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Wallace, Stuart. *John Stuart Blackie: Scottish Scholar and Patriot*.
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\$75.

SIR GEORGE MACDONALD, IN HIS 1936 PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS to the Classical Association of Scotland, made the following blunt comment: “I do not propose to speak . . . of [John Stuart] Blackie as a Professor, in the years when I knew him, the less that is said about Blackie the better” (*Classical Association of Scotland. Proceedings 1936–1937* 21). In the last ninety years, with one notable exception, there has been silence about the man who was for ten years Professor of Humanity (Latin) at Aberdeen and who then held the Chair of Greek at Edinburgh for thirty years. He was not just a classical scholar but also someone who was regarded by many of his countrymen and certainly by himself as “Scotsman of Scotsmen” (Wallace 253). Blackie, at the very least, deserves study as a member of that group of leading nineteenth-century figures, including Sir Walter Scott, Thomas Carlyle, Lord Macaulay, Dr. Livingstone, Samuel Smiles, and Andrew Carnegie, who helped to create a certain public concept of Scottishness at a time when the country was going through ecclesiastical, political, and social turmoil. The only modern author before Wallace who has taken Blackie at all seriously is George Davie in his *The Democratic Intellect* (1961). Davie argued that at the beginning of the nineteenth century, Scotland had an ancient and very different university system from England: one open to all males regardless of religion, much cheaper than Oxbridge since students were non-residential, and one with lecture halls filled with students aged from twelve to thirty-five. More significantly still, for Davie, the course content was different in that it

was it was more general than at Oxbridge and owed much to Scotland's ancient links with universities on the European mainland such as Paris, Leyden, and Basel. The career of Blackie, in Davie's view, can be seen "as being an attempt to give the traditional principle of democratic intellectualism an effective nineteenth-century form" (*Democratic Intellect* [1981] 241). One of the virtues of Wallace's book is that he examines Davie's interpretation closely and finds it wanting; the chapter "Professor of Things in General," is a valuable contribution to the continuing debate on Victorian Scottish university education.

One might derive a variety of possible reasons for Macdonald's dismissal of Blackie in 1936 from Wallace's account. Perhaps it was the cultivated eccentricity of dress. Wallace describes Blackie marching through the middle of the capital with a shepherd's plaid thrown over his shoulder, shoulder-length hair, wide-brimmed soft hat, collar open *à la* Byron and a staff bigger than himself. Then there is the enormous vanity—"I am a moralist, a thinker and a bit of a poet"—coupled with snobbery—"Now what I like is to have chat with the Queen over afternoon tea" (312). Yes, then there is Blackie's "poetry," a treasure house for connoisseurs of doggerel. All his life Blackie had a facility for making enemies, and his principal enemy, and therefore in his mind Scotland's, seems to have been Oxford: "I hate the Oxonians." Wallace also underlines the manic side to Blackie's personality. For example, he gives this instruction to his future wife: "Up and be doing! Busy, busy! Ever cheerful and vigorous. Up and be doing" (141). But my suspicion is that Macdonald's reason for seeing Blackie's career as of little or no account is his record as a Scottish classical scholar; despite a university education in both Scotland and Germany, he produced little of any lasting scholarly worth; there was no second act in his life's work as a scholar in either Latin or Greek studies.

Wallace's detailed biographical account is illuminating. Blackie was born into comfortably middle class circumstances in 1809. His father worked as the Aberdeen agent for the Commercial Bank of Glasgow. Blackie's university education began at the younger of the two ancient university colleges in Aberdeen, Marischal College, founded in 1593; the older

institution was King's College, which was established in 1494. It was and is the proud boast of Aberdonians that between 1593 and 1824 their city had as many universities as England. After three years at Aberdeen, he transferred, in 1824, to the University of Edinburgh, with the intention, after completing the Arts Faculty programme of study, of entering into the four year School of Divinity course in order to prepare for the ministry. These plans were abandoned after three years, and Blackie continued his studies in Europe, first at Göttingen and then at Berlin. A product of these years abroad was a translation of Goethe's *Faust* (1834), a copy of which he sent to Carlyle. Thus began a forty-year friendship between the two Scotsman. On Blackie's side it was seen as of equals, but for Carlyle the younger man was "a frothy, semi-confused disciple of mine" (85). Over forty years later, Carlyle still complained about "*blethering* Blackie" (252), one, according to the *Scottish National Dictionary* who talks "foolishly or profusely." In the 1830s Blackie qualified as an advocate for the Scottish Bar. This accomplishment, according to Wallace, made him an attractive subject for Davie's thesis. Blackie not only had a Scottish and European education, he also had intimate knowledge with two of the three institutions that made Scotland different from England: the Kirk and the Scottish legal profession. He was to spend the rest of his professional life in the third unique aspect of Scottish public life, her ancient universities. In 1851 a Chair of Humanity was created at Marischal College and to become the first incumbent quickly became Blackie's goal.

