent most of her life in Langloan, near Coatbridge, where her parents moved when she was seven. Her mother taught her to read (but not to write), and the little girl read *Paradise Lost* and Allan Ramsay's *Poems* at eight. She later remarked that she 'could scarcely remember the time when her love of books was not her ruling passion' (Hamilton, *Poems, Essays, and Sketches*, 16). At nine, she too began to work as a tambourer, an occupation she followed until she began to lose her sight in the 1850s. At thirteen, she married the 25-year-old John Hamilton (1783/4–1878) in February 1809, and he later transcribed for her about twenty religious poems she composed in her head in her late teens. She seems to have set aside such endeavours for several decades after the birth of her third child, and the family Bible recorded the birth of ten children in all. Seven, at least—five boys and two girls—lived into adulthood.

At about fifty, Hamilton taught herself to write, and began shortly thereafter to contribute essays advocating temperance, women's education, and workers' self-improvement to the supplement of working-class writings published in conjunction with *Cassell's Working Man's Friend*. As she gradually lost her sight, she continued to dictate her poems in the late 1850s and 1860s to her eldest surviving son, James, and she published *Poems and Essays* (1863), *Poems of Purpose and Sketches in Prose of Scottish Peasant Life and Character in Auld Langsyne* and *Sketches of Local Scenes and Characters* (1865), and *Poems and Ballads* (1868). A memorial volume of *Poems, Essays, and Sketches* also appeared in two editions after her death (1880, 1885).

Fluent in standard English as well as her beloved Scots, Hamilton ardently supported European independence movements, and was an admirer of W. E. Gladstone. Of the 'United Kingdom', she also observed that

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,

and she pointedly apologized in 'A Plea for the Doric' for her 'Parnassian' efforts 'to busk oot my sang wi' the prood Southron tongue.' During her lifetime, Coatbridge had evolved into one of the most squalid iron-smelting centres in the British Isles, and she penned brilliantly sarcastic poetic descriptions of its filth, noise, greed, and despair in 'Oor Location', 'Our Local Scenery', and *Rhymes for the Times: IV—1865*. The quiet village environs of her youth lived on only in her 'ballads of memorie' and other retrospective poems.

Hamilton was initially suspicious of middle-class women's causes, but argued passionately that working-class mothers have a duty to teach their children (*Working Man's Friend*), decried the pervasive male bias of working-men's schools and colleges and the 'spirit of predominance and exclusiveness which, with a few exceptions, has met [working-class women] at every turn' ('Address to Working-Women', 1863), and remarked that a tambourer such as herself

[w]ould have shoes on her feet, and dress for church,
Had she a third of your pay.

Many of her vigorous denunciations of alcoholism—influenced, perhaps, by the ardour of her cousin William

Wow, man! he hates and bans the bottle,
An whaur Wull gangs, there gangs teetotal.
(Young, 21)

—focused concretely on violence inflicted on children, wives, and aged parents; particular passages also suggest that she may have had some of her sons or close relatives in mind ('Intemperance and the moral law').

In Hamilton's more lyrical 'ballads of memorie', such as *Grannie's Tale: a Ballad of Memorie*, *Grannie's Crack Aboot the Famine in Auld Scotlan' in 1739–40*, and *Grannie Visited at Blackhill, Shotts, July, 1805*, aged storytellers recalled striking visions and other quasi-epiphanic events, and paid tribute to ancestors' steadfastness and resilience. In other poems, Hamilton personified Scotland as a grannie ('Auld Mither Scotland'), and sent her two thousand fellows at an 'annual supper given to the poor old women in City Hall, Glasgow' a message of hope and

solidarity from 'the aul' blin' grannie that sings to ye noo!' (*The Feast of the Mutches*)

An unapologetic working-class Scottish survivor of the industrial revolution, Hamilton was grimly inured to urban dislocation and industrial blight, and she clearly benefited from middle-class anthologists' and newspaper editors' interests in 'people's literature'. This upright elderly woman's satires and defences of vernacular usage and oral history also deployed an impressively original array of poetic forms and linguistic registers, and her fiercely independent poems and essays flashed with compassionate retrospection and 'grandmotherly' wit.

Towards the end of her life, Hamilton's poems drew wide praise—an *Athenaeum* reviewer of her first volume, for example, called it 'a book that ennobles life, and enriches our common humanity' (June 1863)—and Queen Victoria gave her a civil-list pension in 1868. Visitors to the blind old woman often commented on her humour, wit, skill at ballad-recitation, and love of intellectual conversation. She died in Langloan after three years confined to her bed on 30 October 1873, and was buried on 4 November in Old Monkland cemetery, Coatbridge. Hundreds of mourners came from Glasgow and nearby towns to her funeral in Langloan, and memorial tributes and poetic imitations witnessed her influence on a generation of Scottish dialect and working-class poets.

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Likenesses portrait, repro. in Hamilton, *Poems, essays, and sketches*, frontispiece

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