His appointments to the Chair at Aberdeen and then after at Edinburgh are mired in controversy. Wallace makes perfectly clear that Blackie's success in securing the post at Marischal was entirely due to political influence, the post was secured through his father's friendship with the local Tory MP, Alexander Bannerman. His opponent, James Melvin, was an eminently better Latin scholar, Rector of Aberdeen Grammar School for seventeen years, and had been the part-time lecturer in Latin at Marischal College for over a decade. At the time, Blackie was a thirty-year-old advocate who had never taught for a second in his life; suspicious indeed. The controversy did not end with charges of political influence. Blackie fell out with the Aberdeen Presbytery over his appointment, and after

a two-year court case taken all the way to Scotland's highest civil court, the Court of Session, he was finally installed. The one work of any significance that Blackie produced during this period was a translation of Aeschylus's plays, self-funded at a cost of £160. It was Carlyle who had helped Blackie find a reputable publisher for this venture and, indeed, the Scottish sage said, he found the translation "spirited and lively to a high degree" (147). It is not very clear just how competent Carlyle was to judge the efficacy of this or any other Greek translation: the *Carlyle's House Catalogue* (1895) lists only one Latin/Greek text, a grammar book.

In 1852 the Chair of Greek at Edinburgh became available, and on this subject Wallace provides an excellent account of how the religious divisions of the day, in particular the 1843 Great Disruption, played into Blackie's hands and how he won the Chair because of the Lord Provost of Edinburgh's deciding vote. The testimonial from Carlyle supporting Blackie may also have helped. Just as at Aberdeen, there were far better scholars and teachers than the successful applicant in contention for the post; for example, Dr. Leonhard Schmitz, Rector of the Royal High School of Edinburgh and a supremely qualified former pupil of Barthold Neibuhr, did not get the post. Although Blackie claimed to be *doctus utriusque linguae* [learned in both Latin and Greek] and said also that he wanted at Edinburgh, "to exchange Latin for Greek, copper for gold" (Blackie, *Notes of a Life* 157), what emerges very clearly from Wallace's book is that he did not do a particularly good or efficient job at teaching Greek to his undergraduate classes. His aim was "not to cram their heads with grammar and such nonsense but to teach them to sit down and drink a cup of tea with Homer" (204). As one former student observed, if "one learned little Greek in his classroom one at least had the opportunity of picking up a good deal of Gaelic, and not a little Scottish poetry" (205). His only publication of note during this period is a four-volume translation and commentary on *The Iliad*. Blackie had great difficulty in finding a publisher. Three London houses turned it down before the Edinburgh firm Edmonston and Douglas agreed to publish the book with the stipulation that Blackie would guarantee them against any loss. The book was not a success. It was too eccentric for the

scholastic market and too expensive for the popular market, and it ended up costing Blackie £200.

A notion of what fellow scholars thought of him as an Homeric scholar is suggested by Matthew Arnold's remark that "[Blackie] is as capable of translating Homer as of making the Apollo Belvedere" (198). Wallace leaves the reader in no doubt about Blackie's educational philosophy, which he holds to be far from the embodiment of "democratic intellectualism": "He was an unrelenting reformer, but also an Anglophobe; he was a Scottish nationalist, but also an elitist. He had no time for what he termed the impertinent and short-sighted idea, which some people in Scotland seem to entertain, that the Universities ought to be regulated mainly for the sons of the poorest classes" (225). But there is one issue where Blackie does emerge with great credit, his unrelenting efforts to raise £12,000 to establish a Chair of Celtic at Edinburgh, which eventually was created in 1882 and almost exclusively due to his efforts. Although not the first in Britain—a Chair at Oxford, or rather Jesus College, had been created eleven years earlier—the achievement arguably does stand as Blackie's most lasting accomplishment.

There is much to admire in this biography. The research is exhaustive, and the archival details will aid those who are interested not just in Blackie, but also in the Victorian giants who crossed Blackie's path: Gladstone, Carlyle, Ruskin, and Browning, for example. In an age of bloated biographies, this book is a model of lucid concision. In this less than perfect world, however, errors happen, even in a good text. Dunbar died in 1851 not 1852, for instance, and if by the term "the triumph of the evangelicals" (32) Wallace means the Great Disruption, the date should be 1843 not 1834. I have one final quibble. In 1832 an anonymous article was published in the *Westminster Review* entitled "Greek Literature in Scotland." The tone is abusive, and the author has nothing but contempt for the Scottish professoriate. Typical of this article is the description of Dunbar at Edinburgh as someone "unwilling to forgo any opportunity of mistake" (95). *The Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals* gives the author as Blackie, yet Wallace demurs: "the style of the attack is not his" (123). I may be wrong, but I would suggest that the style is exactly that which

a twenty-three-year old Blackie would adopt. All his life, at whatever cost, he wanted, above all else, to be noticed. This article was surely his calling card.

But let us end with Blackie's *bête noir*, Oxford. In 1866 the great panjandrum of English classics, Benjamin Jowett came to Edinburgh, and Blackie, for once diffident, inquired, "I hope you in Oxford don't think we hate you." The reply was a model of Oxford cool precision "We don't think about you" (246). Wallace has demonstrated that Blackie, blethering though he may often have been, is in fact worth a more serious consideration than has yet been granted to his life and work.

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